

Brent Bumpers Back in the Mix with 'Wicked Mix'

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Posted 11/18/2013 12:00 am

Updated 1 day ago

Brent Bumpers is back in the game, the game being upscale snack foods.

"I guess I'm just a serial entrepreneur, which, unbeknownst to most people, my father was as well before he got into politics," he said.

Bumpers' father is, of course, former Sen. Dale Bumpers, and the snack food is Wicked Mix, a combination of pecan halves, cashews and almonds and other "tasty morsels." The flavor is unique, Bumpers said, salty, sweet and spicy but also buttery. He plans to position it as "a little bit decadent, a little bit healthy," Bumpers said.

Bumpers, of Little Rock, is leasing "a modest production facility" in the Cajun's Wharf area, where he employs five part-time workers, though, he said, three of those are nearing full-time status. Production began in mid-summer.

Wicked Mix currently comes in three flavors, in seven-ounce stand-up pouches: spicy original, chocolate-laced and spicy hot chipotle. He and his team are working on a fourth flavor, either garlic, ranch dill or honey mustard.

Bumpers called Wicked Mix a "modest operation." The enterprise has either broker or distribution coverage in about 18 states, "but we don't yet have anything close to saturation in any major markets."

If the past is prologue, that could come fairly soon. Bumpers founded the Brent & Sam's cookie bakery in 1985. The company was a success, making branded and private label premium cookies at its North Little Rock facility, cookies it sold throughout the United States. Brent & Sam's was sold to Lance Inc. of Charlotte, N.C., in 2008. Lance closed the bakery, which had employed 72 full-time workers and 20 part-timers, a year later, moving production to Charlotte.

"I never thought I would get back into a perishable food item," Bumpers told Arkansas Business. So why did he?

"So few people seem able to do or pull off what I did with Brent & Sam's cookies that I almost felt obligated to do it because it's something that I have expertise at," he said. In addition, "I just am plagued by bad genes with needing a constant challenge as well."

Bumpers also is glad to be employing people again. "I still have a bad taste in my mouth about Lance's foods moving Brent and Sam's bakery out of town a year after they bought it," he said. "In hindsight, I probably could have made them agree to keep it here at least five years. I wish I had done that, because if they had left it for five years, they probably would have stayed forever."

Bumpers is wary of naming his accounts because "you can't help but alienate people," he said. "If you start listing accounts, you're going to irritate those you didn't list. It's around town." The curious can learn more at WickedMixes.com.

A lot of Wicked Mix shipments are going out of state. "When I sold Brent & Sam's cookies, Arkansas constituted maybe 1.5 percent of our sales. The majority of our product is going out of state, which always makes me feel good because you're bringing money into Arkansas from other states when you do that."

"One local benchmark account we monitor closely is selling about twice the units per week vs. Brent & Sam's cookies [back in that company's early days], which gives me a nice level of confidence in the product," Bumpers said.

"If we have not doubled our space by the end of next year, I will be disappointed."

Bumpers has not been idle in the interim between Brent & Sam's and Wicked Mix. He also owns two party supply stores, one in Fort Smith and one in Rogers. The stores, Party Place, are similar to Party City shops, Bumpers said, but independent. He's good friends with the owners of several Party City stores in Arkansas.

The Fort Smith store has been open about three years; he opened the Rogers Party Place in September. The Fort Smith location has been profitable for a couple of

years, Bumpers said, and “Rogers, as it must do to be profitable, is already outperforming Fort Smith nicely.”

As for the potential success of Wicked Mix?

“Who knows? As they say, past performance is no guarantee of future results. I have hopes that I might be able to pull off something akin to Brent & Sam’s success with this.”

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