



# SURVIVING IN THE FACE OF COMPETITION

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## 97-year-old Brucken Foods continues to adapt in the competitive wholesale food business

Brucken Foods traces its history to 1913, when the food wholesale company delivered its pickles, spices and condiments packed in heavy wooden boxes on the back of a horse-drawn cart.

The delivery method — along with a few other aspects of the business — have changed rather dramatically in the past 97 years, but Brucken Foods has managed to survive by changing with — and adapting to — the times, and to the ever-changing restaurant industry.

Brucken Foods owner Donny Tucker said at its peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the company had five employees, two box-style delivery trucks and a delivery van. Today, the 61-year-old Tucker — who took over the company 33 years ago — is the sole full-time employee (he uses some casual help) and has one delivery van.

"It has evolved into more of a niche business," Tucker said. "I just have casual help now, and I am the only full-time employee. And I work seven days a week."

The economic downturn has been a struggle for him and his wholesale food business, but he's seeing signs of a potential turnaround.

"I think things are starting to tick up a little," Tucker said. Sales are up 10 percent over last year, and that's an encouraging sign for a business that saw a 35 percent drop in sales in the past five years.

### Brucken Foods

**WHAT:** Brucken Foods, a wholesale food company

**WHERE:** 78 N. Smithville Road, Dayton

**WHEN:** Established in 1913

**PRODUCTS:** Spices, seasonings, rubs, sauces, salad dressings and specialty condiments used in the restaurant industry

**MORE INFO:** [www.bruckenfoods.com](http://www.bruckenfoods.com) or (937) 252-7092

from about \$700,000 to about \$450,000 a year.

Selling his wholesale products — spices, steak seasonings, rubs, sauces, salad dressings and specialty condiments — to restaurants remains the core of his business. But Tucker credits two decisions he made early in this decade to enter the retail market with helping to ensure Brucken Foods' survival:

► About seven years ago, Tucker decided to begin packaging his products in smaller containers and started pitching them to grocery stores, which would then sell the smaller containers to custom-

**RIGHT:** Donny Tucker is the owner of Brucken Foods, established in 1913 and one of the last remaining wholesale food companies left in Dayton. B2B Staff photo by Lisa Powell



## Brucken Foods annual sales

How Brucken Foods \$450,000 in 2009 sales are broken down:



Source: Benny Tucker

STAFF

ers. The strategy worked, and now Brucken Foods steak seasoning, Cajun seasoning, hot mustard, fresh horseradish and other products are in grocery stores such as Dot's Market, Dorothy Lane Market, Kroger and Cub Foods.

► At about the same time, Tucker launched Internet sales to the public, and some of his products have sold well.

"It's been worth it," Tucker said of the internet sales. "I've gotten some surprising orders from all over the country. It's amazing how much barbecue sauce I sell by the gallon container."

Still, the restaurant industry is responsible for about \$350,000 of the company's \$450,000 in annual sales, and Tucker competes fiercely for restaurants' business.

Jay's Restaurant in Dayton's Oregon Historic District is a Brucken Foods customer, purchasing most of its dried spices and some specialty products such as horseradish, cheese and vinegars from its fellow Dayton-based company. Amy Haverstick, co-owner and general manager of Jay's, said she finds locally owned, independent suppliers generally are more responsive than large, national companies, but wants to make sure she is making sound financial decisions nevertheless.

"We want to stay loyal to the independent companies because we have a personal relationship with them," Haverstick said. "But you also have to look at the cost they're charging, and your own buying power. If we can find the same quality at lower prices, you've got to go in that direction, given the current economic realities."

Chris Cavender, Jay's Restaurant's executive chef, said he has been using Brucken products since the mid-1970s, and is pleased with the quality of the company's spices. "They seem like they're fresher," he said. Cavender also likes the idea of "buying local" when possible. "If we don't buy from these guys, they'll be gone," the chef said.

Haverstick said when she and restaurant staff compared prices for the products they buy from Brucken with prices from other suppliers, staying with Brucken Foods was an easy decision. "We came to the realization that prices were higher elsewhere," she said.

Tucker says large national wholesalers are not necessarily cheaper than small local companies.

"I've heard that time and time again, and it's a myth," he said.

And Tucker said he can be far more flexible and responsive than many large suppliers. He'll "break a case" of a product to sell in small quantities, and he doesn't require a minimum dollar order for deliveries in the Dayton area. He also offers Saturday deliveries — and has been known to deliver on the occasional Sunday.

"If someone calls in the morning, we'll get it there that afternoon," Tucker said. "I do what I have to do to survive, especially in this environment."

That includes doing business directly with some of the companies he's otherwise competing against. Brucken Food sells some specialty condiments and other items to "rival" food wholesalers-distributors such as Sysco, a national food service company, and Queensgate Food Service, a regional company, which then sell those products on a wider basis than he can. It's another potential market that his predecessors probably wouldn't have dreamed of tapping.

"When you're as small as we are," Tucker said, "that's the kind of thing you have to do."

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## Brucken Foods history

The company was founded in 1913 in the 1500 block of Xenia Avenue by Louie Brucken, who delivered pickles, condiments and spices with a horse-drawn cart. The business shut down briefly during World War II, when Louie's son, also named Louie, served in the military. The son returned and reopened the company. The son of the founder died of a heart attack in 1977, at which point his son-in-law, Donald Tucker, who had been helping with delivery routes, agreed to take over the company. Tucker moved Brucken Foods to its current location on Smithville Road in 1981.

SOURCE: Brucken Foods owner Donald Tucker

## A 'sampler platter' of Brucken Foods customers

- Arrow Wine & Spirits
- BBQ Hut
- Brunk's Cut N Carve Meat Shoppe
- Cub Foods
- Dorothy Lane Market
- Dot's Market
- Elsa's
- Grub Steak
- Jay's Restaurant
- Jungle Jim's
- Kramer's
- Kroger
- Old Hickory
- Zink Meat Market