

# Local salsa business shows no signs of cooling down

BY PATRICIA MURPHY

*Triblocal.com reporter*

It is doubtful Rick Kazdan will ever forget a comment comparing him to a chef who not only shares his love for bold Mexican flavors but also his first name.

"Someone once told me I was the second coming of Rick Bayless," said Kazdan of the celebrated chef and owner of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo in Chicago. "That was the best compliment I've ever received."

Leaving behind 27 years in the restaurant industry where he created dishes for chain eateries, the Warrenville resident and entrepreneur launched his own line of salsas and sauces in May of 2005 with help from Sharon Pelecki, his life and business partner.

The products, which bear vibrant labels and a cartoon sketch of a sombrero-capped Kazdan, go by the name El Gringo Loco. Kazdan picked up the moniker—Spanish for "The Crazy American"—after years spent working with Mexican colleagues on dishes that evoke our neighbor to the south.

And the fun, original names don't stop there. Kazdan has termed the whole operation a micro salsaria—"like a microbrewery but for salsa" he explains, and he sells jars of the vegetarian Salsa Chikagwana, a fusion word meaning "from Chicago" and chicken wing sauce Gringo Wingo.

His top seller is the key lime and garlic salsa, which comes in mild, medium and hot. Then there's the fruit-heavy Sweet Island Heat, which combines the tastes of Mexican and Jamaican foods with a hint of Indian cuisine.

But asking Kazdan to name a favorite salsa or sauce, which range from mild to "melt-your-brain hot," is like asking a father to name a favorite child.

"I put months and months into each creation. I usually shed a tear or two when I create them," he said.

With blue-tinted sunglasses hiding his eyes, it was impossible to tell if Kazdan was joking.

Getting Heidi Bellock to name a favorite was considerably easier.

"The mild key lime and garlic salsa," declared Bellock, who stopped by the El Gringo Loco booth at the Warrenville Farmer's Market on a recent Wednesday. "I open a can of



Rick Kazdan, chef and owner of El Gringo Loco, travels to several farmer's markets throughout the Chicago area.

*Triblocal.com photo by Patricia Murphy*

black beans and a can of the salsa. That's my vice lately."

The Warrenville resident isn't the brand's only fan. Kazdan has amassed a number of groupies, affectionately dubbed "Gringo Heads," who have come to know the chef's farmer's market circuit—in addition to Warrenville, he is a regular at the New Lenox, Burr Ridge, Lemont, Park Ridge and Frankfort markets. When colder weather hits, El Gringo Loco and its followers head indoors to craft and holiday shows.

"It is amazing to see just how many devoted customers we have," said Pelecki, who brings her double master's in marketing and finance to the business. "It used to be that we had groups that just came to the farmer's markets and groups that just came to the craft shows, but now there's total bleed over. They can't go a long period of time without stocking up."

Pelecki and Kazdan have also been touched by customers who recognize the importance of supporting local enterprises.

"When trying to get a local business off the ground, it's great to have a community behind us," she said.

The partners' long-term plans include opening up a restaurant in the western suburbs, but it's still a few years off, Pelecki said.

In the mean time, they will continue to sell their products at the markets and shows that have made "The Crazy American" a word-of-mouth hit.

All El Gringo Loco products are preservative-free, and all but the Gringo Wingo sauce are fat-free. For more information on Kazdan's entire product line or to purchase, go to [www.elgringoloco.net](http://www.elgringoloco.net).