

# Maddy and Maize brings flavor to growing popcorn scene

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Thai Coconut Curry and Bourbon Barbecue are no longer names associated just with dinner. A Minnesota native is diving into a growing snack industry and chose these flavors — among other unusual combinations — for gourmet popcorn. And large retailers like Target are paying attention.

Maddy and Maize, a small-batch gourmet popcorn company based in St. Paul, was started by Brett Striker in 2016. Striker, who grew up in Golden Valley and Minnetonka, had no prior experience running a food business or making snacks — just creativity and a passion for clean eating.



Ads by ZINC

The popcorn was included in snack boxes at this year's Golden Globes and Academy Awards, and 4-oz. bags can be purchased at most Target stores in the Twin Cities as well as at smaller retailers such as Kowalski's Markets or the Wedge Community Co-op. Striker said he sells close to 2,000 bags of popcorn a week through online and retail sales.

“I had the idea back in late 2014,” Striker said. “I had a couple friends that were extremely healthy eaters that were eating lots of popcorn and adding different ingredients to the popcorn.”

Though Striker comes from an information technology background, he decided to experiment in his apartment kitchen with foodie-inspired flavors and recipes. “I haven’t had any background in food,” he said. “I really taught myself everything related to this industry. It’s been really fun.”

These out-of-the-box flavors come from Striker’s appetite and imagination, as well as from recommendations and studying food trends. Bestsellers include Lemon Raspberry Layer Cake, Dark Chocolate Caramel and Birthday Cake.

Aaron Lavinsky

Owner Brett Striker boxed up his product Thursday. Striker’s family also helps make, package and distribute the popcorn weekly.

Originally, Striker wanted to open brick-and-mortar popcorn stores and had his sights set on a location in the Mall of America. At the last minute, he changed plans due to costs and lack of experience running a store and decided to sell his popcorn through other channels.

Getting started, Striker sought financial help from friends and family and now finances the company through sales. “Financing is a constant struggle, but the business has been growing pretty fast. Cash flow is a constant issue. I’m really just getting by on sales right now,” Striker said, adding that he’s starting to look for outside investment.

Before starting Maddie and Maize, Striker gave samples of his popcorn flavors to friends and family and sold bags at local farmers markets. “People started loving it,” he said. Next, he started selling the popcorn to grocery stores around the Twin Cities, while others bought the popcorn in bulk for graduation parties and events.

Eventually, Maddy and Maize was selected as one of three food companies included in a “Shop Local” pilot program at Target in September 2017. A one-month trial has morphed into an ongoing presence on Target shelves.

While Striker has hired three full-time workers and seven to 10 part-timers, he said his family helps him out every week — making popcorn, packaging it and distributing the bags. “It’s a big



family process,” he said, adding that it’s been difficult to find full-time staff. More orders from stores and consumers recently pushed Maddy and Maize to move to a larger commercial kitchen in St. Paul.

“When I first had this idea back in 2014, I thought the popcorn market had already been saturated,” Striker said. “Popcorn was everywhere.”

Popcorn is still everywhere, said Melissa Abbott, vice president for culinary insights for the Hartman Group, which studies food industry trends.

Abbott added that popcorn caters to a consumer demand for less gluten, whole food ingredients and natural sourcing methods. “It’s definitely a great time for popcorn,” she said.

Data from Nielsen shows a 12.4 percent compounded annual growth rate in dollar sales of popped popcorn over the past four years, though growth has slowed in the past year. Unpopped popcorn sales have declined during the period.

“It was the smaller players that have really driven this growth,” Abbott said, pointing out how larger brands, such as Orville Redenbacher’s, a major microwave-popcorn brand, have been pushed to play catch-up with ready-to-eat brands.

Consumers also are leaning toward purchasing products from smaller businesses, Abbott said. “[Consumers] believe that there’s greater care in creating products and sourcing of ingredients,” she said. “It’s not just about the bottom line.”

Striker said he feels his popcorn stands out from other brands because of its local ties, confectionary nature and premium ingredients. “Almost all of our flavors are vegan, all of our flavors are gluten-free,” he said. “Our flavors are so unique it kind of puts us in a unique category.”

Striker said he’s hoping to expand his product from just Minnesota stores to regional and eventually national markets. For now, he wants to regulate the business’ growth so the hand-crafted quality and original vision of the popcorn is maintained.

Olivia Johnson is a University of Minnesota student on assignment for the Star Tribune.