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Building Better Butters

Justin Gold '00 stirs up a creative company

by Matt Getty

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The idea for what was to become a multimillion-dollar company hit Justin Gold '00 as he stood in the pale fluorescent glow of a Colorado supermarket. Up and down the aisle, dozens of flavors of salsa lined the shelves and more than 80 different varieties of jelly stared back at him, but there were only two different kinds of peanut butter.

"I was really frustrated because your only choices were crunchy or smooth," says Gold. "So I started making my own peanut butter, adding honey, chocolate chips or coconut flakes."

When his roommates regularly cleaned out his homemade peanut-butter supply, Gold figured he might have something worth selling at the local farmers market. When his peanut butters began quickly selling out there, he figured it might be time to go into business.

"I started to research how you start a business," recalls Gold, who wasn't hindered by his lack of formal business training. "I would go to the University of Colorado at Boulder library, and I wasn't intimidated about approaching the business faculty for help, because at Dickinson, that's just what you do. Before I knew it, they were helping me write a business plan."

Armed with that plan, Gold started Justin's Nut Butter in 2004 and found quick success. Six years later, the company has two-dozen employees and earns millions with eight flavors of peanut, almond and hazelnut butters sold nationally though retailers like Whole Foods, REI, Toys R Us, and Dickinson's own Devil's Den.

"To go from one person selling a few jars and making a few hundred bucks to being a multimillion-dollar company in just a few years is amazing," he says with a laugh. "I pinch myself every day."

Despite the company's rapid growth, Gold has no intentions of taking on Jiff or Skippy. His butters are still made in small batches from high-quality local ingredients, which means they'll always be more expensive than the major brands.

"Our goal isn't to compete with the big brands—that's a race to the bottom," he says. "Our goal is to create the best nut butter we can for people who want a healthier, higher-quality alternative."

And the former environmental-studies major is committed to doing all of this sustainably. In addition to only using locally grown nuts, the company's offices rely entirely on solar power.

Gold's latest challenge is to find a compost-ready alternative for his increasingly popular single-serving nut-butter packets. As he recruits ketchup and other food companies to encourage packagers to develop a more earth-friendly material, Gold brings to the task that same why-not attitude that made him question why he couldn't find more than two flavors of peanut butter at that supermarket.

"How else are we going to get the industry to change," he asks, "unless we go out there and stir things up?"



Justin Gold '00 says his most successful nut-butter flavor has been maple almond. His least successful wasn't even intended for humans. "We came out with a peanut butter specifically flavored for dogs," he says with a chuckle. "I really thought it might catch on from a marketing standpoint, like maybe Oprah would find out and give it to her dogs, and it would draw all this attention to our brand. But it totally bombed!"