

FOOD FIGHT INC.

**Napkin Sketches to Retail Shelves:
An Entrepreneur's Odyssey
of Triumphs and Lemons**



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Bruno J. Codispoti

www.foodfightinc.ca



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Preface



On a late afternoon in fall, escape from the office often leads to a quiet patio table at the closest Starbucks where the sight of people ‘brown bagging it’ is of no consequence. The surprise interruption of my solitude with one said brown bagger would demand my time and attention. The man sidling up to my table has obviously other intentions than to take delight in his homemade lunch and his introduction to me is a fully confident one: *“The lady in your office said I would find you out here. I understand you take popular restaurant recipes and food ideas and introduce them into grocery stores across the country.”* The awkward pause that follows does not deter him. *“You have to try one of my wife’s famous dulce de leche infused mini scones; she tops them with chunks of crunchy real Canadian bacon dunked in dark chocolate! Go on, try one.”* He leans in closer and whispers in my ear: *“We’ll make millions together.”*

Now, aside from the fact that reaching my hand into a stranger’s brown bag, however deliciously described, is beyond unappealing, I am now faced with the dilemma of the short or long answer as to how financially risky and utterly nervy his assumption really is. Where do I start? Do I tell him to take his head out of the bacon and chocolate covered clouds and send him and his brown bag on their way? Or, do I take the more responsible and onerous road, as I want to do, and begin to sketch out the fundamental blueprints for the epic, and frequently fruitless journey. I often begin by saying: *“You learn more about what not to do when you lose money doing the wrong thing. I can tell you how I’ve*

lost a boat-load of it over the past 20 years playing this game of delusional buffet-sized profits.”

This book is a hard-earned collection of stories that have to do with being fanatical about finding the next big food and drink thing, that next sliced-bread or Coca-Cola idea. It’s about surprising, and sometimes unplanned, successes and carefully planned product launches ending in agonizing failure. Generously filled with themes of persistence and perseverance, and spiked with a pinch of humility, *Food Fight Inc.* is a spoonful of reality mixed with sugar to make the medicine go down. In the same breath, it’s a testimony baked with fundamental lessons and practical guidance that can be applied to any aspiring entrepreneur’s crusade, particularly those with only modest means, looking to unchain a product idea so that they can share it with the world. Regardless of the industry you’re trying to break into, I hope that my adventures, particularly the brutal failures, the really sour lemons, will cause you to take a big step back to rethink your path.

From crafting tequila cocktails for former Van Halen front-man, Sammy Hagar, to popping too much popcorn for Pope Saint John Paul II, there’s a little somethin’ somethin’ for even the pickiest of eaters. At times, the lessons and guidance may be a little difficult to taste because they’ll be soaked in tales of booze and butter. But trust me, they’re in there, sticking to the sides of the bowl. Learn, respect and practice the basics in this book, and you’ll be able to make your product launch mission tastier and much more financially digestible should the soufflé sink when it’s pulled from the oven.

As with any maiden journey, the first attempt is generally the hardest one. More often than not, it’s also the most painful one. And like with most journeys, you’ll begin to move faster and more freely with a knowledge of avoiding danger zones the more the road is travelled. It’s nothing short of exhilarating and liberating to dream up your own product idea, sketch it out on a cocktail napkin and then gaze up at the outcome on a retail shelf a year or so later. When you get the launch formula right, it’s a beautiful thing. When you get it wrong, and chances are that you will, more than once, chalk it up as a valuable lesson learned, wipe the counter clean and then start over again. Making

mistakes is not only acceptable gameplay, it's a secret ingredient. Remember, it takes repetition to build muscle. To that end, if I can save one person from betting the farm on their Grandmother's secret Saskatoon Berry Jam, or help them in successfully selling a truckload of the silky organic sesame miso marinade they discovered in Osaka Japan—then my food fight will have been worth it.



