



Fired Up for Flavor

You can mix up your recommended daily servings of the basic food groups a million ways to make your meals and snacks more interesting, but one sure-fire way to spice up any dish is to add salsa.

Salsa wakes up taste buds and adds interest to all sorts of foods. In the past, people usually ate this zesty condiment only with Mexican, Mexican-American or Southwestern cuisine. Thanks to creative cooks, though, salsa is finding its way into a wide variety of dishes, including Italian food, and comfort foods, such as mac 'n' cheese.

By Jean Ann Cantore | Photos by Jerod Foster



Kyle Lancaster

Photographed at Market Street, 98th Street and Quaker Avenue, Lubbock

Kyle Lancaster, a native of Slaton, Texas, is making his mark on the salsa world. He, his brother, Kraig, and sister-in-law, Tracye Fowlkes Lancaster, his business partners, are making Kylito's Salsa® a household name in Texas and beyond. In fact, their motto is ¡Coma Kylito's en todo! (Eat Kylito's on everything!)

There are five varieties of salsa in Kylito's line—Original, Hot, Scorching Habanero, Gentle and Fire Roasted. The Hot variety knocks up the heat a bit from the Original—both are made with jalapeño peppers. Although Scorching Habanero sounds really hot, it's actually just a different kind of hot—habanero as opposed to jalapeño. Fire Roasted is the latest addition to the line and proving to be a favorite, it emptied off store shelves the week before New Year's Day, almost as quickly as it was stocked for the first time. Gentle is another favorite because it works so well in cooking.

¡Coma Kylito's en todo!

The salsa line isn't exactly a brand-new idea for Kyle.

"I always cooked growing up," Kyle, a trained chef, says. "Somehow I was always in the kitchen as a young kid. I had a passion for food, and I started cooking at a restaurant called Juan in a Million in Lubbock and did that for three years while going to Tech. Then I ended up getting a job with Marriott Corporate Services, and I worked in Las Colinas and got formal training. I was there about a year. Then 10 years ago, I had my own restaurant in Slaton, Jodarro's Grill.

"There's a lot of stress that goes into running a restaurant. It was predominantly Mexican food, but everything was from scratch. We got a lot of traffic out of Lubbock and surrounding communities. I had a partner, but it just didn't pan out in the long run. We had great food, big crowds, but looking back we probably could have done a better job from a management standpoint—it was just one of those things. However, it was definitely a learning experience for me, and a lot of positives came out of it."

One of those positives is that the name "Kylito's" was coined by a woman who frequented Jodarro's Grill. The customer, an elderly Mexican-American woman, came in one day and ordered enchiladas. She ate them and then asked to speak to the cook, Kyle. He came out to meet her.

"She explained, 'When I come here to eat, I always order chicken-fried steak. I have been skeptical to try the Mexican food because you have no Hispanics in your kitchen.' She then patted Kyle on the arm and said, 'Kylito, you have some Mexican blood in you!'"



Kraig and Kyle Lancaster

Needless to say, Kyle was very flattered by her compliment.

"The restaurant is where the salsa came from as well. Once I got out of the restaurant, people started asking me for the recipe for this, that and the other. I was basically giving the salsa away for years."

On weekends, Kyle began cooking salsa at home—he started making a few jars at a time, but his product grew to about 200 jars' worth each week—to give to friends and people who asked for it. He hoped there might be a larger market for it one day. When he started a sales job with ADT security systems, he gave each of his customers a jar of the salsa, what he calls "a calling card of sorts." Many customers contacted him, asking where they could get more. That was when he decided it was time to check out the possibility of mass-producing his product.

"2001 is when Kyle introduced the salsa to us," Tracye says. "Kyle is an amazing cook and was always creating something. We all loved his Mexican food, so he would whip up some salsa to go with his enchiladas and tacos. When he opened his restaurant in Slaton, he used the same recipe he had always made for us.

"Kyle asked us in December 2010 if we would be interested in going in with him to manufacture the salsa. Of course, it was a no-brainer for Kraig and me to say yes—we would have no overhead, and we had tons of people hooked on it already, so we knew it was a great product. In January 2011, we formed Kylito's Salsa Co.® and began all the paperwork on trademarks, websites, fanpages, etc."

Tracye has several roles in the company, but her title is director of online sales. She has a bachelor's degree in human sciences from Texas Tech, which she earned in 1997. She also has taught technology in an area elementary school for three years. Her knowledge of computers has been a plus for the company, as she maintains the company website and handles the online orders at www.kylitos.com. She also follows up on questions about the company and products and administers their fanpage on Facebook, where she posts pictures and gives information about products and locations people can find them.

