



Former cookie-maker gets taste of snack-mix market

Photographs by [Staton Breidenthal](#)

In roughly two calendar years, Wicked Mix president Stan Roberts (left) and owner Brent Bumpers have managed to get the homegrown snack mix into 80 to 100 specialty and gourmet retailers in Arkansas.

Story by [Cyd King](#)

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Wicked Mix owner Brent Bumpers took the basic formula for another company's gourmet snack mix and is turning it into a business that is on track to rival or surpass the gourmet cookie company, Brent & Sam's, that he sold in 2008.



By [Staton Breidenthal](#) Nohemy Vasquez measures ingredients for Wicked Mix, a specialty snack mix made at a manufacturing facility in the Riverdale area. [+ Enlarge](#)



By [Staton Breidenthal](#) Little Rock-made Wicked Mix comes in three flavors, with a fourth to be added next year. Each has four kinds of nuts, pretzel... [+ Enlarge](#)

Bumpers, a Charleston native and son of Betty and former Arkansas Gov. and U.S. Sen. Dale Bumpers, practiced law for nearly 20 years, and when he tired of that, he dove full time into the cookie company he started with his childhood friend, Sam DeWitt.

Brent & Sam's Inc. started in 1985 with the pair making cookies at night and on weekends with the help of Bumpers' legal secretary. It was a \$20 million-plus business when Bumpers sold it to Lance Inc., now Snyder's-Lance. Bumpers had already bought out DeWitt's interest by then.

Lance's offer was one Bumpers said he couldn't refuse.

"They bought it for more than it was worth, in my opinion," he said while standing in the kitchen at Wicked's manufacturing facility in Little Rock's Riverdale area.

His only regret about selling Brent & Sam's: After a year, Lance moved the operation from its 56,000-square-foot plant in North Little Rock to Charlotte, N.C., leaving 75 to 80 cookie-makers without jobs. He said he wishes now he'd had a written agreement to keep the business local.

"They wanted it so badly they would have agreed to keep it here at least three years, and if they had left it here three years, I think it would have stayed forever," Bumpers said.

Snyder's-Lance has since sold Brent & Sam's to Shearer's Foods LLC in Ohio.

After selling the cookie company, Bumpers dabbled in other ventures. He owned a couple of central Arkansas ministorage facilities, both of which he's since sold. And he owns two party supply stores, called The Party Place, in Fort Smith and Rogers. The stores carry an inventory similar to the warehouse-style Party City stores found across the country.

He was also a founding partner of Corky's Ribs and BBQ in Memphis and co-owned a Back Yard Burgers in Tulsa.

"I'm easily bored, that's the problem," he said.

Bumpers said he was not looking to get back in the food business when he was approached by Arkansas-based Otis & Betty's Inc., which made a snack mix similar to Wicked Mix. It wanted him to buy the business, but he instead started his own company mimicking its formula and tweaking it.

"I was inspired by the product," he said.

Otis & Betty's quit production two years ago.

Today Bumpers and Wicked Mix president Stan Roberts ride herd over eight full- and part-time employees. The company makes three types of gourmet snack mix: original, chocolate-laced and smoky hot chipotle. He hopes to add a fourth mix in early 2016, likely a garlic flavor.

"We're constantly experimenting," Roberts said.

Each mix contains four kinds of nuts, pretzels, honey nut cereal crisps, wheat crisps and sesame sticks that are mixed before adding a coating that consists of seven more dry and wet ingredients. The product is then baked, cooled, has chocolate applied in some cases and then cooled again before packaging and boxing.

"If anybody wants the formula, I'll give it to them," Bumpers said. "That's about 10 percent of the ballgame."

He said two groups tried to make a go with the Otis & Betty's recipe but failed.

"There's no textbook on how to make this product, and that's why no one has been able to succeed with it, I think," he said.

The 7-ounce packages sell for \$4.99 to \$7.99, depending on the stores' mark-up.

At this stage of the game, acquiring high-end automated equipment is not an option, Bumpers said. Some of the equipment used in Wicked's production has been adapted from other uses.

"The key in manufacturing is figuring out the processes to turn raw goods that come in the back door into finished product that goes out the front door, at a price consumers will pay and still have a little profit margin left in there," Bumpers said.

The raw materials -- nuts, for example -- can be expensive, and Wicked Mix isn't buying in the bulk amounts necessary to negotiate prices with suppliers. Bumpers recently bought a \$45,000 automated scale that will enable

Wicked Mix to increase bagging from 4-5 units per minute to 60-90 bags per minute. He bought another piece of equipment, used for chocolate lacing, on eBay for \$750.

Wicked Mix might turn a profit this year, its second full calendar year in operation, but Bumpers said the company is on track to do more than \$500,000 in sales. He expects to see \$800,000 in revenue next year but is hoping for over \$1 million, which would put the company about five years ahead of where the cookie business was at that point in its existence.

"Had I not already been through the gauntlet with Brent & Sam's and knew what I was doing, I would never have done this," he said.

Experience like Bumpers' is critical to a startup manufacturing operation that makes a product such as Wicked Mix, said Louise Kramer, communications director for the Specialty Food Association.

"It's a very challenging business to bring a specialty product like this to the market," Kramer said. "It's definitely not for mass market. It's for a more discerning consumer."

Snacks are a popular category in specialty food, she said. Nuts and seeds have grown among specialty food consumers, according to research released by the association last week.

"I think he's tapping into a good niche in the market by having a snack," Kramer said. "Plus people like entertaining at home, and this is a specialty answer to Chex mix. I think that's smart. It gives people an alternative."

Also, Wicked Mix's flavors are in demand and getting hotter by the moment, she said.

Wicked Mix has been a popular product at Straub's Markets in St. Louis.

The stand-up, resealable package that distinguishes flavor by color helps Wicked Mix stand out on Straub's shelves, said Trip Straub, president and chief executive of the local specialty grocery chain. The stores have been carrying Wicked Mix for more than a year.

"It's a great little snack mix," Straub said. "There's not many people in this town who don't like a good snack."

The name Wicked Mix came to Bumpers out of the blue, but he didn't immediately settle on it. He wanted a moniker that was as distinctive as the mix.

"I've always thought the word wicked was sort of a complex and unique word," he said. "I think it's a memorable word, an important element. I also think names are a critical part of any food product, especially [startup] products."

Wicked Mix can be found in 80 to 100 locations in Arkansas and in stores in about 40 other states. Bumpers has also started using distributors who sell to independent retailers and gourmet shops.

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