



Businessmen with a vision, Biz Stone (left, with rescued dog Maggie) and Ethan Brown (with rescued pig Mama Mabel) are working to bring plant-based meat substitutes to the masses.

Savory Venture

Entrepreneurs apply business savvy to animal-friendly fare



One man has an MBA, a background in alternative energy development, and a menagerie of rescued animals, including six hefty pigs saved from factory farms. The other is the wunderkind who worked for Google, cofounded Twitter, and swore off eating meat after visiting a farm animal sanctuary more than a decade ago. Not surprisingly, when Ethan Brown and Biz Stone first met in 2010, they saw in each other a kindred spirit—a fellow entrepreneur combining smarts with compassion to create positive change in the world.

A longtime vegetarian who felt a connection with the cows on his family's dairy farm, Brown has spent the past five years pursuing the perfect plant-based protein. He researched meat substitutes and technologies from around the world before joining forces with University of Missouri food scientists. Later, he recruited more researchers from the University of Maryland and visionaries like Stone, who came onboard as an adviser after attending an investors' presentation on Brown's company, now called Savage River Farms.

"They were talking about the efficiency of scale of creating protein and the scientific background behind it all," Stone remembers. "That's the first time I've ever heard anyone take such a smart stance on this kind of product."

His excitement skyrocketed the moment he tasted the company's first invention, a pea- and soy-based chicken substitute that will soon launch in Whole Foods Market stores. "We think it's the closest thing to animal protein that's out there," says Brown.

In the interviews excerpted here, Brown and Stone spoke with senior editor Julie Falconer about the business venture that could redefine what's for dinner.

What inspired you to pursue a new meat substitute?

BROWN: I have a lot of respect for the stuff [other companies] have done. But I think we're still in need of something that mainstream consumers are going to embrace as a true substitute for beef and chicken. So that really motivated me. We believe if we can offer very high-quality proteins in a form that people are used to eating and do it at a cost that's lower than meat, we can dramatically expand the market.

STONE: The point is not to convince people like me, because [vegetarians] are generally happy with "close enough." The idea is to go for people who are normally buying and eating a lot of chicken or other meat stuff.

What's been your biggest challenge?

BROWN: To get people to embrace a plant-based version of their favorite meat, you really have to almost 100 percent replicate [it]. Otherwise, unless they're motivated for other reasons,



they're really just not going to eat it. It's getting that difference between 85 and 100 percent right—that's been the hardest thing.

And plain chicken doesn't taste like much, but people have been acclimated to a particular seasoning, like a rotisserie rub. It's been a challenge to create a taste so the product doesn't get accused of being bland, even though plain chicken tastes bland. What you do on flavoring also affects texture, so you have to be careful.

How can you compete, price-wise, with heavily subsidized meat products?

BROWN: If you look at the national averages, boneless skinless chicken is about \$3.21 per pound. If you look at the [chicken] alternative category, it's anywhere from \$7 to \$14 on a per-pound basis. So if you just had that one piece of data, you'd say, "Wow, it must be a much less efficient process." But of course, it's much more efficient to take protein directly from plants and bypass the entire animal production process. There's a lot of reasons the market communicates a different price point, but we're trying to gradually erode that and over time offer much lower pricing.

How are people responding to the veggie chicken product you developed?

BROWN: The reaction's been extremely positive. People have said it's absolutely indistinguishable from chicken.

STONE: I've been eating these meatlike substances for 11 years, and I'd never had anything like it. When you heat it up, it gets juicy and plump, and basically it's the kind of thing [that] if I got it at a restaurant, I would take one bite and then call over the waiter and be like, "I think you've made a mistake."

Do your friends find it odd that a vegetarian would seek products with the taste and texture of meat?

STONE: I like enjoying myself and having comfort foods as much as I like having whole grains and beans for dinner. [The Savage River Farms product] has roots in technology, but at the same time, it's an incredibly familiar product. If you're going to

put strips of chicken on top of a salad for protein, you could put this on, and you'd get more protein per gram and there's no fat. It's like compassionate comfort food with some really strong science behind it, and I guess that's why I'm so attracted to it.

What is the science behind the product?

BROWN: What we're trying to do is utilize the proteins and fibers that are available in plant-based ingredients to mimic the proteins and fibers that consumers find in animal-based meats. It's finding the right combination of heating, cooling, pressure, and materials—getting all the variables to align perfectly. Food scientists at the University of Missouri had been working on this for more than 10 years when I came along and said, "Let's perfect this and take this product to market."

And the environmental benefits?

BROWN: We could [spend] another billion dollars on some incremental gain in energy efficiency or in renewable energy, inventing a slightly more efficient battery or a slightly more efficient wind turbine. Or you could put a sizeable amount of money toward trying to disentangle the production of protein from the current animal model and shift that over to a plant-based model, and the impacts on the climate would be widely more significant.

What are the company's future plans?

BROWN: The dream for the company is to be producing very high-quality, low-cost protein and to look more like a Tyson [Foods] than a specialty food company. And while we certainly use soy, you will see us introducing completely alternative proteins to give people some diversity. At the end of the day, people will still eat beef and chicken; it will just be made out of plants.

STONE: Aspirationally, you could go to McDonald's and say, "I want the healthier McNuggets." This is far cheaper, far better for the environment, and better for the consumers. If it's marketed right, people will generally then be happier, healthier, smarter and would be paying less.



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