Local chef creates some hot stuff

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In their Lincoln Street garage, Jennifer Faitelson is putting her husband Jamie’s signature label on rows of bottles propped on a table with a small labeling machine while Jamie, 47, is getting ready to pack up his car and head up to Boston to try and attract some buyers at the Natural Products Expo East 2009. It’s a trip that he never thought he’d be making six years ago when what’s in the bottle today was just a hit at a friend’s Fourth of July barbecue.

The product is Chef Hymie Grande’ Barbecue Sauce. It was in 2003 that Faitelson, Chef Hymie Grande’ himself, a former luxury watch salesman, realized at the Fourth of July party that his concoctions of blended spices, chilies and herbs could help him realize his lifelong dream of making a profession for himself in the culinary world.

“It was a pretty big party, about 75 people. I made my sauce with some ribs. After serving some I was cutting more up in the kitchen when I turned around to find a line of people out the door [for more ribs],” said Faitelson.

Faitelson’s fascination for the kitchen came early. From eating his grandmother’s German pancakes, which gave him a sense of how food could tantalize the taste buds, and growing up with Julia Child and Graham Kerr on TV, he was hooked. He then went onto college, where the fascination remained, but job opportunities after his senior year led him to sales in the luxury watch business, which he did for 26 years.

Traveling the world, he grew even more passionate about food, so he enrolled himself in Escoffier in Paris and came home to work pro bono at Judson Grill in New York City between Thursday and Saturday while juggling his luxury watch job. It was the first time in his life he was manning a kitchen line.

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I learned a lot about all these new types of flavors...chilies, kaffir lime leaves, you know, stuff that was new and exciting to the food world when I started," he said. "I have always been a fan of barbecue, so I came up with the sauce.

Working in Judson was where Faitelson became Chef Hymie Grande'. Standing 6’4” tall, he worked the line next to a man named Hymie, the grill master at the restaurant. Hymie was much shorter and because of their differing stature, they would constantly find themselves knocking into each other. They nicknamed themselves Pequito Hymie and Hymie Grande. It was at the grill and working with the chefs and grill masters that he was turned onto creating his own sauce. After his acclaim at the 2003 party, he would occasionally make trips to a small co-packing plant in New York State, churning out homemade bottles with little to no sales at all. It was in 2008 when he wanted to pursue it fulltime. He left the watch business.

"I said it’s a perfect opportunity for you. You just got out of the business and you know what you want to do. I said if you’re going to do it, do it now," said Jennifer. Faitelson, Chef Hymie Grande' himself, gained the stamp of approval by the American Diabetes Association because his line uses no high fructose corn syrup and no processed sugars.

"This is a brand new state-of-the-art facility. They do everything you want if it involves food. They help you with the facilities, food science, the business plan and even staff. It’s funded by Rutgers so you know it’s of the maximum quality," said Faitelson.

Today, Faitelson has three varieties of the Chef Hymie Grande' line: New Mexico, a mild basting sauce; Polapote, a medium barbecue glaze and Cascabel Express, a hot barbecue blaze. "I call it time released love," said Jennifer. Cascabel's hotness grows slowly and is not for the faint of heart.

The factor that sets him apart, though, from most other rib-lovers' condiments is that he went all natural. Furthermore, he has, through his ability to keep the sauces free of high fructose corn syrup and processed sugars, been given the seal of approval from the American Diabetes Association, whose sticker appears on every bottle. Jennifer had been pushing him for years to go all natural and the more research he did, the more he learned about diabetes and knew he could find a niche with a healthy line of sauces.

"Diabetes isn’t something that affects only seniors. It affects children, teenagers and all minorities. It has no boundaries. I became so aware of it that I really took my time on the sauces, six or seven months to make them taste right with no high fructose corn syrup. I replaced it with agave syrup, which really brought out the other flavors," said Faitelson.

Now offered in 10 small tri-state retail stores and online, Faitelson says there’s no option for failure in his business and you know what you want to do. He left the watch business. He brings home 1,400 bottles at a time in a rented U-Haul truck. They then go to the garage until online orders or orders from the stores for Chef Hymie sauce filter in.

"Every dime we are spending is not only our life savings, it’s our future, but that’s how strongly I believe in this," said Faitelson. "I found that if I could make a mark on the U.S. with the food that I offer, that will be more valuable to me than anything else I can do in the watch industry or any other industry."

Chef Hymie's next endeavor? An all-natural ketchup.

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