



Lovingood Foods founders Tony and Brenda Lovingood

# The Sweet (& Tangy) Taste of Success

by Emily Potts

A Peoria couple brings their homemade barbecue sauce to the masses—turning their family’s name into a brand.



For as long as she can remember, Brenda Lovingood has been making barbecue sauce for family and friends, slathering it on chicken wings, pork and meatballs. She had toyed with the idea of selling her homemade sauce for more than a decade, but life always got in the way. Both she and her husband Tony had full-time jobs and were busy raising their 11 children, while running a catering business on the side. “It always got put on the backburner,” Brenda recalls, “until one day I just decided I was going to do it.”

That day finally arrived in 2016 after she attended the Women in Business Success Conference organized by Doris Symonds, who

had been encouraging her to bottle her sauce for years. “It was like a one-stop shop,” Brenda says of the conference, where she gathered information about marketing and finances. “It was also the kick I needed to get going.” In addition, she and Tony met with Kevin Evans, director of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Bradley University, who helped them strategize their objectives and establish the business.

## CONVERTING THE MASSES

Lovingood Foods was formed in July of 2016, and within two years, the couple was selling cases of their barbecue sauce to local and regional stores including Hy-Vee, Alwan & Sons Meat Company, Save-A-Lot, and Haddad’s. “We literally walked into stores with a sample tray so they could taste the product,” Brenda says, and their hands-on tactic worked. They now drive to King’s Food Products in Belleville, Illinois—where the sauce is produced in large quantities—every three weeks to pick up cases for delivery.

“The business has grown faster than we anticipated,” Tony explains, while Brenda is quick to note that their customers have been great partners as well. “Several know that we are new to the game and have given us tips and suggestions that have added to the success of our business,” she explains. “They also showcase our product from time to time, which really promotes sales.”

A large part of their success can also be attributed to regular in-



Lucille Barnett and Brenda Lovingood serving samples at a recent tasting

store tastings. Nearly every weekend, Tony, Brenda and Brenda's mother, Lucille Barnett, serve up meatballs, pulled pork and wings, bathed in Lovingood's Sweet & Tangy BBQ sauce, at stores where it is available. And they've converted more than a few barbecue fanatics along the way.

On one occasion, as she was setting up for a tasting, Brenda passed a man leaving Hy-Vee with two bottles of her sauce in his cart. "I said, 'Make sure you come back for the tasting...'" But he didn't catch on until she pointed to her picture on the bottle. "He wanted to hug me! He said, 'You made me take Sweet Baby Ray's out of my kitchen. I love your sauce!'" she laughs. "Of course, we believe that we have great BBQ sauce—but it's really nice to hear from others."

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

Lovingood's BBQ Sauce is available in 28 stores throughout central Illinois—and they hope to be in six or seven additional locations by the end of 2019. "And then next year, we'll see what's reasonable," Tony says, noting that business growth should be sustainable. "We're listening to other business owners who say, 'You want to be in control of your business—you don't want your business to control you.'" Besides consulting with the SBDC, the couple is working with Illinois PTAC (Procurement Technical Assistance Center) at Bradley University to be certified as a minority business. "We're taking it as we go and learning along the way," he adds.

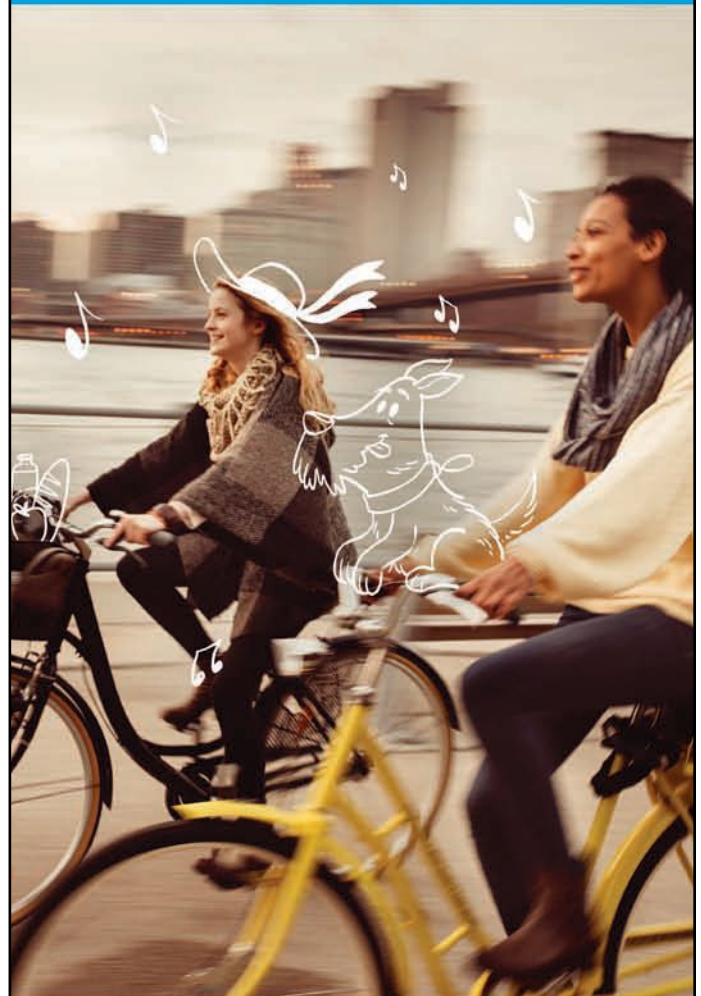
Eventually the couple hopes to pass the torch on to their son Jeffery and his wife Tamika. Jeffery currently handles social media for the business and accompanies them on tastings as his availability allows, while their other kids, who live all over the country, help out when they can. For instance, their daughter Stephanie, who works in marketing for the Phoenix Suns, had tablecloths with their logo made for the tastings. Their son Erik, who lives in Las Vegas, has helped them navigate some of the cumbersome business paperwork, while their youngest daughter Erika helps at the tastings when she can.

It's a family affair for Lovingood Foods—which, after all, was built on family values. "We want people to gather together around great food and good conversation," Brenda says. As the business looks to expand in central Illinois and beyond, they are also planning to add more products based on her recipes, including biscuits, sausage gravy and new varieties of barbecue sauce. To see where Lovingood's BBQ Sauce is sold and for a schedule of upcoming tastings, visit [lovingoodfoods.com](http://lovingoodfoods.com). ■



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