

profile

Taking care of **business**

A chance encounter with a delicious bagel set a couple of New Zealanders off on a winning business venture.

Text: Sarah Beresford Photographs: Joanna Wickham





“There are no numbers in the ingredients list on the back of our packs.”

Chance is a fine thing. When Megan Sargent was visiting the United States in 1995, a friend took her to a bagel store. “There was a queue of customers stretching around the block,” she remembers. “When I got my warm bagel, I could see why everyone was happy to wait so long to be served. It was so delicious! Then I discovered that bagels were low-fat and it really got me thinking.”

Megan discussed the experience with her then fiancé, Brett Milburn, and they decided that a café specialising in selling bagels would go down a treat in New Zealand, too.

“We had always wanted to start our own business and this seemed the perfect opportunity.” Through a series of serendipitous connections with “friends of friends”, they set up a meeting in Chicago with a bagel machine manufacturer and arranged for Brett to spend time training to make the distinctive ring-shaped buns.

“Traditionally, bagels are boiled but they go hard within hours, so we decided to use the popular American method of steaming our bagels,” Megan explains. “Our big concern is making a quality bagel, rather than striving for complete authenticity.”

The couple returned to New Zealand, set up Abe’s Bagels and opened a café with the idea that they would eventually start a franchise. However, chance stepped in again to determine the focus of their business when Progressive Enterprises approached them about supplying their supermarkets with fresh bagels.

“Gradually that side of the business took over so that it became easier to concentrate on the core role of producing truckloads of bagels. So we sold the café in 2003. It’s funny the number of times people say to us, ‘You should start a café...’,” Megan says.

The couple made other significant changes in the interim. “Brett and I started Abe’s as an engaged couple and we did eventually get married... to different people,” Megan explains, laughing. “A lot of people find this very curious but now we can’t imagine what it would be like to work all day with each other and then go home together. What would we talk about?”

And, in keeping with this pragmatic approach, the couple have made sure they keep one step ahead of the business by constantly looking at new opportunities. Diversifying into making bagel crisps is a case in point.

“We’re always on the lookout for new ideas and the crisps have huge potential. They are very low in fat and can be used in ways that you would never use a potato chip. They’re perfect to serve with antipasto platters, cheeses, hummus and guacamole, or as a snack on their own.”

The crisps are made from bagels that have been twice-baked. They are sliced after the first bake, seasoned and then baked again. New flavours have recently been introduced – onion, garlic and poppyseed – as well as the natural and rock salt bagel crisps.

Abe’s Real Food Company is based in Auckland and now employs about 50 people, making more than a quarter of a million bagels a week. These days the lion’s share of the bagels is used to make bagel crisps rather than being sold as fresh bagels. And with Abe’s Bagel Crisps taking off in Australia, the company shows no sign of slowing down.

But that doesn’t mean that the quality that Megan and Brett insisted on in the early days running a bagel café has been compromised in any way.

“We’re very conscious of where we source our ingredients and we don’t use any preservatives or artificial flavours, colouring or GM products. There are no numbers in the ingredients list on the back of our packs,” says Megan proudly.

“We work hard not to leave a big footprint in producing our products and are working towards a zero waste policy. And it’s amazing how even little things count. We reuse the packing boxes that we deliver products to the supermarkets in, up to 10 times. That alone saves on tonnes and tonnes of cardboard, and on trucks delivering new boxes.”

And, although Abe’s has recently expanded its premises so that storage and production can all be on one site, Megan and Brett still see their business as part of the community and support a variety of fundraisers and initiatives, such as supplying children in decile one schools with bagels for breakfast and donating bagels to organisations like the City Mission.

“We’re constantly looking at better ways we can do things and fresh ways that we can develop the business.”

It’s wonderful what a mouthful of yummy food can load to!