Gathering Substance



It's Always Been About Food

My brother Dave and I have always had our own personal strengths, his being academia and mine, despite my body type being reminiscent of Shaggy from Scooby Doo, was being able to eat a lot. Perhaps not the typical strength to brag about, but it has served me well now in my pursuit of delicious food and has been a source of amusement for my family and friends for as long as I can remember. My Uncle Lou loved to watch me devour a thick stack of fried veal cutlets during Sunday lunch, and then jog the block to digest just enough to put down another plate. The staff at Chinese Food Buffets were warned that “all you can eat” was a dangerous proposition when I walked through the door. My friends cheered me on to tackle a third soft serve cone, or the Flintstone-sized steak.

It is only fitting then that my first job was as a stock boy at the local Red & White grocery store. There I was, a thirteen-year-old budding foodie making \$3.81 an hour facing-up canned goods and carrying out paper grocery bags for nice old ladies for a 25-cent tip. Ten years, and many more veal cutlets later, I would find myself working for my Uncle El in his boutique design and print firm, Rockprint (now Creative Rock / creative.rock.net). His main gig was, and still is, designing and printing food packaging for a large (and now monster large) food company called Johnvince Foods (johnvincefoods.com). This is an over-40-year-old family owned establishment that both repacks (other companies' bulk products) and manufactures a colourful multitude of both

commodity-driven and unique food products, selling to nearly every retailer in Canada—and more recently in the US—that vends food.

Looking back to the mid '70s, Johnvince was fundamental in kick-starting and then shaping the concept of ditching expensive packaging to sell food in bulk to save consumers money. My Uncle introduced me to Joe Pulla, the company's owner and opportunity-finding savant, who instantly became a welcome mentor. Joe was, and remains, the most alarmingly clever and convincing entrepreneurial warrior with whom I've crossed paths. The words *impossible* and *surrender* are not in the man's dictionary. If he should ever decide to write his memoir, buy it. Trust me. Following him into his warren of food glory changed my life's trajectory for the better.

In the late '90s, J.P. (as Joe is affectionately called by his close peers; or the BrandFusion-staff exclusive nickname, 'Jeepers') scooped up both Planters Peanuts® and Lifesavers® from Nabisco, which immediately injected a level of admiration and notoriety into his already thriving food empire. The acquisition of the lovable, monocle sporting Mr. Peanut® gave him one of the most identifiable brand icons in the world. Lifesavers was enlisted into another of his growing subsidiary companies called Beta Brands.

In an effort to score myself a more permanent spot on JP's stacked bench of regular players, I took a long shot by offering up a very simple 5-page marketing plan detailing some ideas I had on rebuilding the dangerously out-of-date Lifesavers brand. If truth be told, it was my first attempt at penning a marketing plan, and although it was admittedly the absolute worst plan that I had ever produced, it proved to also be the most profoundly life-changing. The very next week I was given a job and a small desk located right outside JP's office door. I like to think that it was because he was able to see past my cryptic ideas and found a hungry and trustworthy student to mould. The position paid very little in salary, but paid off in spades in terms of providing a driver's seat vantage point, and to opening my sheltered eyes to a fun new world where anything seemed possible.

Beta Brands operated out of the timeworn, but very charming McCormicks Candy® manufacturing facility in London, Ontario. Eager

cottage, he and I chatted openly and intensely about my next career move. I explained that it might be a suitable time for me to take leave of the cozy rabbit-hole in search of a more corporate company chapter with whom to continue my food journey, with the promise to return one day with more to offer both him and myself. With a charming and heavy grin, he gave me his official blessing. Three weeks later I received my first offer from The Quaker Oats Company in Peterborough, Ontario and I swiftly accepted it. Little did I know that, over the course of the next ten years, all of my major career decisions would be thoughtfully discussed and forged during early morning bike rides at JP's cottage. Always over a hot Tim's coffee and a freshly buttered 'everything' bagel while dangling my feet from the same public picnic table overlooking the lake.

Quaker was a barn-sized culture shock for me, as my vast fifth floor playground was replaced with a closet-sized cubicle. Where I once had the freedom to exercise my impulsive ideas and get involved with all things marketing, sales, operational, and legal, I was now boxed in by a very restricted set of marketing responsibilities and measured deliverables. Everyone spoke in a strange foreign tongue filled with acronyms and buzzwords I didn't understand. I felt like an Italian immigrant getting off the boat at Pier 21 into Halifax trying to settle into my strange new surroundings. As with all new adventures, there was an adjustment period and things did eventually click and I found a voice and my groove. The majority of my fellow Quakers proved to be fabulously sharp and highly motivated companions.

