

Meet the 20-something entrepreneur behind quinoa-fueled snacking startup eatKeenwa: 'You've got to be tenacious'

By Elaine Watson+, 16-Jun-2014

Related topics: Cereals and bakery preparations, Fruit, vegetable, nut ingredients, Health and nutritional ingredients, Trendspotter, Whole grains, Health & Wellness, Natural, Manufacturers, People, Snacks

"My background is in sales, so I'm used to dealing with disappointment," observes the founder of quinoa-based snacking brand eatKeenwa. But for every door that's been shut in Blake Niemann's face in the past 18 months, another one has opened. And his tenacity is paying off.

Just a few months after the 2013 launch of eatKeenwa Krunch, New Jersey-based Niemann - who is still in his twenties - has already achieved the kind of success that most food start-ups can only salivate over, with regional listings in a suite of big names from Whole Foods to Wegman's, Albertsons, and Fairway's, and national distribution just secured at Ahold kicking in this fall.

You've just got to be tenacious and keep going

He's made a lot of mistakes along the way, but has learned to be philosophical about it, Niemann tells FoodNavigator-USA: *"I wish I knew then [in his first meetings with retailers] what I knew now.*

"You have to learn to talk the language of the industry, learn how to negotiate over slotting fees and all the other things that come up when you make your presentations.

"I also wish that the first versions of the product - and the packaging - had been as good then as they are now. But we have the same philosophy as Howard Schultz at Starbucks, who said if you're not embarrassed by the first version of your product then you're too late to market.

"You've just got to be tenacious and keep going," adds Niemann, a long-time fan of quinoa who first became convinced it could be the next big thing in food development after his local Costco started carrying it.

"If you're used to working in sales, you get used to people saying no. I've developed a pretty thick skin."

And when you haven't got megabucks to spend on marketing, you have to get as many people as possible to try your products directly, says Niemann, who first started selling his prototype snacks out of a back of a van in New York City.

"You have to get into stores and do demos and sampling for a good year and then, hopefully, it will start to take care of itself."



Retailers don't want more tortilla chips or potato chips; this is something different

While quinoa has been slowly creeping into scores of packaged foods and restaurant menus, it's still fairly new to the snacking aisle, and the fact eatKeenwa is offering buyers something different has been key to its early success, says Niemann, who is already planning a series of brand extensions.



Blake Niemann: You have to get into stores and do demos and sampling for a good year and then, hopefully, it will start to take care of itself

"They don't want another brand of tortilla chips, or another potato chip; this is something different."

The most frustrating part has been waiting to get his shot at retail customers, he adds. *"Sometimes retailers only review their categories once or twice a year and if you miss the window, it can be heartbreaking."*

Packed with Royal quinoa, an edible seed (of the 'ancient' and gluten-free variety) that's so nutrient-dense that NASA once described it as the ultimate space food, each 28g serving of eatKeenwa Krunch has 5g of fiber, and 100 calories.

The recipe - honed by Niemann's brother Paul (now vice president) - includes toasted quinoa flakes, and quinoa crisps (the seeds are cooked until all the water is absorbed and then dried and passed through a pressurized heater, expanding into 'crisps'), plus fruits, honey and chicory root fiber.

The award-winning package design - developed by William Fox Monroe (WFM) - is bright, contemporary and fun with a *"pop culture vibe"*, and decidedly not *"artisanal"* or *"hippie-like"*, says Niemann, who got his first break at Whole Foods

last summer, but is now targeting mainstream grocery channels/convenience stores as well as natural chains with his products.

Most firms we approached weren't geared up for manufacturing small quantities

Unusually for a start-up, Niemann (who majored in global supply chains & operations management at college) retains control over the sourcing of the ingredients for eatKeenwa products, and also owns the machine they are manufactured on - which is located at a facility run by his co-manufacturing partner (which packs them on its own machines).



"When I started looking for a co-manufacturer, it was really tough because our products are square, not standard clusters," he says.

"Traditionally, you'd make them on a bar line, but most firms we approached with bar lines had massive order requirements and weren't geared up for smaller quantities."

Sourcing quinoa also has its challenges, says Niemann, who says prices have almost tripled since he first started experimenting with the seeds in his kitchen, although they have finally started to stabilize this year.

As for financing the business, like most entrepreneurs, Niemann started by burning through his own cash - which he recalls didn't get him very far - before *"knocking on a lot of doors"* and ultimately tapping a series of angel investors willing to take a risk on a small, but exciting new entrant to the snacks market.

As for the work/life balance, it's proving rather elusive at this critical stage of the business, he admits. *"But it's nice being able to be your own boss."*

eatKeenwa will be exhibiting at the Fancy Food Show in New York later this month at booth #5126.

Copyright - Unless otherwise stated all contents of this web site are © 2014 - William Reed Business Media SAS - All Rights Reserved - For permission to reproduce any contents of this web site, please email our Syndication department copyright@wrbm.com - Full details for the use of materials on this site can be found in the Terms & Conditions