

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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Labor of Love

Discover the passion and grit behind some of Lawrence's favorite artisan foods.



by Sara Maloney, photos by Steven Hertzog

In an era often dominated by large-scale commercial manufacturing, local entrepreneurs selling tofu, natural preserves and kombucha showcase how production can thrive in Douglas County through connection and community.

Local business owners have to wear a lot of hats to make a business successful, both behind the scenes and with customers. That might look like managing inventory and accounting, as well as honing and selling new products, and keeping up with production scaling.

But these three business owners shared a couple common threads: the idea that Lawrence and Douglas County's support for local businesses has helped them succeed, and the Lawrence Farmers Market is helping these owners reach new audiences.



Galina Conrad in her forest-like garden in Lawrence

Cultivating Craft in the Backyard

Galina Conrad, owner of Le Petit Garden, began her business in 2005 as a personal journey to stay busy following the passing of her husband in 2003. What started small has continued to overtake the entirety of her backyard. With a more than 5,800-square-foot backyard, she has about 125 varieties of plants.

Her goal was to grow foods that weren't necessarily as common in this area, like persimmons, rhubarb, gooseberry, black currant, jostaberries and hardy kiwi.

"It's my backyard farm," Conrad says. "It is just not a big backyard. I have about 100 to 135 varieties on this small amount of land."

Creating handmade jams and preserves was something she started doing for friends. When they recommended she start taking her items to the Lawrence Farmers Market, she took the advice. She filled out an application, and the rest is history.

Now, she's known around town as the "Pesto Lady."

But it's not been an easy ride. It takes a lot of time, labor and perseverance. Without other employees, Conrad manages all pruning, harvesting and cooking herself. To comply with food safety regulations for her pesto and cooked salsas, she built a small commercial kitchen inside her home garage.

Conrad adheres to traditional Russian jam- and preserve-making techniques, cooking berries over a two- to three-day process without added pectin or preservatives to allow the fruit to absorb the sugar syrup naturally.

Her ever-changing menu is made up of unique creations like rhubarb-orange marmalade, strawberry-rose petal preserves and garlic scape pesto. That's what sets her apart from other types of jams or jellies.

"I try to create something new to surprise my customers," she explains.

Conrad has been at the Lawrence market for more than 20 years now, and she previously spent almost a decade also traveling to the Overland Park Farmers Market before stepping back during the pandemic.

She continues to try new recipes and surprise her customers with options that are not otherwise available in town.

Conrad agreed that the Lawrence community has rallied behind her all these years. "They help when you need help," she says.



Clay Burkhead with Elliot Pees, serving Kanbucha at the Lawrence Farmer's Market



The Passion Behind the Brew

Elliot Pees started producing kombucha around 2008. Started as a home-brewing do-it-yourself experiment during the height of the recession, the passion project evolved into a full-fledged operation with the creation of KANbucha in 2012, when he shifted his focus entirely to the business.

"In around 2009 or 10, it was difficult to get a job during that part of the time of the recession," Pees says. "I just decided, well, this would be fun, nobody's really doing it."

Because of kombucha's fermentation process, navigating the steps to licensing in the beginning of his journey turned out to be a learning curve for both Pees and state regulators.

"The KDA [Kansas Department of Agriculture], who grants the food-processing licenses, didn't really know how to categorize it," he explains. "They didn't know much about it, so it was kind of a learning process for them, as well."

To meet commercial standards, Pees initially built out a licensed commercial kitchen in his home basement before scaling up into a dedicated commercial





Elliot and Clay filling bottles of Kanbucha for distribution

facility in North Lawrence to handle manufacturing, packaging and storage.

As he continues to scale up the business, Pees has had to consider how to carefully reinvest hard-earned profit into better equipment to continue to grow production numbers. It's something that's been daunting and scary at times.

"Usually when you scale up, it's just a big, up-front cost, and you do that at the risk of things maybe not working out, so that incremental leveling up is something that I've always bootstrapped. I've always owned every part of my business because I'm always reinvesting some of the profits to buy better equipment," he says.

Today, Pees is able to produce nearly 300 gallons of kombucha per batch, a maximum for the business so far, and distributes to local coffee shops, grocery stores such as The Merc Co-op and the farmers market.

The way the community wants to support local businesses has made the experience what it is, he says. Not only customers, but the way retailers in the local space want to have other nearby producers in their stores has made a big difference in his journey as a business owner.

"The support here in Lawrence just made it a perfect place to start a local business," Pees adds.

Watching the culture around kombucha change has also impacted how customers show up for KANbucha. When he started the business and jugs at the market, nearly every conversation included educating people on what kombucha even was. Now, it seems every year, he has to explain less and less what it is.

Being recognized around town as "the kombucha guy" brought a lot of gratitude and inspiration to Pees, and has created a close-knit way to receive real feedback.



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Tim Quillin, owner of Central Soyfoods, engages with a customer as he works his stand at the Lawrence Farmers Market

A Local Legacy of Tofu

Taking over Central Soyfoods in 2024 wasn't just a business acquisition for Tim Quillin; it was stepping into a legacy that has been part of the Lawrence community since 1978. The tofu company is the only manufacturer in the region.

Quillin is a former executive chef who spent years leading high-volume local kitchens like Pachamama's, Big Mill and Ladybird Diner. Several years ago, he decided he was looking for a career shift.

"The idea of getting to do one thing instead of a million things at the same time ... not that this place doesn't have its trials and tribulations, but at the same time, I'm not being pulled in a million different directions ..." he explains.

It's not an easy production process because of the nature of tofu—it requires extremely hot temperatures to create and steam. Quillin plays a big role in the production process but has another team member helping with some of the hardest parts of the process.

With customers being both grocery stores and restaurants, he gets a look into where his creations end up while also traveling around Kansas City to see how new places are bringing his tofu to life.

Currently, Central Soyfoods supplies more than 30 grocery stores and restaurants in the area, and produces more than 2,000 pounds of fresh tofu weekly.

Quillin recently started taking his tofu to the local farmers market, and it's been rewarding to see who he's selling to at the ground level. The clientele at the market has continued to grow, and in August, he sold out of all his tofu for the first time.

The market has also allowed him to bridge all different generations of customers. Longtime residents stop by and share stories of buying Central Soyfoods decades ago, and Quillin is able to share cooking and preparation inspiration with new customers who may not know what to do with the product.

"I really appreciate that this town is so excited to tell me their stories about my business that I don't even know," he says. "I'm really proud to be able to carry this on into the future."

For Quillin, the experience reinforces the bond between Lawrence residents and local makers. He's lived in the area almost his whole life and has seen firsthand that people don't just buy the product, they invest in the family, the history and the craft behind it.

"When you wake up every day, and you know that your neighbor has this kind of business, it makes you feel proud about your community," he says. "You have a stake in your community because you know this is a person, they have a family, and you know their name." ▲



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