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BERTIE'S:

FROM SWEET HAND TO SWEET SUCCESS

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PEPPERS, PASSION AND PRIDE ARE TOP INGREDIENTS IN THIS FAMILY RECIPE

Trinidad and Tobago is a land of many passions, but few can match the national obsession with pepper sauce.

Most homes have at least one bottle of the fiery substance on hand, often homemade or gifted by a relative from a trusted family recipe. This traditional preference for homemade pepper sauce makes the emergence of Bertie's Pepper Sauce as the condiment of choice for many even more remarkable.

Co-owners Allana Stuart and her son Logan tell *Business Insider* about the success of the brand, and their obvious pride is tempered with gratitude and humility.



The Bertie's story started in the 1990s, when Allana and her late husband Bertie were living in Woodbrook. Bertie wasn't happy with any of the pepper sauces he found on the shelf and, as Allana explains, "He had a sweet hand, so he thought he would try his own pepper sauce from his own recipe. He made it and started to tweak it."

Logan smiles and winks when asked what the secret to the recipe is: "No recipe conversations," he says. "None whatsoever!"

Allana says the transformation of the recipe into a business started in 2004 when she and Bertie moved to a new home in St Ann's.

In a spirit of neighbourliness, they embarked on a fundraiser to help buy a fridge for a man in the community by selling bottles of pepper sauce made with Bertie's recipe.

"We had to sell a lot of little bottles to buy the fridge," Allana recalls with a smile. "But then what happened was people calling us, saying they liked it, and asking where could they buy some."

She describes the decision by the former franchise owner of Tony Roma's in Trinidad to place the product in his restaurants as "a lightbulb moment."

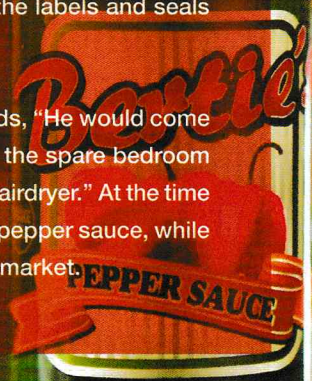


This new pepper sauce product continued as a cottage business until 2009 when Woodford Café asked to carry Bertie's, and Allana also managed get a few supermarkets on board.

It was a strange time for the family, as Logan explains, "We still had day jobs. We'd literally be bottling at night. We turned our living room into a commercial kitchen!" Allana chimes in with her memories of the chaotic period.

"We put a wall in the living room, got the stainless-steel tables. We had a commercial sink and a few tables and a refrigerator. So, the pepper sauce was made there, put in baskets and we would put the labels and seals on by hand."

Glancing fondly at her son, she adds, "He would come at night and we would sit down in the spare bedroom and put labels and seals on with a hairdryer." At the time Bertie himself was still making the pepper sauce, while she would buy the peppers at the market.



It was during this time that Bertie's got its first full-time employee.

"Our housekeeper Sylvia showed an interest as well," Allana recalls. "It would take an hour for us to pluck a basket of peppers, and she was doing it in 25 minutes. Then she came on full-time. Bertie was getting older, and he taught her how to make it. She's still with us as our supervisor."

The game changer for Bertie's as a business was when PriceSmart became a principal distributor in 2015.

"You don't realize the traffic PriceSmart gets because of how they sell," Logan muses, "because it was PriceSmart it was free advertising. If it's in PriceSmart, chances are it is going to be okay."

Because they were now dealing in pallets of product instead of individual bottles, in January 2016 production was moved out of the family home to a rented house in Woodbrook. By September that year, Logan decided it was time to plunge full-time into the family business, leaving his job as a sales manager at a labelling company.

In October 2016, with traffic in Woodbrook making deliveries a nightmare, production was moved to its current location in a large building in Aranguez.

Bertie's Pepper Sauce has grown, but the company retains its familial atmosphere. There is no sense of an industrial process at work in the preparation area. There are no conveyor belts, no giant bottling machines—just a few employees preparing peppers and carefully mixing ingredients.

This measured approach to growth while maintaining the integrity of the product is one of the reasons that Bertie's hasn't been involved in the export market so far.

"There are still places like Rio Claro, and we're not there, so we still have a fair amount to do to cover the island," Logan says. "We take so much pride in this product that we don't want to play with that. Unfortunately, our scaling has been slow, but we have to get it right when we do it."

Logan sums up the philosophy of Bertie's: "We don't say it's homemade, we say it's the closest thing to homemade." Without a doubt, Bertie is proudly looking down on the mother and son team and nodding in agreement. ■

