

NORTH JERSEY ENTREPRENEURS TURN A BELGIAN FAVORITE INTO A THRIVING BUSINESS

# HOT WAFFLES

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Five years ago while on vacation with family at a Vermont ski resort, Sam Rockwell of Mahwah stopped short at the base of a mountain and saw dozens of people standing in line for something – he couldn't see what – in 20-degree weather. Curious, he joined

the queue. More than 3,500 miles away, his buddy Justin Samuels, an Englewood native, who was studying abroad in Barcelona for a semester and eating his way through European cities, found one treat that he couldn't get enough of.

The two University of Wisconsin-Madison juniors shared their new discoveries during a Skype chat and, much to their surprise, realized they had both stumbled upon the same thing: Liege-style Belgian waffles, that is Belgian waffles (identified by its large size, large squares, and light batter) sprinkled with pearl sugar (it's the sugar that makes it Liege style). It didn't take long for Rockwell and Samuels, who were both ma-

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From left, Brian Samuels, Justin Samuels and Sam Rockwell of WaffleWaffle, which today churns out 4,000 Liege-style Belgian waffles hourly at their production facility in Garfield.



# Waffles

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joring in business, to decide to start a Belgian waffle company. They strongly believe waffles will be the next big food trend.

Today WaffleWaffle churns out 4,000 waffles hourly from a production facility in Garfield, shipping both frozen and ready-to-eat waffles to supermarkets, restaurants, ice cream shops and convenience stores across the country. The sweet doughy snacks are available in five flavors, including chocolate chip, red velvet and chocolate cocoa, as well as seasonal flavors.

"We're trying to take the taste profiles that the American public enjoys and marrying that with that nostalgic, old European-style waffle," said Rockwell, who said that launching their own company seemed like a no-brainer to the duo.

"It was 2009 and our country was in a tough place financially," said Rockwell, today 27. "For us to get an internship or job someplace was something of an uphill battle. We thought, 'Why not take control of our own destiny?'"

"At first I had this naïve, grand idea that we'd start this multinational company with huge factories in the Midwest," Samuels said. But because both are from North Jersey, they thought it best to run their business from here.

Rockwell and Samuels tested and created their own recipe in the summer between their junior and senior year, experimenting with it at a local commercial kitchen. After graduating college in 2010, they rented space from a local Dunkin' Donuts commissary and began using three waffle irons to make about 150 waffles early every morning.

"We'd clean up, Justin would go left, I'd go right and whoever sold the most that afternoon was the



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It all began with three waffle irons making 150 waffles daily.

winner," Rockwell said.

One of their first customers was Allendale Bar & Grill, which sold the waffles for dessert and brunch.

Eventually WaffleWaffle grew – Samuels' cousin Brian, now 24, joined the team and later, Gene Mirabella, a 45-year-old former employee at Rockwell's father's business, came on board. At the six-month mark, operations moved to a larger kitchen in the Bronx and eventually Garfield.

To get more customers, they had to be creative salesmen; they served their waffles to local Whole Foods employees to snag a deal with the chain.

"Just picking up a phone and calling a corporate office very seldom results in success," Rockwell said. They struck deals with several Whole Foods locations as well as other retailers, including Inserra shops.

Originally, the small waffles (about the size of an average donut) were sold only frozen, in boxes of four. Now, they're also available individually wrapped, and retailers can also make the waffles fresh for customers through WaffleWaffle's "Fresh Dough Pro-

gram"; the company provides the dough and sugar, and the client takes care of the rest. Online, customers can build their own waffles, add ingredients (sprinkles, chocolate chips and strawberries, etc.), and have them shipped anywhere in the U.S.

"We started making these waffles by hand and selling them case by case," he said. "Now we're shipping them out by the trailer-load across the country. It's the coolest thing."

What's next?

A waffle bar would be nice one day, Brian Samuels said. "Sort of a Cold Stone concept, where the waffles are made fresh and people get to pick their toppings."

But right now the five-man team – 23-year-old Dan Chiriff of Westwood is their newly hired account manager – is focused on coming up with a catchy slogan for the company.

"WaffleWaffle – 'So nice we named it twice?'" Rockwell proposed, and then rattles off a few more. "Better waffle for a better world? Or how's this, 'WaffleWaffle, so good you know you should.'"

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