

# Nuts for Peanut Butter

A Vermont dad turned his passion into a thriving business, one jar at a time.

Chris Kaiser was sweating, tired, and famished when he reached the peak of the mountain in the Adirondack Park. It was 2005. He was 34, living in Lake George, New York, and recently divorced. His daughter was 2. An athlete by passion and a financial

planner by profession, Kaiser had been thinking a lot about where he wanted life to go next. So he decided to take a day to do what he loved best: get out into the wilderness and clear his head.

"That day, though, I hiked farther than I thought I would go," he remembers. "When I got to the summit, I was spent."

He sat down on a rock and opened an energy bar. "It didn't taste that great, but I ate it anyway. It just wasn't enough; I was still hungry. So I reached into my pack for the only other food I'd brought: a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

He looked at the empty energy bar wrapper in one hand, and at the sandwich in the other. "That's when I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if one 'real' food could give me all the energy the bar provided and all the flavor I got from the PB&J?'"

When Kaiser got back home, he turned his kitchen into a food lab. He started buying roasted nuts and grinding them in a food processor. He'd add a bit of sea salt, then mix in pumpkin seeds, dried cranberries, honey, and a bit of whey protein isolate. "I was a full-scholarship Division I baseball player in college and had worked with the Baltimore Orioles as a strength trainer, so I knew and cared a lot about nutrition," he explained. "Peanuts are naturally high in protein and good fats, but the more I looked at store-bought peanut butters, the more I realized how many junky ingredients, hydrogenated oils, and extra sugars were in there."

He sought out high-quality peanuts from U.S. farms, and organic ingredients where he could. He avoided preservatives, palm oils, and added sugars. He experimented with different varieties of peanuts (or almonds or walnuts) and different roasts. Then he would add the "fun stuff": whey protein for extra sustenance, flax seeds for their omega-3s, and small amounts of chocolate chips, maple syrup, or raisins for their natural sweetness.

His daughter Regan, then a toddler, would sit on the counter watching. "I'd give her a taste and I'd immediately get a reaction," Kaiser says. "If she rolled her eyes, I knew it was good. If she scrunched up her nose," he says, "not so much."

As Regan got older, her father would make her "gourmet" PB&J sandwiches that were the envy of her classmates. "She'd show up with white-chocolate peanut butter with blueberry jam or almond butter with cranberry jelly on whole wheat—with the crusts cut off, of course," he adds.



Chris Kaiser went from crunching numbers to grinding peanuts.



Kaiser's peanut butter is the real deal: What makes it creamy is the peanuts' natural oils. Find out more about his peanut butter varieties at [vtpeanutbutter.com](http://vtpeanutbutter.com).

Then, one night, after an evening on the town, a group of Kaiser's friends ended up back at his house to watch TV. "The guys were super hungry and I had nothing in my fridge, so I brought out some of the peanut butters I'd made—I just handed out jars with spoons," Kaiser says. "There was silence for a while, then a round of 'Oh. My. God!'; then 'Dude, you gotta sell this stuff!'"

And Kaiser did. By the time he moved to Stowe, Vermont, in 2009, he had developed 10 flavors of nut butters. Good Karma is a creamy butter with dark chocolate. Avalanche uses white chocolate and notes of vanilla, a combo that tastes like an old-fashioned peanut butter and marshmallow sandwich. Stowe Cinnamon Raisin is perfect on a toasted bagel at breakfast. And Green

Mountain Goodness is made from an almond/peanut butter blend with organic pumpkin seeds and flax seeds mixed in.

Kaiser started out by taking jars around to Stowe area stores. The first place he visited, a local specialty food shop called Cold Hollow Cider Mill, sold out in a day. "I got a call from the store manager asking how soon I could get an additional 12 cases together, so I ran back to the house and started mixing up more." He then took it around to other stores and did a taste test for the local paper, the *Stowe Reporter*, which ran a full-page story on him. Shortly after, he got a call from Italy.

"At first I thought it was a joke," he says. "This guy with a really heavy accent starts asking me about my peanut butter and do I sell it in Italy. Turns out he was a food distributor who had been skiing in Stowe and tried it. It took me a few minutes after hanging up to realize that I had my first major order: We were barely selling in Vermont and suddenly we'd gotten an international order for 3,600 jars."

That was more than Kaiser could handle in one small kitchen. So he cut back on his financial work, hired an employee, and worked with a manufacturer to design and custom build a commercial mixer.

In 2011 he moved operations into a warehouse space in nearby Waterbury. With the new mixing machines, Kaiser and his small team could now churn out 7,000 to 9,000 jars a month and they were shipping them off to Whole Foods and more than 500 other stores, primarily in New England, as well as online. Today his products are sold at Amazon.com, where a 16-ounce jar of Avalanche goes for \$6.09. Life was looking good.

Until August 29, 2011.

"I woke up that morning and heard the rain pounding the roof. The river near my house was rising fast." Then he got a text from the landlord at his commercial space in Waterbury: "Get down here now!"

Hurricane Irene, which swept up the East Coast, had become a tropical storm that dumped 11 inches of rain in 24 hours. Down in the valley, the low-lying town of Waterbury was completely flooded, the river rising as high as the first floor of the buildings. The roads were completely



impassable. Kaiser's business was gone.

"I was stunned," he remembers. "When I could finally get in, desks, chairs, computers were all jammed up against the front door. Everything was soaked and covered in mud. I'd put all my savings into the new machinery. It was ruined."

But the orders were still pouring in. So Kaiser acted quickly. He found a new space just 30 minutes away and a landlord who was eager to help him rebuild. He worked with the mixing-machine manufacturers to get new equipment on loan. He reached out via Kickstarter to help refinance the business. He went to the local newspaper and asked for old issues to use for packaging.



*"A guy calls, asking if I sell my peanut butter in Italy. I thought it was a joke, but he was an Italian food distributor who had been skiing in Stowe."*



"In some ways, it forced us to do some of the things we should have done, and we're greener and more energy efficient now because of the move," Kaiser says. Within six weeks, the company was back up and shipping.

Now Kaiser finally is getting a chance to breathe and to think about where the company can go next. Earlier this year, he partnered with another Stowe entrepreneur, Leigh Williams of Laughing Moon Chocolates, to provide peanut butter for her peanut-butter cups and other items in her line of all-natural, locally sourced chocolates and candies. In April he signed up Jeremy Jones—a professional snowboarder and one of *National Geographic's* 2013 Adventurers of the Year—as Vermont Peanut Butter's brand ambassador. "I told Chris that I probably eat more peanut butter than anyone I know; it's a superfood that keeps me alive in the mountains and at home," said Jones. "I think what he has done with a category that had been stale for years is amazing."

This summer Kaiser plans to put the last piece of the puzzle in place. "Remember that day I told you about, when I was hiking and first started thinking about peanut butter?" he asks. "I wasn't really thinking about putting it in jars, but about putting it into little portable packets, like the energy gels." That packaging had proved too expensive, so he settled for jars to start with. But this summer, he plans to launch VTPB Pack It, squeezable single-serving packs of his various flavors.

"It's going to be a lot better than trail mix," he promises. "I think it could be huge."

—Lisa Gosselin



Chris and Regan making some sandwiches. Chris says she's starting to get too cool for peanut butter—a blow to his fatherly ego!