

CANVAS REBEL

Meet Jimmy Wernsing



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Alright – so today we’ve got the honor of introducing you to Jimmy Wernsing. We think you’ll enjoy our conversation, we’ve shared it below.

Jimmy , thanks for joining us, excited to have you contributing your stories and insights. Let’s kick things off with a hypothetical question – if it were up to you, what would you change about the school or education system to better prepare students for a more fulfilling life and career?

I am a retired educator. In one of my positions I restructured a school to relate current education to what students are going to do with the rest of their lives. I was recruited by the Clinton administration to help start a national program called Schools to Careers to create ways for schools and business to work more closely together in helping students make more relevant decisions about future workplace plans. Every student in this country is going to work for money one day and our education system does little to tie these activities together. Ludicrous. Schools need to make available to students opportunities to think, explore and hear about what they may want to do with their life and know all the opportunities that exist.

Employers are very much on board to help in schools and offer resources which in the long run, will improve the quality of their employees.

I believe that community college associate degrees and a myriad of technical programs are the most underutilized education resources in the country. We need to do a better job of educating students about these options and that through federal, state and local financial aid programs, low income students can exit with a credential at a very low cost.

Awesome – so before we get into the rest of our questions, can you briefly introduce yourself to our readers.

The creation of Jimmy Tomato has been the best, hardest and most exciting period of my life. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, got a Bachelor's degree and MBA from the University of Oregon, then entered corporate America in finance and sales. Eventually I realized I hated corporate life and the crass treatment of customers in the mad dash for corporate revenues. I returned to school and received two teaching certificates and a Master's degree in Education from Portland State University. I was a teacher, ran administrative programs, developed national education programs, and ultimately returned to Portland to help students find a pathway in life from education to work.

I have been growing tomatoes and making tomato sauce for over 40 years. It began as my mother's basic recipe and I have worked to improve it. In 2017 I cooked some tomato sauce for two friends who had just had a baby. They said that it was the best tomato sauce they had ever consumed and urged me to sell it. This set off my journey and sparked in me a fire that I had never felt before. Solving all the mysteries of how to develop a product and sell it was very exciting. I was hooked.

I am now known as Jimmy Tomato and my company is now in its 6th year. I have produced over 7 tons of tomato sauce in my own kitchen and sold them. I have done all of this by myself, with valuable mentors and advisors along the way. It is an incredible amount of work but I love it.

Let's talk about resilience next – do you have a story you can share with us?

I had to have further proof that my sauce was as good as I thought it was and learn what steps to take to bring it to market. I brought samples to two Farmers Markets and introduced myself to market managers. I got invaluable guidance from the director of the Oregon State University's Department of Agriculture, Food Innovation Center.

I didn't know what I didn't know, but I began the process: I had to get a food processor license and a domestic kitchen license to produce in my home. That involved over 60 emails and four home visits over 10 months. A friend designed the labels you see on my product which also had to be approved by the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Next I visited every Farmer's Market within 75 miles of Portland to observe, talk to market managers, see what equipment I needed etc. In 14 months, I made 64 trial batches of sauce and filled two notebooks with notes of what I had learned.

In February of 2018 I sold my sauce for the first time at the Hillsdale Sunday Farmer's Market. I sold 18 containers of sauce. I immediately begin to think how to get bigger and better. The fire was now burning hotter. My largest sales day ever on a 4th of July was 120 containers and 90 of the sales were from brand new customers.

However, it's not always easy—winter markets were brutal and one Sunday in a snowstorm I sold only \$99 worth of sauce and paid a fee of \$64. There was a period in the high point of the season in July/August that I had to either cook a batch or sell for 8 hours at a market for 27 straight days without any time off. That takes some deep caring and motivation.

Each year I sold more and more sauce, cooking and packaging by myself. Eventually I made nearly 4,000 containers of sauce and sold them in 76 markets. It was the hardest I had ever worked in my entire life. Then Covid hit. Everything closed up. I weathered that storm by selling online and personally delivering my product.

As markets and life resumed I returned to my two major markets, Beaverton and Lake Oswego, selling every Saturday during the 6 month market season. I was also included in a group representing the Food Innovation Center and showed my product at the San Francisco Fancy food Show, the second largest in the nation.

Can you tell us about what's worked well for you in terms of growing your clientele?

I sell in Farmer's Markets. I sell classic Italian Tomato Meat Sauce and classic Vegan Marinara Sauce. I just completed my sixth year and sold over 3000 containers in 6 months.

What works for me is offering samples of my sauce. I have a conversion rate of better than 2:1 in terms of sales. Most importantly I believe deeply in my product. I have given out over 25,000 samples and watch my customers' eyes and can tell immediately they really like it. If people taste it they buy it.

I also make sure that my customers know that I use the best ingredients possible, and have never cut one corner to obtain excellence in my product and business process.

I now have a loyal following of customers which is an incredible accomplishment. I am most proud of the fact that I began this from nothing with no knowledge of the food industry and have been successful. I am very proud that I entered an entirely new arena and have a reputation of offering an excellent product, having a great work ethic and being a nice guy. For me it doesn't get better than being respected for all those traits.

The problem with growing my clientele is one of production, it is only me. I need to hire co-packers to make my product for me and also work with USDA on a certification process.

During all of this I have always believed that I could keep taking this to higher levels and enter the retail markets. I have been working on strategies of how I can imitate this in the retail market.

A philosophy I carry: " Doing something very complex, very well, is exceedingly difficult.. But if attained it is joyfully rewarded."

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