



he slow burn

Litchfield condiment maker fires up a chili sauce line

"WHEN YOU PUT THIS IN YOUR MOUTH, IT'S HOT GOING TO TASTE HOT FOR 30 SECONDS, BECAUSE IT'S NOT JUST A CHEMICAL. YOU'LL TASTE THE SWEETNESS OF THE SAUCE, THE RICHNESS OF THE PEPPER, AND THEN YOU'LL BURN TO FEEL A DRIP IN THE BACK OF YOUR THROAT."

BY STEVE KASSEL

Don't call Paul Ferraioli condiments hot sauce. He turns up his taste buds at the suggestion. With his smiling, mile-a-minute intensity, he will readily correct anyone who makes the mistake. To prove his point, he might even begin pouring, on one plate, a watery, orange-red liquid, on another, a thick glob of mustard sauce resembling dense bathhouse slather. "It's like pumping battery fluid in your mouth," the Litchfield resident says, swirling a Tabasco puddle on a

plate while listing its main ingredients: a chemical pepper extract and vinegar. Adding to an unwavering record of his own company's Sweet Sun-Dried condiments, he continues, "The difference is, these are full of chili." The world of condiments has become increasingly crowded in recent years. Where once Tabasco ruled the roost, store shelves have seen the addition of everything from bottles of Tabasco Pure to Pure It Good, labeled with hokey pictures of screaming faces. Ferraioli hopes to add his own variation of Sweet Sun-Dried, from sweet to jerk to smoky, to the mix.

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PHOTO: JEFFREY M. HARRIS
ON THE LINE OF SWEET SUN-DRIED CONDIMENT COMPANY

Sweet Sun-Dried Atomic Chili Sauce is thicker than most of its competitors.

SWEET SUNSHINE: 'Flavor before fire'

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He sees his success (which owes their invention in part to his brother, Van) as superior on a few fronts.

For one, Sarris craves an almost limitless number of pairings. With veggies. Roast potatoes. As finishing sauce for chicken. For dipping. The list goes on.

He says they have more kick than barbecue, more diversity of flavor than ketchup. Like the distinction between ordinary hot sauce and his own edible accoutrements, he likes to share his slogan: flavor before fire.

"When you put this in your mouth, it's not going to taste hot for 30 seconds, because it's not just a chemical. You'll taste the sweetness of the sauce. The presence of the pepper. And then you'll begin to feel a drip in the back of your throat," he says in a Litchfield office adorned with glossy 8-by-10s of his wife, Chastene, two daughters and two sons, ages 7 to 13. An inspirational calendar hangs on one wall, the current month celebrating achievement.

Sarris' dream is to see Sweet Sunshine line shelves at stores like Whole Foods. For now, he is content to test his flavors at local concerts and sell the line about \$1 a bottle from his Web site, www.sweetsunshine.com. *GW Taverner in Washington*



To purchase Litchfield resident Paul Sarris' Condiments, visit www.sweetsunshine.com

Condiments, keeps a couple of bottles available for customers on request. Three Sweet Sunshine sauces recently won Scotwin, taking first, second and third prize awards in different categories from a fiery foods and barbecue trade group.

Career as an entrepreneur

The sauce enterprise has been a long time coming for Sarris, 56, a self-described introvert. He grew up on Long Island, studied political science

in college and went to graduate school to become a teacher. Instead, he invested in a company that marketed smoke detectors, then went to work spending Burger King stores and reselling them for commercial shops. But he was unhappy in big corporate culture. At a buddy's urging, he quit his job and started making high-end, mostly medical packaging — containers that nurture or retainers might come in.

He was living in his mother's basement with two sons and a then-pregnant wife. He was, by his own account, founding

Tony Robbins to the rescue

Then Tony Robbins entered the picture, on television screen to be exact. Inspired by an infomercial for the famous motivational speaker, Sarris said he used the few dollars he had to purchase Robbins' tapes. They looked like each set, the quest does not determine the future.

Three rules in particular resonated with Sarris: have a good attitude, always do more than is required and never quit.

About 12 years ago, Sarris and his wife bought property in Litchfield, built a home and moved out of his mother's basement. They entertained often. Sarris delighted in

edible creations. The sauce has been simmering for some time now. Sarris and brother Van bonded about ideas to market some sort of gourmet food before settling on a condiment about eight years ago.

Sarris scoured the Internet for pepper purveyors. He later recruited a renowned food technologist to refine the recipe, which feature all-natural ingredients and lots of seeds and habanero chilis.

In recent months, his focus has been on testing the tastes — mainly with country music concertgoers at Hartford's Dodge Music Center. Chastene Sarris, who is partial to the roasted shallot and garlic and warm varieties, thinks her husband's gusto will help propel the line to success.

"I know he can do it. He's a very determined and strong-willed person," she said. "And, people really love the sauce."

Sarris hopes to expand beyond sauces and create other food items that make it easier for at-home cooks to whip up something tasty under the banner of his company, Gourmet Connoisseurs.

A portion of proceeds from his sauces will ultimately go to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, he says, a cause he wants to contribute \$1 million toward during his lifetime.