

Brian Makarski and Amy Henninger

Dade City, Florida



Charm City Eats

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Brian Makarski and Amy Henninger:

Prior to launching Charm City Eats – a food truck offering mouth-watering Baltimore staples such as authentic Maryland crab cakes and coal smoked thin sliced seasoned bottom round pit beef – Brian Makarski and Amy Henninger both had successful careers in sales. They both also reached a point where they were tired of the corporate grind and wanted to make a change. Brian and Amy shared the story behind their journey and explained how they’ve grown their business and acquired an impressive following in such a short amount of time.

“I was born and raised in Baltimore,” Amy said. “Brian is from New Jersey, but ended up in Florida where he attended The University of Central Florida. After college, he worked for a company that did a lot of business in Baltimore. I was also living and working in Baltimore and that’s ultimately how we met. We both spent over 15 years in sales and,

even though we were successful and developed some great relationships with clients and co-workers, we decided we were sick of it. We wanted to do something that made us happy.”

Amy continued, “Brian loves to cook and during his work trips between Florida and Baltimore, he noticed that no one was doing authentic broiled Maryland crab cakes. During one of those trips, we were both in Florida and we had a chance to try, what someone advertised as an authentic Maryland crab cake at a festival. Needless to say, it wasn’t authentic and we didn’t like it at all. That’s when we thought, ‘Let’s take all the best food from Maryland and do something that no one else is doing in Florida’.”

Brian and Amy are both very business-minded entrepreneurs. As such, they approached their new venture with a plan and stuck with it. As Brian, who also has previous restaurant experience, shared, that plan included market validation of the menu items before launching, as well as building a new food truck to their exact specifications.

“Our menu feedback came from a focus group we did while still living in Maryland,” Brian said. “When it comes to crab cakes, people in Maryland are elitists – and they should be. The first crab cake I made got rejected, but eventually we got it right. Besides crab cakes, we tried everything out on family and friends and their extended networks. We weren’t leaving anything to chance. We knew that no matter how well we were prepared to run the business, if the product didn’t look good and taste good, our customers would not be coming back. Before we dove in, we really made sure we had every angle covered.”

Brian continued, “That same attention to detail carried over to our food

truck. We had it built from scratch in Virginia. Everything is brand new. When the truck was finished, it delivered to us in Florida in September.”

Amy added, “Before the truck was even delivered – and before I moved to Florida – we started booking events. Brian was already living in Pasco

County. I moved down on September 30th. Since I’m more on the marketing side of things, I quickly got to work on identifying places to bring the truck. Between meeting people, scouring social media, and taking advantage of all the food truck industry resources, we learned about a lot of great opportunities. You must be committed to do the research, but Google is a very powerful tool.”

Since launching their food truck in early October, Brian and Amy have introduced Charm City Eats to foodies at breweries, neighborhoods and festivals throughout the Tampa Bay region. From pit beef with made-from-scratch tiger sauce to Maryland fried chicken with a Nashville zing and mouth-watering crab fries, their made-to-order creations come from a true place of love and passion.

“Our motto is to do what you love every day,” Brian said. “For me, it’s cooking and seeing the satisfaction on our customer’s faces when they try our creations. Selling copiers never gave us that satisfaction. It’s great to save your clients money, but the joy we bring to people through our food is totally different.”

As you might expect, despite superior products and a well thought out business model, Brian and Amy have faced and continue to face a handful of challenges.

“Like any plan, it’s never bullet proof,” Brian said. “You try to prepare for

every possible challenge, but some you don't see coming. One of those is the cleaning aspect. It's a romantic idea to have a food truck, but most people don't think about the cleaning aspect. Another challenge is staffing. I've always been a big believer of finding good people and treating them right. Unfortunately, in the food industry that's not always the case. However, we treat our employees like family and we pay them well."

Brian added, "Another unforeseen challenge is dealing with the weather. A lot of our business is done outdoors at breweries, private catering events and neighborhood events. If it rains, those events will be dead. Fortunately we're getting better and better at knowing what to expect at each event and we're tracking our data to understand our products from an analytics standpoint."

Despite feeling "more physically beat up than ever before", Brian shared that his mental head space is the best it's been in years. He's happier and more fulfilled now than ever. He and Amy, who shares the same excitement and feelings about their new endeavor, shared their long term goals and how their food truck will likely morph into additional opportunities.

"Our plan is growth, but we also don't want to be in front of the fryer our whole lives," Brian said. "We have a lot of spin off ideas including a New Orleans themed truck, a truck serving New Jersey type food and even a bus featuring nothing but pit beef, ham and sausage. Maybe at some point we'll even have a commercial kitchen with the ability to do deliveries and handle walk-up business. Whatever we decide to do, we'll need to hit certain growth metrics before we move forward with some of

those ideas. We'll be strict with that."

What advice do Brian and Amy have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "It definitely takes some lunacy and stupidity," Brian said with a laugh, referring to starting a business. "It's not for the faint of heart. If you're only going to have one foot in the door, don't do it. You need to go full throttle and you need to be prepared for heartaches, sleepless nights and lots of stress. Also, make sure that you have enough in savings to sustain your quality of life for an entire year."

Amy added, "It's important to have grit. Also, don't be afraid to fail. If you fail, at least you can say you tried."

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