

Dino Ferri

Sanford, Florida



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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Dino Ferri:

By day, Dino Ferri, Founder of Hotter Than El, serves as CEO of the Central Florida Zoo & Botanical Gardens. By night and on the weekends, he's hand-crafting award winning hot sauces and salsas. Even though he's been 'dabbling' in hot sauce since 1997, he didn't make it official until January 2015. Ferri shared the story behind his journey and offered a glimpse of what it takes to succeed in this spicy industry.

"I've been in the zoo business for 25 years," Ferri said. "I started at a small zoo in Texas before transferring to other zoos and eventually ending up in Sanford. At one point, while living in Jacksonville, I was completely out of the business. That's when I decided to turn my casual hobby of making hot sauce for friends and family into a legitimate operation."

After registering his business with Sunbiz and settling on a name, Ferri acquired his food handling license and, after crunching some numbers, decided the co-packer route was the most feasible production option.

After touring three facilities, he found what he was looking for in St. Augustine.

"I do the recipe and they do the bottling and packaging," he said. "After I approve of a sample batch, it goes to production where they also do the nutritional calculations, testing and labeling all under state and federal guidelines. It's important for any food product to meet certain PH criteria. Currently, I still do my own distribution, but that may change in the near future."

When Ferri first launched his business, he primarily sold through his website and at farmer's markets. Once he landed his first retail client, Tijuana Flats, it opened the door for others to follow. As Ferri shared, while the market is fairly saturated, it's akin to the craft beer industry, in that hot sauce lovers and connoisseurs enjoy trying new sauces. They're also willing to pay for the good stuff.

"For the price of a six pack of craft beer, you can buy a case of PBR," Ferri said. "However, you get what you pay for. Same goes for hot sauces. I always tell people, 'Making something hot is easy. Making something hot that still has flavor is a different story!'"

So what's the hottest sauce Ferri offers? "Love Burns. About 40% of the bottle is made up of four of the world's hottest peppers," he said. "As hot as that sounds, it's actually very tasty. Between Love Burns and 24K

Gold, those are my two favorite sauces."

Ferri, who enjoys making quality sauces free of artificial colors, flavors and additives, is focused on getting into as many retail establishments as possible. He'll also continue to attend a circuit of hot sauce shows in places like Chicago, New York and Portland. Long term, Ferri would like to get into grocery stores like Publix, but only if the margins are ideal.

What advice does Ferri have for aspiring entrepreneurs? "Don't give up and never doubt yourself," he said. "Also, don't let convenience be a deciding factor when making a business decision. The initial co-packer I went with was because of convenience. This ended up being the wrong decision. Go by what makes the most business sense, not by what's the easiest or most convenient."

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