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Dispatches from Donut Land

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GABRIEL WIESEN (BUS ’08) HELPED JUMP-START THE FOOD TRUCK CRAZE IN CHICAGO, AND HE ISN’T HITTING THE BRAKES ANYTIME SOON.

BY KELSEY SCHAGEMANN | PHOTOS: JEFF MARINI
Long before the sky-blue truck looms into view, scents of cinnamon and sugar waft through the air, priming taste buds around the block for a decadent bite of hot fried dough. Beavers Coffee & Donuts isn’t the only mobile donut shop in Chicago, but it was the first, and it’s still the only one making its tasty treats fresh to order. Happy customers walk away in a daze, powdered sugar lining their lips, the sound of sizzling buttermilk batter still ringing in their ears. The co-owner and co-founder of Beavers Coffee & Donuts didn’t grow up in a family of bakers. He didn’t know much about food trucks—after all, they weren’t even legal in Chicago until 2012. But Gabriel Wiesen (BUS ’08) did know something about paying one’s dues, working hard and accepting failure. So while he’s quick to name luck as the reason for his success, the truth isn’t so easily sugarcoated.

Starting from Scratch

In a turn of sweet irony almost too good to believe, donuts cost Wiesen his first job. He wanted to help supplement his mother’s income—it was just the two of them struggling to get by—so he secured a position at the bakery counter of Morningfields, a neighborhood grocery store in Park Ridge, Ill. “I was actually so young that I had to get a special work permit certifying that it wasn’t child labor,” Wiesen says.

That didn’t mean the job was easy. Wiesen remembers carrying 20-pound sheet cakes up three flights of steep stairs and rarely feeling knowledgeable about his daily tasks. When the manager spotted him giving away free donuts to a friend’s parents, it was all over. Not surprisingly, Wiesen’s first foray into the food and beverage industry didn’t leave the best taste in his mouth.

Nonetheless, work didn’t faze Wiesen. By the time he enrolled at DePaul, Wiesen had already held jobs in construction, and at an auto mechanic shop and a call center. “I knew I’d have to work during college, so DePaul’s downtown location was really appealing,” he says. “I also liked the giving aspect of the university’s mission. I connected with that.”

Eager Entrepreneur

Wiesen decided to major in finance for practical reasons. “My mother never graduated from college, and I witnessed the difficulties she faced and the opportunities she wasn’t afforded,” he says. “Being financially secure has always been a huge motivator for me.” His senior year schedule highlights this inner drive: Wiesen held a full-time job at DePaul in the Office of the Treasurer, attended classes at night and spent the weekends working on his first business, an events promotion and marketing company he co-founded with three friends.

The venture took off. “We were booking talent, venues, staffing,” Wiesen recalls. “Our ultimate goal was always to open our own bar or nightclub.” Unfortunately, the company struggled to stay afloat during the recession. “Eventually, things came to an end,” Wiesen says. “But it was good to go through the rise and fall of a company while I was young. It helped me gain an understanding of what to do differently in the future.”

Next up, Wiesen and James Nuccio, one of the event company’s co-founders, hatched a plan to bring flash-cooked, Neapolitan-style pizza to Chicago’s North Side. The pair developed their idea for nearly a year. They found a promising location near Loyola University’s Lake Shore Campus, built relationships within the U.S. Small Business Administration and applied for loans.
DISPATCHES FROM DONUT LAND

PUTTING IT ALL ON THE LINE

Wiesen, who was working as a production assistant and stand-in for the television and film industry at the time, started thinking about on-set trailers and catering. Food trucks weren’t legal in Chicago, but other cities were embracing the concept. Maybe Chicago would be next. Even if the city lagged in passing legislation, Wiesen could always operate on private property with a catering license.

He took a gamble. “I maxed out my credit cards, put in my entire savings and sold my car,” Wiesen says. “I moved back in with my mother to save money. My business partner and I both went all in.” His cousin, a trained pastry chef, helped create the first recipe. An artist friend designed the logo and related branding, which Wiesen calls “kitschy, fun and memorable.” In late 2011, Wiesen cooked his first batch of donuts onboard the truck.

