

'Sky's the limit': Local business picked up by Walmart, Sam's Club

BY ANNA SYLVESTRE
DISPATCH RECORD

Lampasas-based PhoLicious has been picked out of thousands of businesses to sell its product through Sam's Club and Walmart stores across the United States.

Making instant pho kits started as a COVID-time project for Joseph and Anh Trousdale, but the business exploded past their expectations.

PhoLicious has its roots in Anh's Vietnamese heritage. Her family moved from Vietnam to St. Louis when she was a little girl, and she grew up on her mother's pho — a soup with noodles dish. It has become one of Joseph and Anh's favorite meals, Joseph said.

During the pandemic, the Trousdale's couldn't get it from restaurants that were forced to shut down. Joseph was in hotel management, and Anh was an emergency room nurse, which left them little time to cook the soup, which takes eight to 10 hours to prepare. None of the instant pho they tried tasted like the real thing.

The Trousdale's decided to try their own quick version of the family favorite.

"It turned out so good that we're like, 'Hey, we have something here,'" Joseph said.

But it was Anh's parents, who have owned restaurants in the past, who gave them the key to making their instant pho really special. Based on the family recipe and with the help of Anh's mother, the local couple tweaked their spices to better match the original recipe.

"And it was so, so good — like better than most restaurants that we went to," Joseph said. "We're like, 'We need to share this with the world; we need to share this.' And so that's when we developed the company and the product to match and just sort of went from there."

They started selling pho kits on Amazon, and then they were picked up by the QVC television network at the beginning of this year.



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Local Vietnamese restaurant PhoLicious, owned by Joseph and Anh Trousdale, is expanding with its soup kits that will be stocked nationwide at Walmart stores.

QVC had a contest called "The Big Find," which Joseph likened to the show "Shark Tank." Thousands of companies applied, and QVC picked a few hundred to pitch their business model virtually to the show hosts and guests. The Trousdale's then were given a "big ticket" to talk to buyers. They have aired on QVC twice and will be featured again this year, Joseph said.

To serve locals and supplement their earnings from the instant pho kits, the Trousdale's opened PhoLicious Cafe. The cafe sells Boba tea, along with pho soup kits. Later, the couple started serving spring rolls and sandwiches. Many residents have become regular customers.

"We always knew Lampasas was a great town and how open-minded it was, but that put it into practice, I guess you could say," Joseph said.

The success is just beginning for them, it seems.

Walmart held an "open call," where businesses pitch their products in hopes of having the superstore pick their product to sell nationwide. Of the 13,000 companies that applied, PhoLicious was one of 1,000 companies invited to participate.

Joseph described receiving the invitation as humbling and surreal.

"We had to read the email like four or five

times to make sure it said 'You are invited' instead of 'Sorry, you have not been chosen,' because that's what we were expecting, you know, being a new company."

He continued: "When it's your own thing, your own baby, sometimes you're the harshest on it. But yeah, it was really exciting."

The business event took place June 28-29 at Walmart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, Joseph said. The first day included seminars and sessions with the CEO in attendance, as well as celebrity speakers.

The second day, the Trousdale's pitched the pho kits to both Sam's Club and Walmart officials. And by the end of the day, they

learned they would be selling on both companies' websites.

In addition, by March 2023, the PhoLicious product will be available on 100-200 Sam's Club shelves, along with 50-100 or more Walmart stores by November.

About the Sam's Club offer, Joseph said, "At first, I guess we didn't exactly realize how big that was. And then afterwards as it sunk in, we're like, 'Oh, my gosh.'"

Anh and Joseph are in full

swing preparing for the transition of their business. While they initially had plans to expand the cafe, they now think they will have to set that aside.

A new 10,000-square-foot facility is in the works for the business, an upgrade from the 1,700-square-foot building where they currently operate. They will either reopen the cafe in their new location or help someone else continue it at the original site.

At first, the Trousdale's feared they might have to leave Lampasas to find a large-enough building within their time constraints. But with the help of the city and the Lampasas Economic Development Corp., the couple found a developer who had land. The plan is to have something built in the next few weeks.

"So, the city has been huge on helping us be able to stay here and help grow in Lampasas," Joseph said.

Inflation has presented a new layer of challenges, however. In February, the Trousdale's sold their house and moved into a camper to expand their business and buy in bulk more easily. Rather than cut down on quality, they have chosen to be more efficient and increased their prices a few months ago, Joseph said.

The economy can be harder on small, new businesses, as established firms with the largest orders are prioritized during a supply shortage, Joseph said.

"It's real hard for the little guys to start off and not get hammered on inflation and prices and shortages because they're the ones at the backburner — and that's where we were at," he said.

But the Trousdale's embrace the challenges that come with building a business. Anh said they had to listen to a higher being on the journey.

Even the negative things, "you have to see that as an opportunity," she said. "And some doors were closed, but that was our opportunity."

The couple are on track to surpass their five-year business plan next year, Joseph said. With the bigger space and the employees to meet the demands of their new business agreement, "almost the sky's the limit right now."



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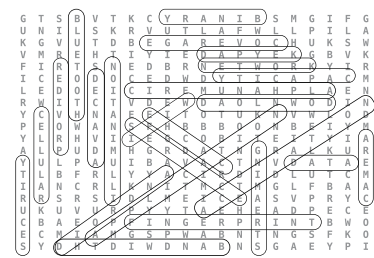
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