



Bob Fenske

Angie Bastian helps one of her vendors load kettle corn outside the Metrodome on a recent Sunday. Angie's Kettle Corn has a booth at the Metrodome plaza before every Minnesota Vikings game, but it also sends people out into the streets to hawk the corn.

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Kettle corn credibility

Contract with Vikings helps Mankato couple's business take off

By Bob Fenske

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MINNEAPOLIS - Dan Bastian remembers well that first batch of kettle corn he and his wife popped in their Mankato garage.

They had just received the equipment for their new business and couldn't wait to get started. So Bastian, cell phone in hand, went to work.

“I’m talking to this guy, and he’s telling me what to do. ‘OK, you put the corn in? Now add the sugar,” Bastian said. “So here’s this guy giving me directions over the cell phone and I’m thinking, “This is going to be great.”

He paused for a moment, the smile disappearing. “Well, let’s just say we needed a few practice tries.”

Angie Bastian’s recollection was much more succinct.

“Burnt. Really, really burnt,” she said.

The Bastians have come a long way since that spring day in 2001. Their business, Angie’s Kettle Corn, has taken off, thanks in part to experience and thanks to the National Football League.

It is the official kettle corn of the Minnesota Vikings, a coup that Dan Bastian does not understate.

“It gave us instant credibility,” he said. “When we talk to people about working their events, they know we can handle large crowds. And when we talk to stores about carrying our product, the word Vikings goes a long way.”

He again paused and smiled. “Of course, if our product wasn’t any good, it wouldn’t matter. I might be biased, but it’s the best around.”

Starting up

The couple moved back to Dan Bastian’s hometown after meeting in New Mexico, getting married and moving to Florida for several years. Dan Bastian found a job teaching Spanish at Mankato Area Catholic Schools while Angie Bastian was a nurse practitioner at St. Peter Regional Treatment Center.

A business would bring in extra money, but more importantly, Dan Bastian says, it would give the couple a chance to work together and set an example for their children.

“We wanted to show them that you can start something from scratch, that all you need to do is try,” Dan Bastian said.

But what kind of business?

They searched the Internet for franchise options and found nothing. But then one night, Dan Bastian went to a kettle corn Web site. “I just wanted to see what it was ... and a few minutes later I’m yelling for Angie to check it out.”

It was the perfect business for a teacher because it didn't require set hours. They decided kettle corn would be their start. And after those first few failed tests, they hit what they thought was the perfect blend of ingredients.

The Vikings

By the summer of 2002, the fledgling business was ready for more than just an occasional fair or festival. What the Bastians needed was a break, a launching pad, if you will.

They found it at the Vikings training camp in Mankato. They worked with Minnesota State University officials to set up a stand during camp, and one day they decided to donate 115 bags of their corn to Vikings players, coaches and staff.

Two days later, a Vikings sales manager approached Bastian's stand, contract in hand. It took the Bastians seconds to say yes. For a fee, they would be able to sell their wares outside the Metrodome before every home game.

Game days

The three hours leading up to the kick-off at a Vikings home game are pure mayhem for the Bastians and their workers.

Up at 5:30 a.m., the couple heads to Minneapolis and begins setting up on the "plaza," a block-long party zone where bands blare, vendors hawk their food and game booths are set up.

By 9 a.m., they are ready to sell. Dan Bastian pops, Angie Bastian bags, and workers sell, both in their booth and out on the street.

"It gets really crazy right about now," Dan Bastian said just before 11 a.m. on the day the Vikings played Denver. "From now to kick-off, we don't have a lot of time to do anything but worry about the corn."

Before it's all over, they'll sell close to 400 bags: at \$4 a bag or a \$1 more than they charge elsewhere - to Viking fans.

The Vikings have allowed the Bastians to build a client base in the Twin Cities. And there's that credibility issue. Since they signed on with the team, the Bastians have landed a number of smaller deals - the Taste of Minnesota and numerous festivals - and they've begun selling Angie's Kettle Corn in two area stores, Ray's Market in North Mankato and the St. Peter Food Co-op.

Dan Bastian now works full time on the business, although he admits he misses teaching and will eventually return to the classroom. Angie Bastian, meanwhile, continues to work in St. Peter, but her weekends are all about corn.

Not bad for a woman whose family consists of die-hard Tampa Bay Buccaneer fans.

“That’s the ironic part. Here it’s the Vikings who gave us our big break,” she said, “and my family is all about the Bucs ...”

She thought for a moment and laughed before adding, “except for me. Vikings all the way.”