I learned how to dig deep into the countless dollars spent on consumer research to decode the food business at a different level. I learned how to structure, deliver and execute a proper product launch. I enjoyed exercising my multi-million marketing budget and I picked up a little corporate-poise along the way. Thank the food Gods for my brief stint at Quaker, as without it, the recipe that ended up becoming my career would have been dangerously void of salt and pepper. I like to think I made an impression on my new family at Quaker: the Marketing Director told me the prudent and well-respected then CEO blurted out a 'Fuck No' when he heard of my departure.

With my feet dangling once again from the lakeside picnic table, JP took a bite of his buttered ‘everything’ bagel, looked over the water and made me a casual and hefty offer. *‘I have an opportunity. It won’t pay anything for at least a year, but it could turn into something.’* I was still unmarried, with no brood of my own to watch over. The timing felt right in the pocket as the corporate life, although stable and promising, just didn’t feel like me. With a few exchanges and high-fives, it was done. (Seriously, there were, and usually still are, solid old school high-fives to consummate such decisions.) JP and I were now business partners in a company that I would operate and he would watch over with a helpful hand and a keen eye.

Settling into my entrepreneurial life at the newly formed Brand-Fusion Ltd. (brandfusion.ca), I could faintly sense the value and strength that my experience up until this point had given me. I was able to meld together the youthful spirit and take-no-prisoners approach of working in a private and flat-structured organization with the discipline and methodology of working in a large public corporate setting—I’ve tried to uphold the right balance between these contrasting worlds ever since. Over the next 17 years, with a growing band of fanatical foodies, I would be devoted to trying to unearth the next food product sensation. And I’m still at it.



Grocery Math



What to Expect

For those of you wanting to get into the grocery game, or into any product launch game for that matter, here are the Coles Notes; for a small start-up enterprise it's all in the cold math. How many store shelves can I squeeze my product onto? What will it cost me to get there? How many units per week, per year, can I conservatively move? Do I have the mandatory cash flow and the patience to wait until my return on investment clears the breakeven hurdle? If my product doesn't move can I finance the messy aftermath cleanup? Therein lies the rub. And unless you're cutting a deal in some quaint Farmer's Market where a transaction is consummated with a firm handshake, things can get costly and complicated quickly.

Let's start from the ground up. To get the ball rolling, you have to find a reputable and accessible contract packer (also known as co-packers or private label manufacturers) that will translate your small-batch kitchen recipe into one that can be commercialized and cost effectively mass-produced. Essentially, contract packers are manufacturing companies that you can commission to produce and pack your product. They can also be positioned to appear as if the product were manufactured directly by you. This is the stage where your virgin recipe usually ends up somewhat manhandled and transforms into a slightly adulterated version of its former self. It's important to stick to your guns. Do not compromise your recipe concept and vision in an act of desperation. A contract packer will always reach for the big red easy button and opt for what's economical and most closely aligned to his existing

personal but also demands a fluid and open mind for constructive criticism. God knows that every friend, family member and the mailman will have a spirited opinion. Be sure to smile politely, nod acceptingly and process the suggestions and criticism internally. Only you can sort the treasure from the trash. The design phase is also the first potential financially hazardous stage because it's where the second and considerably larger contribution is made to fund your mission.

There are many echelons of design firms in both Canada and the US. A fresh and new-fangled design can run anywhere from \$2,500 to \$25,000 per sku. If you're taking a chance on your first food venture with a modest to medium tolerance for pain, I advise sticking to the former. The downside is that the risk is heavily weighted on your natural ability to recognize a brand design and narrative that will look suitable, will have both a memorable and proprietary feel to it, and will communicate the right message to your target audience in a meaningful way. The upside is that saving \$20,000 in design suggests that you'll be 20,000 units closer to a breakeven scenario based on a food product that puts \$1 per sale back into your pocket.

