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Locally Sourced

A slow brewing success

Local business sets sights on expansion

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The devil is in the details. Last month, Chico Chai welcomed a new kettle capable of brewing her concoction 250 gallons at a time. It was a welcome sight for the chai micro-brewery's owner, Sarah Adams. This new kettle would allow them to better handle the growing demand for their slightly sweet, spicy blend in places like Sacramento, Grass Valley, Nevada City and the Bay Area.

"At some point one batch wasn't enough, then I was making two, then we were making three and last winter we were making four-ish and sometimes more," Adams said of the 60-gallon batches. "We were running out of days."

However, their anticipated brewing schedule was thrown for a loop when she realized that their current oversized spoon wasn't big enough to reach the bottom of the new kettle — so a new one had to be ordered.

"We've been planning this expansion for a while. It's taken a while to get the right gear," Adams said. "You can't just call around and say 'Does anybody have a chai kettle?' and they'll be like 'What is chai? And no.' So you have to figure out what works for chai, what can I use from other manufacturers that will be interchangeable or that I can change slightly and make it useful for brewing chai. It's a lot of invention and a lot of adaptation."

This catch-as-catch-can attitude may be the very foundation the masala chai company is built on.

Adams' foray into her brewing business has been a long, simmering success story.

Before settling in to their location on Park Avenue near downtown, she began by co-opting the Guzzetti's Food and Catering kitchen on Monday mornings. She was only a year out of college when she made her decision to forgo her wildlife-centric degree and job to pursue a career in the tea business.

She recalls the difficulty of pitching her idea door-to-door in 2004 when the city's knowledge of the spiced tea remained minimal, at best.

"I've never really been outgoing, I was never really a salesperson, but I believe in good ideas." Adams said. "I knew I had a good idea."

Word got around about Adams and her spiced teas "grassroots-style," after local coffee shops and Chico Natural Foods began carrying her stuff. However, she would be the solo driving force behind Chico Chai for nearly eight years: measuring, grinding, brewing, packaging and hand-delivering her creation. Nowadays, this one-woman operation would not be possible, when Chico Chai uses over 400 pounds of nutmeg, Adam's favorite spice, a year.

Despite her self-professed obsession with teas, Chico Chai was not her first attempt at a successful patience-driven, beverage business model.

"I had a lemonade stand for years growing up. I would sit out there for forever and just try to get people to stop and buy lemonade and luckily they did. I had that for a long time," said Adams. "Way long after it was cute."

Adams said that small operation taught her the basics of starting a small business. She then supplemented this knowledge with classes from the Small Business Development Center and attended several talks including one on sustainability from Sierra Nevada Brewery's Ken Grossman. She also says her studies at Humboldt State, especially plant taxonomy, assisted in her recipe-making.

When formulating her brew, she made sure to make a few little batches with varying amounts of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, black pepper, nutmeg and star anise. She put them in mason jars and carried the spiced black teas around downtown, and like a census taker, gauged what flavors her would-be customers would enjoy by doing a blind taste test.

She opted to be more careful and diligent about her recipes this time around, stepping away from her more cavalier attitude during her time at Humboldt State where she made chai for her college roommates.

"I didn't really pay attention to a recipe — kind of like how some people make a spaghetti sauce: You throw this-and-that and 'Oh I have this too,' throw that in," Adams said. "Sometimes it would be amazing, sometimes it would be less than amazing. But it was never really terrible."

Nowadays, Chico Chai prides itself on excellence, which meant consistent, made-to-order products and having local, fresh, fair-trade ingredients. Recently, the North American Tea Championship announced that Original Chico Chai won first place in 2014's Fall Hot Tea Class, so it's no wonder that Chico Chai is garnering some attention in the Bay Area.

"It's another large area, like when we started going to Sacramento," Adams said.

She confessed the new market presents a host of new challenges. "People are like, 'Why is it called

Chico Chai?’ And I’m like, ‘Well ... there’s a town called Chico.’”

Adams isn’t hesitant to continue labeling her business as “small.” In fact, she relishes the idea of the community-driven, local brewing company. Given the choice, Adams says she’d prefer telling people about her “robust, lightly sweet, spicy” product in person.

However, if things continue to work out in the Bay Area, Chico Chai will probably need to start looking for an even bigger spoon.

Locally Sourced is a biweekly feature spotlighting local businesses and the recipes and products that make them special.

Chai

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