



Derek Kaplan

Miami, Florida



Fireman Derek's

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Derek Kaplan:

"I like to eat", said Derek Kaplan with a laugh, Owner of Fireman Derek's, when asked why he started making Key Lime pies at the age of 15. The truth is that Kaplan's love for confections and willingness to try new things was born from necessity. With determination and a clear vision, he was able to turn his sweet hobby into one of South Florida's most sought after bakeries. Kaplan shared the story behind his entrepreneurial journey and what the future holds for Fireman Derek's.

"When I was a kid I moved in with my dad and he said, 'If you want to eat, you need to learn how to cook'," Kaplan said. "From the start, it was trial by fire. I taught myself different recipes and, along the way, I also learned how to make desserts. Being in South Florida, Key Lime pie was a natural fit. I watched shows, looked up recipes, experimented some and eventually made a great pie."

That great pie was enjoyed by family and friends during Kaplan's high school years. He briefly moved away to play Division I football at Grambling State University before realizing that college wasn't his thing.

Upon returning to Miami, Kaplan joined the fire academy and also attended EMT and Paramedic school. After graduation, he accepted a position with the Islamorada Fire Department and, in his spare time, started making pies again. After nine months of working in The Keys, Kaplan was hired by the City of Miami. Following a year of probation, a period of time when new firefighters are "put to the test", he had more time to focus on his craft and started selling his delicious pies.

"I was hired by Miami in December 2006 and by May 2008, I officially incorporated the business," Kaplan said. "I had more free time to devote to the business and it was a great way to supplement my income. I started by selling my pies to different chefs around town. I had a small commissary kitchen where I did all the baking. From there, I added a food truck and started attending lots of events. The days I was on shift, my dad would drive the truck. The business steadily grew."

By early 2013, Kaplan was growing out of his truck and commissary kitchen and needed more room to expand. He began looking for a location in the Wynwood District, the area where his commissary kitchen was located. After identifying the perfect space, he negotiated the lease, completed the build-out and, in July 2014, Fireman Derek's Bake Shop was officially open for business.

"I was really excited to have my own space," Kaplan said. "We worked through some challenges, including finding the right architect and

general contractor, but once we were open for business it was all worth it.”

Two years later, the demand for Kaplan’s pies, cakes, cookies and other delectable desserts reached a point that warranted his retirement from the fire department.

“The business was spilling over into my day job,” he said. “I had a great position within the fire department, but things lined up and it was time to pull the trigger. The business took off and by March 2019, we opened our second location in Coconut Grove. The second store proves that it can be done in multiple outlets. We’re currently eyeing a third location in Fort Lauderdale.”

Despite the success and the nearly 70,000 Instagram followers, Kaplan continues to operate from a place of joy, humility and love. He’s driven by the satisfaction of bringing others happiness.

“I get so much joy out of feeding people,” he said. “Coming up with new flavors, having people try them and watching the happiness it brings them is so rewarding. When you see the posts on Instagram or the reviews on Google, it makes you feel good.”

Looking ahead, Kaplan sees a future with multiple Fireman Derek’s throughout the state and eventually, the nation. He’d prefer to scale by opening and operating corporate stores versus the franchise model.

According to Kaplan, it’s easier to maintain quality control and the growth of your team. He did reiterate that, while he’s very focused on future growth, he is willing to be patient in order to grow in a more sustainable way.

What advice does Kaplan have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “If you’re only motivated by money, you’re wasting your time,” he said. “Focus on what’s going to make you happy. Pick and choose wisely who you hire. Treat your employees right and be a good owner and a good leader. Also, start small. If you have a product, start by selling it to friends and family or at farmer’s markets. Don’t go all in until you’ve been able to fully develop your product. Get feedback and then perfect your idea before you invest a ton of money.”

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