Lowe's Supermarkets actually were the first chain to give Kylito's Salsa® a shot. The buyer in the corporate office in Littlefield, Texas, gave them their start with that company. It was their first big step into the grocery world. Soon more chains would follow, adding United Supermarkets, Brookshire Brothers (Lufkin), Whole Foods (Austin locations), and many Affiliated Foods member stores throughout Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. Brookshire Grocery Company (Tyler) will be adding Kylito's Salsa® to their 150 locations beginning in mid-February.

"United Supermarkets has been a huge partner for Kylito's Salsa Co.®," Tracye says. "Not only did they believe in our product, but they loved our story and dedicated time and effort into promoting it."

Eddie Owens, director of communications and public relations for United Supermarkets, is complimentary of the products.

"We are really making a concerted effort chain-wide and especially in our Market Street stores, to promote Texas products," he says. "It's an even bigger feather for us to promote great area companies such as Kylito's."



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up some salsa to go with



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From left, Kraig and Tracye Fowlkes Lancaster; Kyler Lancaster and her dad, Kyle.

Both Kyle and Kraig have bachelor's degrees in marketing from Texas Tech—Kraig graduated in 1991, and Kyle graduated in 1999. That background has proven to be very helpful with their company.

"I would say the favorite or most rewarding part of what we do would be coming up with strategy or a marketing plan for our products in a given account and watching that plan executed successfully," says Kraig, who has an administrative role with the company.

Kyle says that their marketing strategy is very hands-on. They are acquainted with the leadership in most of the stores that sell the product.

Part of their jobs is serving as merchandisers. They go to the stores and make sure the product is there and in a good location. They also make sure the price is correct, and if there is a promotion, ensure they have sales tags. The partners also coordinate and schedule all demos for the various stores.

Kyle and Kraig's sister, Karla Wolfe, is their sales representative in Wichita Falls. She has helped open up doors to many grocery stores in the Wichita Falls area and large parts of Oklahoma. She

has been solely responsible for their success in those areas and is an integral part of the company.

"Ultimately, you have to get it in their mouths," Kyle says. "We demo a ton. We demo in as many of the grocery store locations as we can."

Tasting homemade is what sets the Kylito's Salsa® apart from the competition. Although Kyle no longer cooks up the hot sauce in his kitchen—it is made in a factory to his exact specifications—the product reminds people of something Mom or Dad might make or that you might find in a hole-in-the-wall Mexican food restaurant. The jar even has an old-fashioned feel—the type you might put your own homemade sauce in.

The inspiration for the jar's logo came to Kyle while vacationing on a beach in Mexico. He liked the clothing the bartender there wore and patterned his mascot after it. The mascot morphed with each product, even to wearing a fireman's uniform on the Fire Roasted label.

From the Kitchen of Kyle Lancaster



Huevos de Kylito's

2 eggs

1/3 cup Kylito's Salsa®

(Use the heat level of your choice, but I dare you to use Scorching Habanero!)

2-3 oz. of shredded cheese

In a skillet, fry eggs to your desired preference (mine—sunny side)!

Once they're done, place eggs on a plate.

Pour salsa into hot skillet and bring to a rapid boil. (About 20 seconds should do it.)

Pour salsa over eggs, and top with shredded cheese.

Cover plate with a domed lid for about 30-45 seconds to allow cheese to melt.

Top with finely chopped green onions (optional).

Serve with a side of potatoes and a stack of homemade tortillas!

Get your Guns Up!!!! Then Wreck It!



Although there are no plans to go nationwide with the products, people as far away as New York have had a chance to sample it.

A man in Tyler, Texas, whose son attends West Point, asked Kyle to participate in "The Texas Tamale Tailgate" there last fall. The cadets' parents treated all the Texas cadets to a Texas-style meal. Shiner Bock donated beer, and several other companies donated products.

"We were able to donate 12 cases of salsa," Kyle says. "We got some cool pictures back of a three-star general and others holding the jar. It is a tremendous honor to be included in something like that. The guy (from Tyler) asked me if I wanted to make a trip out there next year, so I definitely am planning on going. West Point just looks like a really cool atmosphere to see a football game and all the tradition that goes with that."

For the Lancaster family, probably the best part of their company is that they are able to combine all their talents to make the business work. They like the idea of keeping it in the family.

"We want to do something special for our kids, my daughter, Kyler, and Kraig and Tracye's daughter, Berkley, and son, Drew," Kyle says.

With the popularity of their products, it's pretty apparent that they will be able to do just that.

For more information about Kylito's Salsa®, please visit www.kylitos.com, or visit their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/kylitos. 

