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Educator turned gourmet

By Anna Guido
Enquirer contributor

By day, Lee Corder is an assistant high school principal, handling disputes among teens at Madison Local Junior/Senior High.

At night and on weekends, the Liberty Township resident tends to his secret love - gourmet cooking.

Just over a year ago, Corder's mastery in the kitchen put his name on the Internet and in grocery stores with his own brand of mustard that is vying for shelf space alongside the likes of French's, Gulden's and Grey Poupon.

Lee's Hot Mustard, made at home by Corder for 15 years, has evolved from its cottage industry beginnings to full-scale manufacturing.

Corder's goal, he said, is to expand sales of his mustard beyond the 75 independent food retailers now carrying it - at a "reasonable pace."

"Last year, we grew 50 percent and I could feel it - time wise," he said.

Lee's Hot Mustard is "good for dipping and spreading," according to the label, and comes in three varieties:

Sweet Spicy (mild).

Sweet Hot (medium).

Sweet Insane (hot).

Increased sales in recent years are what prompted Corder to take his mustard out of the kitchen and into a bottling plant so it could be processed fast enough to meet demand.

Last year, Corder sold about 8,000 units of his mustard, along with a line of 10 dry rubs and party dip mixes produced under his name. Eventually, he said he wants to develop his own recipes for those products.

Cajohns Fiery Foods Co. in Columbus bottles and packages Corder's products.

Cajohns owner John Hard - whose company makes more than 150 varieties of mustard, barbecue sauce, marinades, salsa and spices - said Corder "took a niche product and has done very well."

"I've just been amazed at the growth of his company," Hard said.

"Nobody can sell the product like the developer, and Lee has worked really hard to get his product out there."



ZOOM The Enquirer/Glenn Hartong
Lee Corder in his Liberty Township kitchen with a few of the products his company is now making.

FACTS ABOUT LEE'S

Founded: 2003 **Number of employees:** 1

Where it's sold: Jungle Jim's in Fairfield, Remke Markets in Northern Kentucky and Deer Park, Dave's Quality Meats in West Chester Township, Dave's in Middletown, The Party Source in Bellevue, and nationwide via the Internet.

Interesting fact: According to the Ohio Revised Code, foods that require temperature control during production such as mustard can't be made at home. Lee's mustard is bottled and packaged by a Columbus company.

Address and information: 7165 Lakota Ridge Drive, Liberty Township, 45011; (800) 682-7247; www.leeshotmustard.com.

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For example, Hard said, Corder went to pretzel and chip companies - not just retailers - to promote and distribute his mustard.

To help in his marketing, Corder became a member of Ohio Proud, an Ohio Department of Agriculture program whose goal is to increase sales and awareness to consumers of Ohio products.

"If a product is 50 percent raised, grown or processed in the state of Ohio, it's eligible to be an Ohio Proud product," said program liaison Lori Panda in Columbus.

For one, the Ohio Proud logo indicates that a particular product "is fresher because it's not being shipped across the country," Panda said. It also allows Ohio producers to network with other Ohio Proud companies. Lee, for example, is having his product produced by another Ohio Proud company."

Started as a kid

Corder's interest in cooking dates back to his childhood in Cambridge, Ohio.

"I remember sitting on the counter top when I was 3 or 4 years old, buttering toast," Corder said.

His special interest in mustard and dry rubs was an outgrowth of a lifetime of watching his mother cook and watching grill masters at VFW barbecues.

"The basis of my mustard came out of those days," Corder said.

Corder and his wife, Carrie - also a school administrator - have two children. They outfitted their kitchen with the equipment a chef might have: large stainless-steel appliances, a 12-foot island, granite countertops and a built-in wine cooler and wine rack.

Corder said he has always longed to be a chef.

"I checked out culinary schools in Louisville and Rhode Island, but the hours of a chef are not family friendly - chefs work when nobody else wants to. So I decided that if I can't be a chef, I'll just act like one."

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ZOOM The Enquirer/Glenn Hartong
A pretzel dipped into Sweet Hot Mustard produced by Lee's Sweet and Spicy Mustards, available in stores and online.