

Making a good food even better

Inventor goes nuts for taste, portability

By Douglas Brown

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Aztecs ground peanuts into pastes long before Marcellus Gilmore Edson, in 1884, scored the world's first patent for peanut butter.

Since then, not much had changed with the spread — up until a few years ago.

That's when a laid-back, vegetarian Boulderite who looks like a Romantic-era poet started tossing peanuts into his food processor and making peanut butter. But he added flavors like maple.

Now, his peanut butter is in Starbucks — every Starbucks in the United States.

Things are different in peanut-butter land, thanks to Justin Gold, 31. For one thing, he had the idea to put his nut butters into squeeze packets.

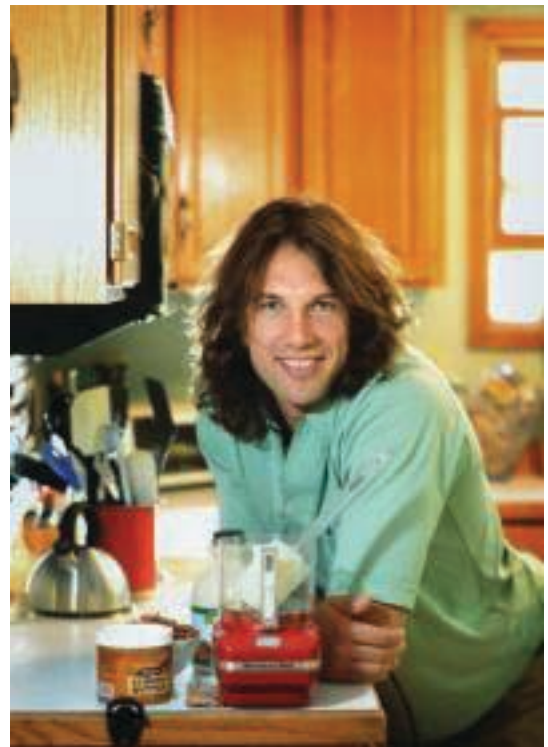
“The only reason I am making peanut butter is nobody was doing it the way I wanted,” he said one afternoon, outside the Louisville plant where boxes of peanuts, almonds and flavorings are transformed into Justin's Nut Butter.

Gold has a thing about nut butters.

As a vegetarian — and one who moved to Boulder so he could more actively pursue mountain biking, skiing and rock climbing — Gold was always on the hunt for protein. Meat is where most people get the bulk of their protein, but Gold didn't have that option. Instead, he was drawn to peanut butter.

Frustrated with what was on the market — as he puts it, “either creamy or chunky” — Gold began experimenting at home. His first stab? A butter made out of peanuts and honey, which he whipped together in 2002.

He liked it. Then he loaded up on different kinds of nuts — peanuts, almonds, pistachios, hazelnuts, walnuts — took them home, turned them into pastes in his food processor, and added all sorts of



different flavors. He would spoon the different concoctions into baby-food jars, stick numbers on the jars that corresponded to the nut butters and lug them to the Boulder restaurant where he worked as a waiter.

There, he would pass them around for taste-testing.

During this period in his life, Gold ate a lot of nut butter.

“At one point, I ate so much nut butter, it felt like it had clogged my esophagus,” says the Pennsylvania native. “I had to lie on my back on the linoleum to open up my throat.”

He also learned a lot about nuts and legumes. For one thing, peanuts are legumes, not nuts. For another, he says, you don’t need a professional grinder to turn nuts and peanuts into butter. Just dump them into a food processor, and turn it on.

“At first it will look like peanut powder, then paste, then a tennis ball, and then it will flatten out into a butter,” he says. “Then you can add other ingredients.”

Banana tastes great, he says, but by the next day the fruit turns the lovely, caramel-colored jar of peanut butter into a scary, coal-colored jar of peanut butter.

Honey is wonderful, but be careful: Add too much, and the butter turns into a brick; too little, and you can’t taste the honey.

Cashews don’t have enough oil to make a good butter. Almonds have much more oil than peanuts, which is one reason Gold prefers almond butter to peanut butter.

Gold visited organic peanut farms in New Mexico, where his preferred peanut variety, the Valencia, is grown. The Valencias, he says, are sweeter and lighter in color. Most peanut butters use “runner peanuts,” which are grown primarily in the South.

He visited almond farms in California, where big trucks with padded claws approach the trees and shake them to harvest the nuts. Gold likes the Mission variety of almond because “they have a more robust, nutty flavor,” he says.

Eventually, he arrived on a suite of nut butters — peanut and almond, mixed with flavors like honey, maple and cinnamon.

Soon, Gold started making his nut butters in a factory in Denver, switching from whirring the nuts in his kitchen food processor to dumping them into a contraption he designed. He eventually moved the equipment to a Boulder factory, and now the product is made for him at Fresca Foods, a food-manufacturing center in Louisville.

Along the way, he had an “aha” moment while mountain biking in Crested Butte. He was craving his almond-honey butter for a quick protein and calorie boost, but hadn’t brought along a jar.

It occurred to him that if his nut butters came in little packets, it would be easy to get a protein boost while exercising.

So he figured out how to fill business-card-size, foil packets with nut butter — it took about a year to make it work — and started selling them in 2006.

Business took off. Gold was able to focus full-time on the business. In September, on Gold’s birthday, Starbucks called. Now, Gold’s nut-butter operation runs 24 hours a day.

The centerpiece of the operation is Gold’s Willy Wonka contraption, a mishmash of machines that at one point rises 15 feet into the air and spreads across an area the size of a two-car garage. The contraption carries almonds from a bin, through a tube, to a funnel, where rotating blades turn the nuts and flavors into butter, which then slowly creeps down a metal ramp. It looks like wet sand.

The glop eventually gets shot into the packets through tubing. The packets are stuffed into plastic bags, crammed into square, cardboard boxes and shipped — primarily to Starbucks.

“For me to walk into this room, knowing what it was like when it all got started, . . . the really dorky food processor,” says Gold, after watching five Fresca Foods employees work the contraption. “It’s hard to believe.”

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