



PHOTOS: MILO'S WHOLE WORLD GOURMET

Jonathan Milo Leal, Milo's Whole World Gourmet

Beating the Odds

Growing up in Nepal and Mexico, Jonathan Milo Leal had an early indoctrination in international cuisine. Creative spirit and a business mindset have been his recipe for success.

BY NICOLE POTENZA DENIS



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In retrospect, launching a company with wine-based pasta sauces was an ambitious endeavor, muses Jonathan Milo Leal, owner and founder of Athens, Ohio-based Milo's Whole World Gourmet/Vino de Milo. Buyers told him over and over that the pasta sauce category was too crowded for anything new.

"If I could go back and start over," says Leal, "I probably would have chosen a different category to get my feet wet." But, fast-forward 15 years, and Leal has beaten the odds.

A Worldly Upbringing

A child of missionary parents, Leal spent his early years in a remote village of Nepal. From there, his family moved on to Mexico to continue their work.

"I've grown up in a family that is multicultural—my great grandparents were Mexican immigrants—and I was constantly exposed to lots of interesting foods. I think that plays a big part in who I am today and the chances I'm willing to take," Leal says.

Though exposure to a multitude of cuisines came at an early age, a culinary career wasn't his first dream. "I was sure I was going to grow up to be an inventor or a writer," he says, adding that he wrote his first 80-page mystery novel at the age of 11. After college, Leal took his love of writing to the suburbs of Oklahoma City and became a small-town reporter for several years. He then decided to go back to school, get a couple of degrees in French, and try his hand at teaching. It wasn't a good fit.

"When I realized teaching high-school kids was not for me, I began looking around for what to do with my life," he says. His thoughts kept coming back to food.

After responding to an ad for a personal chef, Leal began cooking for a few clients and then went on to cater small events. "My foray into catering was the impetus to creating Milo's," he says.

Creating an Original

According to Leal, the development of his company came very organically, but not without some bumps along the way. "I was catering an event that called for pasta sauce, which I was creating from scratch in the kitchen at ACEnet, a food business incubator in Athens, Ohio," he recalls. As people raved about his sauces in particular, "I decided to take the plunge into actually bottling them."

Leal is constantly working with his customers to make sure what is being developed has demand behind it.

Leal calls himself a cautionary tale for other companies on what not to do. “Focus right off the bat on profitability,” he advises.

When Leal’s former French professor suggested he add wine to the recipe, the name *Vino de Milo* sprang forth. “A terrific and all-encompassing moniker that sums up the company: I’m Milo and we use vino in everything!” says Leal.

With pasta sauce such a saturated category, Leal knew he needed to bring something different to the table. Starting with ingredients that are up to 95 percent locally sourced, the sauces are prepared the old-fashioned way, starting with sauteing onions and garlic in extra-virgin olive oil, and then reducing with the wine. “It gives the sauces an extra depth of flavor that you don’t find elsewhere,” Leal says.

Adapting Expectations

The company debuted with three SKUs—Mediterranean Pinot Grigio Puttanesca (now called Triple Olive and Artichoke Puttanesca), Portobello Shiraz (currently Fire Roasted Portobello) and Tuscan Merlot (now Chunky Tuscan Vegetable)—and a small part-time team that handled everything from production to sales.

Expectations ran high in the beginning. “We had pie-in-the-sky goals,” Leal says with a laugh. But the difficulties of getting established and understanding the real costs of doing business soon became clear. “There were so many things that came up—overspending on the wrong inventory, not researching label design, spending on things that didn’t have a direct impact on sales, and not diversifying our customer base were big challenges we faced in our infancy,” he says.

Leal calls himself a cautionary tale for other companies on what not to do. “Focus right off the bat on profitability,” he advises. “If what you’re doing or selling isn’t profitable—or going to be soon—then take a hard look at what needs to change.

“This approach never ends. We’re constantly evaluating what we’re doing, what’s working, and making changes.”

New Products, Far-Reaching Customers

After the first wine pasta sauces took off and the company landed accounts like The Hills Market, Heinen Fine Foods, and Cooper’s Hawk Winery, Leal added wine-based salad dressings, in such varieties as sun-dried tomato with merlot and gorgonzola pear with riesling, and bruschetta toppings, such as artichoke garlic and roasted red pepper.

But the seminal moment in the growth and development of

Vino de Milo’s came when the company got its first order from Japan, for its salad dressings. “It was amazing to me that there was a whole market outside the U.S. for specialty foods. This opened my eyes to the many other avenues of selling,” Leal says. He now sells to half a dozen other countries and has branched out into private label, further diversifying the company’s customer base.

Image Refresh

Critical to the success and identity of Leal’s product line is the *Vino de Milo* logo and packaging. “It is who we are,” says Leal.

In 2012, Leal decided to overhaul the company’s brand presentation. “We hired Paul Zullo at Silver Creative [Group] to completely re-imagine us from the ground up—in other words, do what we should have done from the start,” he explains. The result: a bright, cheerful, colorful logo and packaging that stands out on the shelf. Leal says the change has made a huge difference in sales—almost doubling them by the end of 2013.

The cubist-looking chef donning each label is, in fact, “an artistic representation of me,” Leal reveals. “Glasses, colorful clothes, wine glass, and all.”

Expanding the Concept, Keeping the Formula

The company devised a brand extension in 2012: a line of barbecue sauces and salsas packaged under the name *JB’s Best*. “We originally

JONATHAN MILO LEAL

Age: 44

Years in specialty food: 13

Favorite food: My mom's Nepalese dal bhaat.

Least favorite food: Lima beans.

Last thing I cooked and served: Rhubarb strawberry pie.

If I weren't running my business: I'd be doing humanitarian work in Nepal.

One piece of advice I'd give to a new food business: You really have to be in this for the long haul, because it's not a get-rich-quick business by any means.



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The packaging update has made a huge difference in sales—almost doubling them by the end of 2013.

started selling them under Vino de Milo, but it did not make sense,” Leal explains. While no wine appears in either line, alcohol is a common theme among the products: JB’s Best salsas use tequila and the sauces contain microbrewed ale.

The JB’s Best line might be considered Leal’s alter-ego, but in fact it’s a loving gesture to his husband, Barry, whom he calls his silent supporter. “I figured after 10 years of constant emotional and financial support, it was about time he had his name on a line!”

Today, the company offers 40 SKUs under the Vino de Milo and JB’s Best brands, and another dozen under controlled brands. Leal continues to introduce new items that undergo rigorous testing before launch, and is constantly working with his customers to make sure what is being developed has demand behind it. He examines what is doing well in the marketplace, talks to his accounts to see what is moving and listens carefully to customer feedback. “Our customers help drive our business and offer ideas for new products,” he says.

Despite the business’ continued success, Leal still produces at ACEnet, for the time being. The company’s growth has sparked the preliminary stages of product expansion.

“We are starting to look at what it would take to have our own facility, which is incredibly exciting. We currently employ about 10 amazing, dedicated, hard-working people, and this move would enable us to take this business to the next level,” Leal says. “There is so much more I want for this company—we are halfway to where I want to be.”

Nicole Potenza Denis is a contributing editor to Specialty Food Magazine.