For the first 18 months, Wiesen and Nuccio made each donut, poured each cup of coffee and served each customer. They learned that operating an 84-square-foot food truck requires physical finesse and stamina. They discovered that donuts fry differently in the summer versus the winter and that batter and oil temperatures also affect quality. They began to understand their monthly sales trends. They experimented, adapted and expanded, and had a blast doing it. Today, the Beavers staff encompasses 25 employees at four food trucks and a permanent stand in the Chicago French Market.

GETTING A PIECE OF THE PIE

It turns out that Wiesen’s little donut shop on wheels paved the way for a whole range of related endeavors. Much of his current business comes from catering private events, such as weddings, corporate retreats, events at colleges and high schools, and private parties; some clients hire Beavers multiple times per year. Wiesen is also actively working on franchise opportunities in Cincinnati, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and elsewhere. In January, his first franchise, The Dapper Doughnut, will open in the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Furthermore, nearly one-third of the licensed food trucks spreading deliciousness throughout Chicago were manufactured by Midwest Food Trucks, another of Wiesen’s ventures. The company has outfitted specialty trucks for McDonald’s, The Hershey Co., Stouffer’s, NBC and other major businesses interested in experiential marketing.

However, food trucks still face an uphill battle in many respects. “I joined the Illinois Restaurant Association because they were the biggest lobbyist against us,” Wiesen says. “There was a lot of pessimism,

BEAVERS DONUT DATA

- Number of donuts sold annually: More than 2 million
- Number of donuts in a large order: 35
- Busiest month: November
- Busiest time of day: 8:30-9 a.m.
- Best day of the week: Friday
- Number of catering events annually: 200+
- Pounds of batter made annually: 25,000
- Fun perk: Free donuts on your birthday
especially earlier on, and I wanted to help change that.” In Chicago, food trucks must park at least 200 feet away from a competing food purveyor—and that broad category encompasses everything from fine-dining establishments to fast-food joints to 7-Eleven, gas stations and Starbucks. Food trucks are also allowed in 35 designated zones throughout the city, including at S. Wabash Ave. and E. Jackson Drive in the heart of DePaul’s Loop Campus. Competition can be fierce for those spots.

There are stringent regulations regarding food truck sink size, gas lines, permits, licenses and other items. Navigating the political environment and working with street festivals present their own set of challenges. Plus, some potential customers still view food trucks as dirty and their fare as unsophisticated. All of these factors compelled Wiesen to relaunch the Illinois Food Truck Owners Association, a defunct advocacy group, to amplify owners’ voices and assert their rights. “As more food trucks entered the market and onboard cooking became the norm, I recognized a need to continue the association’s goals and mission,” he says. “It’s our responsibility to create a safe working and dining experience for both food truck operators and our customers.”

### SHIFTING THE CULTURE

Four years ago, Beavers sued the City of Evanston for barring food trucks that didn’t also operate a brick-and-mortar restaurant in the city. “We wanted it understood that there are people who will not stand for this type of discrimination,” Wiesen says. In February 2016, he received good news: Evanston agreed to change the law. “The notion that a food truck could ever put a restaurant out of business when restaurants have seating, heat and air conditioning, liquor licenses—it’s ridiculous,” he affirms.

The food truck dining experience can be a solitary one as customers grab a quick bite on the go, but Wiesen is also working to change that perception. In 2015, he helped organize the first Pilsen Food Truck Social. This past June, the second annual social brought together 25 food trucks, seven neighborhood restaurants and more than 25,000 hungry customers. “It really hit the mark in terms of what the trucks wanted and what the consumer experience was,” he remembers. “We had a great hodgepodge of people and trucks.”

Wiesen, who seems to run solely on coffee (and a rare donut), isn’t easing up on the accelerator anytime soon. “The harder you work, the more successful you are, but the more successful you are, the more work you have,” he notes. Despite the stress and challenges, Wiesen embraces his nonstop schedule with its endless phone calls, meetings, emails and strategizing well into the night. “I enjoy my work every day, I truly do,” he says. “And I think it will be nice 30 or 40 years down the road when I can press pause and look back at what I’ve done.” He smiles sheepishly, then adds, “Or maybe I’ll retire to a beach and sell lobster rolls.” Beavers Margaritas & Lobster Rolls? Sounds like a plan.