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A RESEARCH GEEK'S PATH TO BARBECUE BLISS

BY KIMBERLY HAZEN

As Beef Butter BBQ owner, Patrick Riha, drives his truck to a 40-acre parcel of empty land on Highway M on Madison's north side, he's trailering a 10-by-17-foot LED Insane Impact video wall. He's taking the 4.86-pixel screen that runs on a self-contained, 20-kilowatt generator with an onboard production box, Blue-ray DVD, and satellite to do a test run for his new summer outdoor restaurant concept.

The natural space will feature 11 firepits, a food truck with Texas-style barbecue, a beer trailer, a bathroom trailer, and the aforementioned video wall. "I tend to overdo it," he chuckles and explains that his Camp Beef Butter BBQ this summer will feature nearly half a million dollars' worth of equipment in an outdoor space overlooking wetlands and prairie. In this

pandemic nightmare, the concept is simple enough. "It's for people who are itching to get outside and who love beer, barbecue, and bands."

The concept is just one more way Riha has been able to continually adapt his business model in order to compete, even with COVID-19 crippling most restaurants. "Our business was up 30% last year because we kept pivoting," says Riha.

Riha is a UW-Madison finance and marketing grad with decades of corporate food experience for brands such as Oscar Mayer, Louis Rich, and Wolf Brand Chili. When he started thinking about bringing Texas-style barbecue to Madison, one thought got stuck in his head: 90% of all restaurants fail within the first year. Not wanting to be part of the majority, Riha began to study.

"I'm a research geek, really," he says before describing the multitudes of books and extended education that he consumed to augment his business knowledge. After investing months in learning how to be a "pit master," Riha set his sights on reducing his business risk.

"Well, the first phase was learning barbecue inside and out," Riha explains, "but I knew nothing about running a restaurant other than working at McDonald's for six months when I was 16 years old, and I'm not going to open up a restaurant when 90% fail."

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— Patrick Riha, Beef Butter BBQ

Riha wanted to see if Madison was both receptive to and willing to pay for quality Texas-style barbecue. He designed a food truck and smoker that he parked in a busy grocery store parking lot on weekends and in his Maple Bluff driveway the rest of the week. "You know, I was just waiting for the phone call from a neighbor saying, 'Hey, what are you doing?'" The neighborhood must have been full of barbecue lovers because neighbors were very tolerant, but Riha eventually ended up at FEED Kitchens, a north side commercial kitchen that serves as a business incubator for food business operators.

When he was approached by a shopping center to fill a vacant restaurant space, Riha was hesitant because he was only looking for catering space. In the end, he struck a deal. His primary condition was that the landlord outfit the kitchen's restaurant exactly the way he needed it.

"I wanted a smoker room, upgraded electrical for hot boxes, and a 10-foot-wide doorway where I could wheel out all my equipment if this thing goes south," he explains. He also negotiated a percentage of sales for his rent. "If things go great, I'd be paying three times market rate," Riha admits, "but in all my restaurant studies, I knew to keep rent to less than 10% of sales, which I'm doing."

Riha also went back to the books. "I worked with a consultant that teaches independent restaurants the systems of the national chains," he explains. "I learned things like inventory management, costing cards, recipe cards, labor management, and scheduling."

Two and a half years later, Beef Butter BBQ has served more than 250,000 people. Riha laughs as he unhooks the trailer. "Go big or go home, right?" **BB**