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BUSINESS



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Starting with one family recipe, Tim Ashman has built a successful sauce business.

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Peppers and bourbon
are winning combination
for hot-sauce maker
in Virginia Beach

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VIRGINIA BEACH — Dressed in a golf shirt and baseball cap and driving a forklift through the aromas of vinegar and herbs in an open warehouse, Tim Ashman hardly looks the role of president of a successful company in the forever-mushrooming gourmet world.

But the look is misleading.

In just over a decade, the Virginia Beach kid who didn't know what he wanted to do when he got out of college has taken a family-favorite steak sauce and turned it into a growing manufacturing and distributing company that today makes, markets and distributes more than 230 sauces, dressings, seasonings and mixes. And, although his staff numbers only 12, he still manages to whip up new recipes at home.

Now, with the 35-year-old at the wheel, Ashman Manufacturing Co. has swept through the Virginia Food and Beverage Expo, capturing the Best New Product Diamond Award with a hot sauce.

Virginia Gentleman 90 Proof Bourbon Chipotle Hot Sauce, to be exact.

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It took Ashman almost two years to persuade A. Smith Bowman Distillery of Fredericksburg to allow him to blend fine old bourbon with peppers, but the effort appears to have been worth it.

The Ashman sauce bested 18 competitors, including cookies, candy, jam, chips, soy-based foods and pork patties. Products were evaluated on originality, taste/aroma, creative packaging, visual appeal and presentation.

The hot sauce stood out.

"We got to this hot sauce and it was — boom!" said Marion Horsley, with media relations for the Department of Agriculture. "All three judges just looked at each other. They talked about the richness, a depth to it. They really all thought it was something special."

Ashman Manufacturing started in 1987, when Tim Ashman graduated from Hampden-Sydney Col-

lege with a degree in economics and few career goals. His father, a semiretired chemical salesman at the time, took him in hand and suggested doing something with the family sauce.

The Ashmans bottled House London Broil Sauce in their kitchen. It still leads the product line, which includes Ashman recipes as well as recipes from restaurants and gourmet shops across Virginia and into Maryland.

When the elder Ashman died eight years ago, the company had only eight products, and it's been through some tough times.

"Dad always pretty much let me run the company," Ashman said. "I can't tell you the number of times I thought about going somewhere else.

"The satisfaction of making it work" kept him with it. "Every year, the company grew at a good rate."

Last year alone, by more than 30 percent.

"We've been very fortunate. A lot of people have been very good to us," Ashman said, declining to provide sales figures.

In 1997, Ashman won the Commissioner's Award, recognizing

foods companies that have contributed to Virginia agriculture, from the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. From 1995 to '97, he was president of the Food and Libations Association of Virginia. Before that, the company won an award from the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade.

When it comes to manufacturing, Ashman said, he likes to work with established companies, like the Austin Grill in Alexandria and Sutton Place Gourmet in Rockville, Md. He also likes to work with individuals who have a great recipe but little expertise in manufacturing or marketing.

He especially likes the Virginia slant. That's why he went after Virginia Gentleman.

"We specialize in that type of company, the kind with a lot of Virginia tradition," he said. "Just the name has an aura about it."

Ashman went back to his kitchen at home to develop — first — Virginia Gentleman steak sauce and hot sauce. The barbecue sauce was the final one in the three-product line.

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