

DENVER & THE WEST

FAST SLAP OF SNOW

Slushy commute; snowier to north » 14B



Business » 6-10B

Al Lewis » 8B

BURRITO BOON

A desire to create a business, and make a healthier burrito, evolves into a major frozen-food triumph for one Boulder chef who found a way to market his creation -- with the help of a catchy title and natural ingredients. » 6B

Wall Street

DOW JONES
 ↓ 36.88
 10,748.26
 NASDAQ
 ↑ 0.64
 2375.31
 S&P 500
 ↓ 3.94
 1155.79

Story » 6-7B
 denverpost.com/business



Workers hand-roll burritos along the line at Evol Burritos in Boulder. The company makes 450,000 burritos a month at the plant and distributes the frozen all-natural products in 15 percent of grocery stores nationally. (Photos by RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)

A firm's touch of Evol

Burritos makers growth in overdrive since entrepreneur added partners

By Greg Griffin The Denver Post

A warm burrito hand-delivered in aluminum foil is a time-worn tradition in Colorado. But when Boulder chef and rock climber Phil Anson tried his variation on the business 10 years ago, it flopped.

Anson tried to sell fresh, all-natural burritos to climbers in Eldorado Canyon.

"It didn't work," he said. "One reason is that I was this white kid doing that. People couldn't connect the dots."

Today, Anson oversees weekly production of more than 100,000 burritos that are distributed to 4,000 grocery stores. Evol Burritos, co-owned by Anson and entrepreneurs Brendan Synnott and Tom Spier, calls itself the country's No. 2 natural-frozen-burrito company.

Anson's climb from dejected upstart to burrito magnate has the makings of a business-school case study.

After his first failure, the former line chef began placing labels and a brand name on his burritos. They started selling.

Soon, he was delivering them daily to Front Range natural grocery stores.

In 2008, Anson began freezing his burritos, and distribution expanded from coast to coast. Phil's Fresh Foods reached \$1 million in sales, but Anson felt overwhelmed. He didn't have the money or expertise to go further.

Then, through a mutual friend, Anson met Spier and Synnott, who were living in Vail. Synnott co-founded Bear Naked Granola in 2002 and sold it in 2007 to Kellogg's for \$60 million. Spier was the Connecticut company's financial and operations chief.

The two bought a stake in Phil's in April 2009. The multimillion-dollar deal gives them a majority share, Synnott said. Anson remains

an equity partner, chef and chief executive.

They changed the name to Evol (Synnott's idea; it's "love" spelled backward) and cranked up the marketing, production and distribution.

Paul Jerde, executive director of the Deming Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business, said early-stage companies often fail when entrepreneurs are unwilling or unable to share control.

"The frequency with which companies get in trouble around expanding and building a team is really astounding. Many founders are not willing to let go when they reach the limitations of their expertise," he said. "This is a marvelous example because it's apparent that Phil saw the value in doing that."

Evol burritos are locally sourced and all-natural — made with antibiotic-free meat, cage-free chicken and eggs and mostly organic ingredients. The 6- to 8-ounce burritos sell for \$2.99.

Evol recently began selling fresh burritos in convenience stores, coffee shops and universities. The company's frozen burritos are sold in 15 percent of the nation's grocery stores and all natural-foods stores, Synnott said.

The company's 45-employee plant in Boulder is at capacity, and it is looking for bigger space. Evol may eventually enter other frozen-food categories, but for now burritos are the sole focus.

"I totally believe there should be better burritos in the world," Synnott said, "and I want to make it happen."



Phil Anson has been successful with his all-natural burritos since his first effort flopped.

Growth story

Evol Burritos' rapid expansion has it looking for more space. Here's its growth by the numbers:

Sales: 225 percent rise, first quarter 2010 over 2009

Employees: 45 today vs. 16 in 2008

Burritos: 450,000 made in March vs. 100,000 in March last year.

Source: Evol Burritos

Greg Griffin: 303-954-1241 or ggriffin@denverpost.com