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Boise Fry Co. has become a sizzling success

The fries have it: In just two years, the eatery earns acclaim — and profits

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The Boise Fry Co. got off to an inauspicious start last year, locked in a legal dispute with the Idaho Potato Commission over its name. It was originally called Idaho Fry Co.

But that's now a distant memory for the fry company's owners — under legal gag from talking about their run-in with the spud commission — as the startup thrives amid the worst economy in decades.

"One of the hard things about business, especially in the restaurant industry, is you have incredible highs and incredible lows, something I never experienced in my previous occupation," said co-owner Blake Lingle, 30, a Boise State University alumnus and former foreign economic analyst for the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Federal Trade Commission.

Lingle and his business partner, chef Riley Huddleston, not only created their own niche in the food service industry (a fry joint with "burgers on the side"), they already have received local and national recognition for being the best at what they do.

How many new restaurants can say they've been promoted by the Food Network (America's best hand-cut fries) and ESPN College GameDay host Erin Andrews in the same year, much less the same week?

"It really is hard to put a price on that type of advertising, PR, or whatever you want to call it," Lingle said.

Lingle and Huddleston have been approached by about a dozen people wanting to invest in the business or get franchising rights. And they're toying with the idea of a second location in the Treasure Valley.

"We're still so young," said Lingle, not ready to consider franchising. "I feel like we're really starting to hit our stride."

In July, the restaurant took top honors for "best fries in the Treasure Valley" in the Statesman's annual Best of Treasure Valley contest. In September, the restaurant won "best burger" in Boise Weekly's annual contest. And don't be surprised if you see Boise Fry Co. in Sunset magazine this spring; staff took photos at the restaurant this year.

BOWLED OVER BY NATIONAL PUBLICITY

Sales were strong before the Food Network segment aired in September. Afterward, "our sales literally doubled almost overnight," said Ryan Reinke, general manager of the restaurant. "The fluctuation was insane."

He recalls having to shut down early several nights because they kept running out of fresh-baked organic whole wheat potato buns, delivered fresh daily.

No thought of just buying some buns at the nearest grocery store?

"We're a real stickler on quality," Reinke said. "I didn't want to put out a subpar product."

ESPN rolled into town soon after for College GameDay at Boise State. A crew member was advised to try Boise Fry Co.

"He came in the Wednesday night before the game and said, 'We want you to cater the meals for the crew, and we'd love to put you on College GameDay,'" Lingle said.

The show ran out of time before featuring Boise Fry Co., but the business got a boost in social media. A photo by

Statesman photographer Joe Jaszewski was tweeted far and wide by show host Erin Andrews, who has more than 250,000 fans on Twitter. The playful photo also found its way onto the Boise Fry Co.'s Facebook page under the headline "Once wasn't enough!"

BUILDING A BUSINESS, ONE RECIPE AT A TIME

While working in Washington, D.C., Lingle dreamed of returning to Boise and starting a business. He says no one flat-out discouraged him from pursuing that dream, though there were some doubters.

"I definitely got the feeling from some people, some weren't as subtle — 'Are you sure you want to sell high-priced burgers in the worst economy in years?'" Lingle recalled last week.

He partnered up with Huddleston, a friend and chef who saw it as better than what he had been planning — to go to work as a chef in Vail.

"I knew Vail was really risky," he said of the economic hit on higher-end establishments.

"A lot of my friends in the culinary world laughed at me ... They said, 'You're supposed to be heading for a top chef job,'" said Huddleston, now executive chef and beverage director of Timber Cove Inn in northern California. But he travels back to Boise every other month or so to check on the recipes and techniques the staff is using.

Huddleston said he approached the creation of Boise Fry Co. with five-star restaurant standards. He did a lot of research on potatoes — the restaurant offers as many as seven, including purple, sweet and Okinawa — and the best way to cook gourmet fries. They offer five cuts: regular, homestyle, curly, shoestring and po' balls.

"It took a lot more effort than anything else," Huddleston said of learning and refining the process of making gourmet fries. "All the other things come natural."

Huddleston developed all the fry dipping sauces, including blueberry ketchup, roasted garlic aioli and chipotle.

"We try to hit every note — the tangy, the hot, the sweet, the bitter, the savory," Huddleston said.

In addition to fresh local beef for burgers, Huddleston put bison on the menu after he tasted a sample from a ranch in Nyssa, Ore., where his mother is a city administrator.

LOCAL FLAVOR MORE THAN JUST THE FOOD

The furniture in the restaurant is made from juniper from Huddleston's grandpa's farm in the Baker City, Ore., area.

"My grandpa has a portable saw mill," Huddleston said. "He made the furniture ... Everything in there, it seems like it just fell into place."

The restaurant walls are adorned with work by local artists, including Ben Wilson and Jeremy Webster. Lingle said one of Webster's paintings sells about every month. As many as 18 have sold since it opened.

One Tuesday a month, the restaurant hosts a nonprofit meeting and donates 20 percent of sales to the group. Lingle said it's a way to give back to the community — and bring in new customers.

"If you've never heard about Boise Fry Co., if you like it, maybe you'll come back," Lingle said.

CHALLENGES INSIDE AND OUT

The restaurant is in a strip mall on Broadway Avenue near St. Luke's Boise Medical Center. It's a great location — lots of motor and foot traffic — but not easy to find if you're not looking for it.

The biggest benefit: They got a break on their rent because it wasn't as visible to passersby. But the space is small; the indoor seating capacity is about 30.

"There were customer complaints — it's elbow-to-elbow in there," Lingle said.

Another challenge also was internal — replacing kitchen equipment. The fryers, for instance, were messy, smoky and hard to maintain.

"They broke down every day," Lingle said of the fryers. They replaced equipment one piece at a time, when they had

money.

Lingle said the business had enough positive cash flow after the first month to cover employee salaries and other expenses. It became profitable in year two, and they put that money back into the business — from launching a mobile fry truck in January to adding a back patio with 16 more seats in April. The fry truck was parked in the north end zone for Boise State football games this season.

“This summer, we want to be at every festival and street fair,” Lingle said.

CREATING JOBS IN TOUGH TIMES

Boise Fry Co. employs nine people — mostly college students, refugees (two from Iraq, one from Bhutan, and one from Burundi) and an occasional high school student.

Lingle said he’s proud to be able to create some “living wage jobs,” paying \$11 to \$12 an hour with health and dental benefits.

Lingle is a member of the International Refugee Committee. He said it’s difficult for refugees to find work.

“Working in the international development field, I got exposed to many of the environments that many refugees came from,” Lingle said. “This is a small little way that I can give back to people who have had it a lot worse than I have.”

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