

## Cutting the Mustard

### Lessons of youth lead to growing venture

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It sounds like so much business hype — this claim of mustard on pizza.

Mustard on ham or roast pork, you could understand. Mustard in potato salad or salad dressings, certainly. Even mustard on roast wild game, in cole slaw or with shrimp. But mustard on pizza?

Yet that's the way Curt Riemann's Nine Fingers Mustard got its early reputation. And, according to Riemann, it still accounts for much of the use of the "Montana western-style mustard" that he is producing, bottling and selling as an addition to the Little Big Men Pizza business he's owned in Laurel for the past 18 years and Curt's Saloon, which is 14 years old.

"I grew up at Columbus, and my dad taught me how to make mustard back in the early 1950s," Riemann said.

"My original mustard was a real hot German-style mustard. Then a friend of mine, Lonnie Kellogg, taught me how to make it better with a little change in ingredients."

"I originally started making it just for in-house use, and pretty soon everybody wanted to buy it. I've been selling it to other bars and restaurants for 12 years, and, about two years ago, I started getting it on store shelves," he said.

Sold in a 12-ounce bottle, the label on the specialty item features a drawing of the bearded Riemann himself in a cowboy hat and duster with a beaver holding a sign that states, "If ten is perfect, our NINE ain't too darn bad!"

As to the Nine Fingers name, it comes from Riemann himself.

He lost the ring finger on his left hand when he fell from a truck while helping get ready for his senior high school class party over 40 years ago.

"We were sitting around drinking beer and somebody asked what I was going to call it. I lied and told him 'I've only got nine fingers and I'm just perfect. So I'll call it Nine Fingers Mustard,'" Riemann laughed.

Then he added, "But anybody who knows Curt knows his mustard is a lot closer to perfect than he is."

The sweet mustard is true to its name — just about perfect on a

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mustard maker

lot of things, he said.

"It's good on any type of pork, from ham to pork chops to roast pork. People use it on hamburgers, in cole slaw, potato salad, deviled eggs and salad dressings," he said. "It's a sweet-hot mustard. It's a mustard that 6-year-old kids can eat and like it. It's not overbearing and strong."

But mustard on pizza?

"That was another time we were down here just goofing around, and one guy said, 'This is so good. It'd even be good on pizza.' So we tried it."

"It turned out to be very good. Now 60 percent of our customers put it on pizza — anywhere from a little dab to quite a bit. They use it on all kinds, except taco pizza," Riemann said.

His marketing efforts have put it on the shelves of County Market and the Osco Drug stores in Billings, Jan's IGA and Ricci's in Laurel and Buttreys has picked it up for all its stores in Montana and Wyoming.

"Jan told me that he first put it on the shelf as a favor to me, but now it's his best-selling mustard," Riemann said.

And that, despite Riemann's statement that "Nine Fingers is the most expensive mustard on the market."

"It retails for \$3.89 to \$6.89 in stores," he explained. "I sell it for \$4 per 12-ounce bottle or \$42 for a 12-bottle case here."

Despite the price, individual sales have spread its reputation far beyond the bounds of Laurel and Billings. He's shipped cases all over the United States, to South Africa, England, Hawaii and even Antarctica.

His production facilities are set to take off to even further horizons. He buys ground Montana mustard and Montana sugar by the ton. His sources for bottles and labels and other ingredients are set. His facilities could produce 1,800 to 2,000 bottles per day.

But his efforts at breaking into



Gazette photo by David Grubbs

**Curt Riemann added producing, bottling and selling mustard to his other business ventures.**

big wholesale markets in the United States have been less a big success.

"It's tough to get into those markets," Riemann said. "Wholesalers charge shelving fees to put your product in, and those can run \$10,000. The wholesalers are so used to getting kickbacks from the big companies that it's hard for the small buy to break into it."

By the time he put his pencil to what one wholesaler offered him, he'd be making about a nickel a bottle on his mustard after deducting his costs.

But Riemann's still trying. And he isn't necessarily done with mustard development either.

"If I can get two or three wholesalers, that's what I want. Then I can make it and let them handle selling it," he said.

"Some day I'd like to experi-



### GETTING STARTED

Why does someone go into business? Sometimes it's just because they love it, no matter how rocky the start might be.

Such is the case with Curt Riemann, who produces and sells his Montana-made Nine Fingers Mustard in addition to running Little Big Men Pizza and Curt's Saloon in Laurel.

"I've always liked business, right from the start," Riemann said.

"When I was 9 years old and growing up in Columbus, I'd pick cattails in the swamps around town and put them in arrangements and sell them for 50 cents to the ladies around town."

"When I was 14, I tried a fireworks stand," he laughed. "I wasn't old enough to drive, but I had my dad's pickup truck loaded down with fireworks. Then a drunk customer came up and set it on fire."

"We saved my dad's pickup, but the whole load of fireworks went up in one shot. It was probably one of the biggest displays that Columbus ever had."

ment with some other mustards — a hot one, a dill mustard, a horseradish mustard. I enjoy making it and the business of making it," Riemann said.