I imagine this will be a controversial point because someone (most likely, and rightfully so, a marketing agency or pricey design firm resident) will argue that an out-of-the-park design and brand message conjured up by a seasoned pro will help sell truckloads more product. I completely agree. Maybe. Sometimes. However, I've had the privilege to peruse the balance sheet of quite a few food start-up failures who were badly in need of a shot of capital to keep them alive. Spending beyond their financial means too quickly in the game for brand development, packaging design and website development is usually the first menacing number that jumps off the page like a signal fire. It's a tough call as I've had the pleasure of introducing both successful brands and products built using minimal outside aid, and the pain of unleashing stink bombs built with small fortunes and over countless pricey strategy dinner meetings; why do consultants always seem to choose the over-priced Brunellos? Once again, it depends on your risk tolerance against the size of the opportunity and how strongly you believe that your drilling for the ultimate packaging design will help tap into a sales-gusher.

your hands to tread water, there's no opportunity for high-fives. Your presentation handout must be succinct and compelling, and your delivery must be confident and convincing. The squinty-eyed and usually intense personality sitting on the other side of the negotiation table is waiting to jet back to their desk to respond to 500 new emails, most of them peppered with fires needing to be extinguished.

Let It Simmer ~

1. *Does your product concept adequately fill a meaningful consumer void and opportunity gap within the category it will be sold in?*
2. *Are the driving benefits of your concept truly valuable and unique, or have you simply created sexier packaging for a me-too product? Remember, you can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig.*
3. *Have you personally scoured every store shelf to ensure that your product concept will help to enhance their existing assortment offering?*
4. *Have you cut (i.e. taste tested) your product against the competition's to ensure that it meets or exceeds your pledge to the consumer?*
5. *Is your product concept priced realistically and fairly when compared to similar offerings in the marketplace?*
6. *If shelf space is limited, what is your recommendation to the retailer for possible placement? Which competitive products should get the cold boot to clear space for your undertaking and why?*
7. *Try to snap a picture of your mocked-up product set up on a retailer's shelf to see how it looks in action (note—always ask the store manager for permission, or a smock-sporting bouncer may ask you to kindly leave).*
8. *How will you support and nurture your product concept once it's impatiently sitting on the shelf?*
9. *How much money can you stomach parting with to help mop up the aging inventory should the product not meet with the retailer's expectations?*



Show Me The Cheddar



Rules of Engagement

Show me the golden cheddar! That first cheque stub deserves to be proudly framed and displayed on the fireplace mantel beside your kid's first picture with creepy mall Santa. So be prepared, and avoid personal devastation when that cheque finally arrives in the mail with a figure that's only a mere fraction of what you expected to receive. Build your pricing model with great care. Retailers will want to keep you fed and alive, but do not want to fatten you up. How much they believe you take home versus how much you actually end up banking are two very different stories. Don't be greedy, or if you're lucky enough to get through the door and onto the shelf, your retails may end up hopelessly high. Don't price your product too low just to get through the door, or you won't have the necessary funds and fuel to travel far enough on your journey.

Striking the ultimate balance between achieving a realistic retail while giving the retailer the top end of their desired gross profit margin, and still managing to keep enough bread for your table, isn't always easy. Before you slide a piece of paper with a penciled price across the buyer's table, you have to know the retailer's pricing program expectations. Except for a select few, each retail chain has a custom *mélange* of financial contribution requirements; no doubt spurred on by crafty accountants. And unless you build in a reserve for a 5% Co-op fee, 2% Volume Rebate, 2% Damage Allowance, 1.5% Business Development Fee, 1% Cash Terms and a .025% Clean Underwear Fee, you'll squeeze yourself out of the financial picture.

Like most business ventures, planning for the worst-case scenario while secretly hoping for the best outcome is always a prudent approach. Crunch and munch the numbers to ensure that you can store enough acorns away should the retailer turn the tables and want restitution for poor performance.

