

# Recipe for success

## Retired soldier transforms hobby into fruitful business

By Jon R. Anderson - Staff writer

Thursday Dec 3, 2009 19:23:46 EST

You might say the idea of cooking up a way to transform his hobby into a business always appealed to Mike Lawrence.

For nearly 20 years, the full-time Army National Guardsman has found a singular joy in the art and science of banana bread baking. And since retiring about a year ago, he has carved out a slice of the boutique bread business as the self-proclaimed Top Banana of his own business, Havana Banana Breads. Like some batter-beating Andy Warhol, Lawrence has taken the everyday and turned it into something extraordinary, raising common quick breads into culinary masterpieces.

It all started with his autistic son's love for bananas.

"Robbie was about 5 at the time, and he loved bananas," said Lawrence, who was raising his son as a single dad while serving as a young officer. "He could get really aggravated, so the worst thing in the world was to run out of bananas. He's nonverbal, you can't really reason with him, so I just made sure I had a lot of bananas in the house."

Of course, one kid and his dad can only eat so many bananas, and inevitably, Lawrence found himself with bunches of brown fruit.

"I hate to waste anything, so I just started making banana bread."

Pretty soon those breads started making their way to the office and it wasn't long before the experiments began.

"Army people can be tough — they'd say if it was kind of dry or whatever — but the proof was usually in the empty plate. It was the combinations I was coming up with that perplexed people more than anything else."

One week it'd be white chocolate-macadamia nut banana bread,; the next it would be some wacky coconut combo. But the bread kept disappearing. The baking light to go pro went on one day about 11 years ago while Lawrence was commuting to his job at the Pentagon. He was concocting new flavor combinations in his head when suddenly it hit him: "I can sell these! I still had 10 years before retirement, but I just got more and more excited from there."

And that enthusiasm never faded. Since retiring in late 2008 as a lieutenant colonel, Lawrence has wasted no time transforming his hobby from part-time pursuit to full-time profession, baking hundreds of loaves a week to sell at farmers markets, deliver to coffee shops and fill orders on his Web site. He has



SHEILA VEMMA / STAFF

Lt. Col. Mike Lawrence first started thinking about selling his homemade banana bread during his commute to the Pentagon 11 years ago. Now retired, he's turned his hobby into a business called Havana Banana Bread.

yet to recoup his investment, but business is growing to the point that he expects to hire part-time help soon.

Here's his recipe for success so far:

### Know your kitchen

Like a baker in a new kitchen, any hobbyist-turned-business-owner needs to take stock of himself and the tools at his disposal. "To start your own business in these turbulent times, you have to be pretty sure of yourself," says Lawrence said. "The military prepares people to be resilient and flexible and focused and prepared. Take those same qualities and apply them to what you want to do," Lawrence said.



SHEILA VEMMA / STAFF

Lawrence handles all aspects of Havana Banana Breads himself, from marketing and sales to baking and bagging.

That also means asking yourself tough questions: "Just because you can make banana bread or a good steak or whatever, it's no guarantee you can turn it into a business. Ask yourself, 'Why do I think I can succeed in this endeavor? Are there other people doing the same thing? How much will I have to sell to turn a profit?'"

By the time Lawrence retired in the D.C. area, he had nearly three dozen banana bread recipes and a solid plan of action.

### Preheat business oven

Long before the actual baking starts, every baker knows to warm up the oven. The same applies to heating up a new business. "You can't prepare early enough. I started 10 years out, which has dramatically reduced my learning curve," Lawrence said.

He launched a Web site almost as soon as he decided to go pro and talked to everyone he could meet in the baking industry. In 2001, during an assignment to Florida, he rented some space at a bakery a few times a week. "I actually had quite a few accounts and was really able to work out all the bugs in how to do things on a larger scale."

### Consult other chefs

A good chef never relies on his taste buds alone. Lawrence said he made sure he applied that same principle principal to his business. That's why he joined the Retail Bakers of America. "Networking and, ideally, a good mentor are a must-have. You can't be a lone wolf in business and expect to survive for long," he said says. "My mentor has been in the baking industry his whole adult life and I couldn't do what I'm doing without his advice."

### Gather good ingredients

Although most big bakeries use purees, Lawrence insists on hand-mashed freshly ripened bananas. And he uses pure Madagascar vanilla over cheaper, lesser-quality options.

His emphasis on quality translates directly to the business side as well, especially when it comes to customer relations.

Lawrence said he he's quick to respond to every e-mail and phone call. "Being responsive is important. Even if they're requesting something I can't do, I always get back to them quickly."

## Clean as you go

Know that things will get a little messy, Lawrence said. The trick, he said, is to clean things up quickly and learn from your mistakes.

For example, a few years ago, when he was still in the Army and juggling his bread-making part time, he experimented with outsourcing the baking grunt work to a local company — a common practice called “private labeling” — so that he could focus on marketing and sales. “It was a disaster,” he said. Despite his protests, the company cut corners and used cheaper ingredients, so Lawrence pulled the plug and mopped up.

## Work smart

When you’re baking and shipping as many as 1,200 loaves a month, it pays to pay attention to process. A simple tweak can reflect directly on the bottom line.

That’s why Lawrence bakes in a silicon-lined pan, which drops directly into a custom-made box with his logo. “I don’t have to take it out of the pan. I just let it cool and then ship. It’s all one movement.” Because he rents space at a local bakery, the time saved is money saved.

Other small but important differences also help him turn new customers into the bread-buying faithful that have become the bulk of his business.

The difference between moist, delicious bread and a dried-out banana brick can be the bag it ships in. That’s why Lawrence uses special bags that are 2½ times thicker than typical freezer bags: “It’s a little more money, but it allows the customer to freeze their bread for a few months.”

## Get Good Reviews

While it’s true for any business, food-based businesses especially rely on word of mouth. Rave reviews, whether friend-to-friend or in the local press, are often the best form of advertising.

That kind of enthusiasm recently earned him a nomination for the Best Comfort Food award from the newspaper Express, the commuter version of The Washington Post.

“My breads are my advertising. They are so unusual and so yummy, they sell themselves. Ninety percent of my business is from word of mouth.”