

PETER NEAL '81

RIDING THE WAVE OF THE NATURAL FOOD MOVEMENT

From chips & salsa to gourmet cookbooks & wine – Neal Brothers Foods continues to evolve

By Kim Sillcox



Growing up in Aurora, **Peter Neal '81** and his brother, Chris, appreciated good food and dreamed of starting something of their own. In 1988, during Peter's second year at Bishop's University, they launched a gourmet crouton business under the name Neal Brothers Foods in their mom's kitchen and haven't stopped since.

"We weren't looking to invest in machinery or re-invent the wheel," explained Peter. "At the time, salad dressings were becoming more upscale. It seemed a logical choice as we both ate a lot of salads and made our croutons from scratch."

As a young startup, their profit margins didn't allow for a distributor, so they made their own deliveries. "While we enjoyed meeting our customers, driving around boxes of

croutons wasn't exactly paying the bills. We needed to add more brands."

In the early 90s, they started a distributorship of other gourmet food products, including Cape Cod Potato Chips – their original inspiration. The rollout of Neal Brothers Tortilla Chips and Salsa, what they are best known for, followed shortly after. Until then, a family-size bag of tortilla chips



could only be found in the ethnic food aisle. While Peter and Chris continued to roll-out more natural snack foods throughout the 90s, it was the other Canadian brands they carried that helped build their business, including Kicking Horse Coffee and Kettle Brand Potato Chips. By the late 90s, the larger retail stores had become more receptive to the natural food movement and Neal Brothers' products became a fixture in the snack food aisles of Loblaws, Sobeys, and Dominion.

"From the minute we started our business, we always volunteered on some level. I was on the Junior Committee for the Royal Winter Fair, the Board of Directors of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Toronto, and Young People's Theatre. We were at a point where we could consider the business successful and wanted to give back."

About eight years ago, Peter and Chris were introduced to The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto. Since the 70s, The Stop has demonstrated how food can contribute to an ongoing transformation in the health and quality of life for low income communities. Today there are eight community centres across Canada that operate under the umbrella group Community Food Centres Canada (CFCC) established in 2012.

Peter has served on the CFCC's national fundraising committee since 2014 and put forth the idea of creating a cookbook highlighting themes central to community food centres. "I thought if my brother and I wrote a book celebrating the inspirational stories and recipes from food activists and

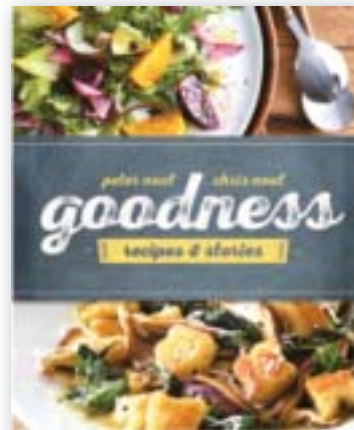
chefs who believe that good, healthy food should be accessible to all, we could raise awareness and money."

Published in 2015, book sales for *Goodness: Recipes & Stories* are now just over 5,000, ranking it a Canadian best seller. It features stories from 37 chefs, entrepreneurs, growers and food activists, including Jamie Kennedy, Vikram Vij and Sarah Harmer, and has been dubbed a "Masterpiece" by the Food Network.

"In our book, we pledge to donate 50% of all proceeds to Community Food Centres Canada, but I can't see us ever taking a dollar out of it. It has done the job of inspiring people."

The Neal Brothers recently joined forces with an old friend, Ian Hanna, and his son

**“
I thought if my
brother and I
wrote a book
celebrating the
inspirational
stories and recipes
from food activists
and chefs who
believe that good,
healthy food
should be
accessible to
all, we could
raise awareness
and money.”**



Peter and Chris Neal have pledged to donate 50% of all proceeds generated through the sale of their 2015 cookbook, *Goodness: Recipes & Stories*, to the Community Food Centres Canada.

Andrew, who represent a second and third generation wine family in Ontario. Together they launched Hanna Neal Wine Merchants, a collaboration of both family's names and importers of mostly Spanish wines for the LCBO and restaurants. Peter and Chris are enjoying this new phase of pairing wholesome food with good wine.

Meanwhile, Neal Brothers Foods continues to expand, including launching their new Kettle Chips into 400 Whole Foods Markets across the U.S. In February, the company moved their offices and warehouses from Concord to a new location by Buttonville Airport to accommodate their close to 50 employees and growing product line. Peter handles sales and marketing, and Chris oversees the business side of things.

While two years may not sound like a long time, it is long enough to leave a mark. Peter only attended CDS for Middle School from 1979-1981 (CDS only went to Grade 8 until 1986), yet remains in close contact with numerous CDS friends. Neal Brothers also continues to donate to the Annual Auction, something we greatly appreciate. ■