In addition to the retailer's obligatory programs, build in some monies to protect your precious new real estate by supporting the marketing efforts needed to draw in attention to your tasty vittles so that they don't collect dust sitting on the shelf. When operating with a restricted budget, temporarily reducing your sell price to help fund in-store feature deal activity (e.g. 2 for \$5.00 vs. a regular price point of \$2.99 each) is a safe wager among the many more futile and fruitless retailer managed marketing options. Its effectiveness is highly measurable and, for the most part, it can still be profitable if your COGs (Cost of Goods) are intact and the retailer chips in on the deal. Unless you can piece together a consistently effective social media campaign, most other aggressive out-of-store consumer marketing activities are ordinarily beyond financial reach at the start line.

Confused? Don't be. I'll compare and contrast the paybacks and pitfalls of **out-of-store advertising** vs. **in-store promotional** marketing in *Chapter 31: Milk Money*. For now, let's make a note to play it safe by building in a set amount of money for marketing activity contribution into your pricing model. For example, for a product that retails for \$3 up to \$5, try to work in 50¢ per unit. Better yet, if you can afford to assign 75¢ to \$1.00 per unit, you're groovin'. If not, allocate what you can comfortably afford until your volumes and production efficiencies eventually increase, thus causing your COGs to decrease, at which point you should be able to start setting aside more marketing monies. Take heed. In the early going you'll find that production and order fulfillment efficiencies are thrown out the window in an effort to stay afloat. Until you fall into a steady supply and demand rhythm, plan for your COGs to be a conservative fifteen percent north of your initial calculations.

Aside from the more conventional marketing expenses, there's a handful of supporting role services that will serve to raise your tab. For example, hiring a third-party merchandising team to visit high traffic

yet they'll want you to deliver it yesterday. And, by the way, if you don't deliver the goods on time you'll be fined, tarred and feathered. This is when you need to exercise your basic management skills. Triple check absolutely everything. Walk through every step with everyone involved in the game—your team, the packaging company, the contract packer, the guy on the line attaching the doohickey to the whatchacallit, the freight company, etc.

Murphy's Law: the one single and seemingly inconsequential step or piece or person that you don't check will bring down your house of cards. It's remarkable how many folks in business, irrespective of the industry they work in, don't practice this attention to detail methodology. After my first year in business, the president and founder of Kernels Extraordinary Popcorn®, Scott Staiman, expressed this notion to me: *'It's surprising how many people don't have "it" when "it" is the most important quality to have.'* I never forgot that.

You park in the tic-tac-toe of cars and abandoned grocery carts. Walking through the sliding doors, you feel giddy and your stomach is in knots. Did my product make it into this store or is it helplessly trapped in the retailer's distribution centre, or lost here somewhere in their box-city of a backroom? Walking down aisle 5 you catch a glimpse of a red box on the shelf at the other end of the store. Is that my little red box? Tears of joy and pride christen your cheeks as you realize it is your glorious, most perfect crimson little red box of promise smiling back at you on the very top shelf. You wish it wasn't on the top shelf because you can't reach it and worry about who actually can. But, that's a problem for another day. For today is your first official day in business.



Chew Your Food



Tale of the Triple Pants

Onward and upward. It's high time to take a solid crack and bust open any crusty hesitations that are holding you back from moving forward with your quest. Protect yourself. Move sensibly by defining and then playing within your risk tolerance threshold, but move forward. Carefully structure your game-plan so that, if you should nose-dive, you'll easily be able survive the fall. If and when you do fall, take time to let the situation simmer and then apply the learnings and try again—and again. Create and embrace the self-pressure that comes along with involving supply partners and prospective retailers in your mission. If nothing else, consider that a little well-placed stress is both healthy and necessary to keep you travelling in the right direction.

