

## Entrepreneur aims high for his BBQ sauces

By BOB CHUVALA

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Lightning in a bottle? Jonathan Soares, founder and president of Q Products Inc. in Danbury, displays his barbecue sauce at Stew Leonard's Yonkers, N.Y., location.

Jonathan Soares is 21 and on his fourth business venture -- one he hopes to take national in a year or two.

Soares isn't just daydreaming when he talks about taking his fledgling Q Products barbecue sauces national. He's already got three variations of his mom's sauce in more than 250 supermarket stores in Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts, plans to boost that number to 750 by summer and to more than 1,000 by year-end.

"I'm calling on every major supermarket," he said. "You name it, I've been on the phone with the buyer or with brokers. Things are looking very good. Most of the buyers I've met love the idea of a 21-year-old out there pushing a product."

The head buyers for Stop & Shop and the Big Y chain said they'd give Soares a chance, but that "my product has to perform, that it can't sit on the shelves or they'll pull them off." Add Stew Leonard's to the list. And soon, Giant Foods and Shaw's could be stocking Soares' barbecue sauce, as well. And he's negotiating with, among others, KeHe Foods outside Chicago, which distributes gourmet and other foods to thousands of stores in the Midwest.

It's not just the idea of an entrepreneur fresh out of college -- he earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Western Connecticut State University in Danbury last month -- that is convincing supermarket buyers. Sure, he's enthusiastic and organized. He shows up with a packet of press materials, pricing information, brochures, business cards, descriptions of his sauces "and my story."

But there's more. His barbecue sauce is actually selling in the dead of winter, when nobody is thinking BBQ. "I did a demonstration at Stew Leonard's in Yonkers, N.Y., a month ago and sold about 100 bottles in four hours," Soares said. "That was at Christmas in winter."

"After this year, I'll have a sales record and I'll be able to say 'I sold X number of bottles,'" Soares said. "Right now, buyers are taking a chance on me. I'm not only selling product, but myself, my tactics, my marketing skills."

### Learning the ropes

Soares began honing those marketing skills when he was 12 and a student at Broadview Middle School in Danbury. He would buy Airheads candy in bulk, repackage the candy by flavor and take orders from classmates. "I'd make about \$13.25 profit." His business flourished until teachers put an end to it.

A year later he and a friend began buying fresh-made ice cream wholesale from Double Twister in Danbury, repackaging it and selling it at youth sports, family parties, even

corporate functions. "We went all over the place with ice cream carts," Soares said. "Our business increased to the point we were working 70 hours a week" during summers.

Soares retired his scoop when he was 19 and "walked into a buddy's restaurant and tasted some of his sauces" that "I thought were absolutely phenomenal." His buddy wanted to increase revenues, and Soares suggested bottling the sauces for retail sale. That began an 18-month immersion in the food industry.

"I started doing research," he said. "I'd call a supermarket chain, ask for the buyer for sauces, tell them I'm 19 and have a marinara sauce, and ask for tips and advice."

He learned how the industry works and how to work it, designed labels, printed them up at Staples, then bottled 400 mason jars and sold the sauce in the pizzeria. "We sold them all in a month and a half at 5 bucks a pop," he said. "That was our test market."

He kept hustling when he wasn't in class or studying. "I contacted label designers, manufacturers and distributors all over the United States and Canada. I called everybody. I didn't care if it was the CEO, I did whatever I had to get hold of them. They respected my initiative and would give me a half hour of their time and give me advice,"

Soares found a label designer, a manufacturer and distributors. He had everything lined up and ready to go when the restaurant owner decided he didn't want to market his sauces. Soares' work abruptly stopped. But his dreams didn't.

Going national

Soares backed off the project and focused on college. But "I had done all this networking, I had all these contacts, and I considered what I had done a success." He began looking around for something else to market, which he discovered on his mother's stove. "She has a great barbeque sauce," he said. But "I knew from experience that if I sold just one flavor, it would fade away on the shelf. If I had three flavors, the product would be more visible."

Soares developed hickory teriyaki and spicy Cajun flavors, sketched out a black and silver label, and began working his contacts again. "I targeted the gourmet BBQ sauce niche because there are none out there," he said. "When it comes to retail, consumers are focused on perception. If you think any product is worth \$15, you'll pay it. If you look at my label, it's classy and unique. It's one of the most impressive BBQ sauce labels on the market."

Within a matter of months, Soares created Q Products Inc., had a 19-year-old buddy create a spiffy Web site ([www.qproductsinc.com](http://www.qproductsinc.com)), began bottling his three sauces through a New Haven manufacturer and began lining up supermarkets. "I've already sold about 10,000 bottles," he said. He hopes to be profitable in February, when he may move out of his parents' home ("They want me to stay home until I'm up and running.") and into his own condominium. And he may even have to stop being a one-man show and begin hiring people soon.

But his plans don't stop with national distribution of his Q sauces. He'll be adding marinades, salad dressings "and various other products" to his offering, taking his company national "and then bringing it all together and taking it public," he said.

Stay Tuned....