I started this book by confessing that your fight will be about surprising, and sometimes unplanned, successes as well as carefully planned product launches ending in agonizing failure. Full disclosure: I'll be the first one to admit that I've had more food fiascos than tasty triumphs. For clarity's sake, let's call it five to one, respectively. And believe you me, I'm still sitting on a colourful cornucopia of more untold whoppers that I haven't shared for either legal or future tactical motives—remind me to tell you about the popular 80s seltzer that we struggled to resurrect. But hey, to the quote the Chairman of the Board: *'Regrets I've had a few, but then again too few to mention.'*

The flip side of the coin is that, for every five or six letdowns, we've had one hell of a sweet ride. Consider that most everyone you know has

secretly had a viable idea at some point in his or her life. It's startling then to recognize just how very few folks choose to act on their burning ambitions. To breakaway from this pack of overly-cautious nonstarters, you'll need to flush the idea out of your system and be cleansed of that nagging blueprint that you've been telling people about for longer than you care to remember. Go for it. Be all in. Sound the bell. Strap on a pair of mitts, step into the hot and sticky ring and throw the first punch to instigate your food fight.

'Son, please chew your food! Breathe in between bites. Slow down, no one is chasing you!'

I can't tell you how many times I've heard these cautionary words in my life. But damn it, I'm hopelessly addicted to the flavour rush too damn much despite the imminent risk of passing indigestion. Want proof? I'll let you in on my top-secret triple-pant-size strategy to prove just how much I love to food, can unleash my appetite and just flat-out go for it. When I travel on vacation, I'm always prepared to accommodate my culinary curiosity and ravenous appetite. I'll pack three different waist sizes of pants because I know what to expect. After years of practice, I'm all too familiar with the rapid transformation and damage that I'll wreak on my waistline, so deploying what I call the 34-6-8 routine is mandatory if I'm to function comfortably.

Hold your judgment and give me the chance to explain. Six or so weeks leading up to my travel, it's all about the pregame training. You see, I know I'm about to be all in at the all-inclusive buffet so doubling down on trips to the gym and cutting serious calories will be my fleeting obsession. When it's time to go, I'm dialled in. I'll step off the plane in my 34" Levi's feeling like an Olympian. Halfway into the voyage, after having put back one too many beachside cervezas and hot chicken wings, I'll slip on a pair of 36" khakis to let the belly breathe a bit better. By the end of the week, after having totally invested myself into the experience, I'll need to strap on my emergency 38s to survive the flight home.

However, the very moment that I touchdown on Canadian soil, it becomes all about the control of knowing it's time to unplug, step away and to rebalance. Within a week, I'm sporting my Levi 511's again and looking back on the adventure with a nod and a smirk. I suppose you

still take on more challenges than most. I've finally dropped the danger 38" waist zone from my arsenal and can now proudly travel with only a couple pairs of 34s—and, of course, a pair of emergency 36s. But I guess that comes with a little experience and one too many generous slices of humble pie à la mode.

As with any recipe, there are numerous interpretations and techniques that can be used to prepare a successful dish, but it's the final product that matters most. Whichever industry you're attempting to conquer, be sure to lean heavily on the fundamentals. Let my lemons help to serve as a careful reminder that it takes more than one attempt to pull off a perfect dish. Add your own flair. Mix it up in your own way, but don't change or challenge the basic ingredients. Like every pizza dough, a product launch plan will demand a lot of kneading before the final pie presents itself. Keep battling and know that you may have to survive ten unwelcomed flops before busting the game wide open with your eleventh swing. Play hard, but play smart. If you're new to the product launch game, try to resist up and quitting your day job until that triumphant eleventh wallop comes through. Play the game on the side until there's enough traction to transfer all of your energy and effort into the same pot. Keep your head down, keep your cash burn rate way down, and keep chopping away. Have faith, it's not a matter of if it'll happen, it's much more about when it'll happen and then ensuring that you're properly suited up for battle.

To be completely honest with you, what keeps me going is the fear and discomfort of not being able to repeat the process, for that would mean I'd have to actually find a job for a living. Ugh! Nope, not me. I'm hopelessly addicted to three tasty vices: chocolate, coffee and napkin sketches.

Let it all Simmer ;)



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About the Author



Bruno Codispoti is Founding Partner at BrandFusion Ltd., and Co-founder at Crazy Uncle Cocktails. Over the past twenty years, he has crafted and launched over one hundred unique retail food products into the Canadian and US marketplace. He lives in Vaughan, Ontario with his wife Lisa and their three children.