



The

Snack That Gives Back

By Tara DeLorenzo



In light of his son's unexpected autism diagnosis, Chris Laurita and his wife Jacqueline wanted to make a change, starting with their son's diet. After extensive searching, they found their options to be limited. Laurita and his business partner Andy Epstein decided to take matters into their own hands, founding their own brand: The Little Kernel, a new better-for-you snack that is hoping to make a difference.

Laurita, who had specialized in branding, and Epstein, who had been in the food business for over 30 years, had been brainstorming different business ideas for their own start-up company. While they researched different companies and began developing their brand for The Little Kernel, it became an underlying motivation for Laurita to make a snack that would fit into his son's gluten- and dairy-free diet. Thus, the two were determined to create a healthy, tasty snack anyone could enjoy.

The Little Kernel began its production two years ago and started shipping into the market a year ago. Named the best new snack food of 2016 by *Snack and Bakery Magazine*, the popcorn is popped in 100 percent pure olive oil and is made from only the highest quality ingredients.

"It's really foodie product," Epstein said.

"When you put it in your mouth, you get all the different



delicate flavor blending together to make a fantastic product. Customers appreciate that and they're coming back. They become active on our social media, and it's very rewarding. You want people to appreciate what you're doing for the brand."

Just as important as its taste, the brand itself had grown bigger, looking to be known for more than just popcorn. With a main focus of being a better-for-you treat, The Little Kernel is attempting to differentiate themselves from the traditional brands, catering to the trends millennial, young consumers and parents are searching for. Driven by experience, passion and a product they believe in, Epstein and Laurita are confident in where their company will go and how it will do against the competitors.

"We're going in a direction that consumers are going in. It's important. I see the impact of having snacks or anything that is not as healthy on your body. We want to give people a better alternative to what's out there," Laurita said. "Our vision is to put out there that it's a brand with purpose. It's not just a better-for-you

brand.

We put our heart and soul into it. As far as ingredients go, it's the best we could find and also the packaging too. We want to build a company that's not just popcorn. We're experimenting with other snacks. We want to build a better-for-you company that gives back and our initiatives are to give to autism. As we grow, there's always going to be a giving back component to it."

With the philanthropy in mind and Laurita's own experiences with autism, The Little Kernel has made a donation of \$2500 to Generation Rescue, an organization that, according to its website, is dedicated to providing treatment opportunities and education to families affected by autism. The donation was given in honor of Autism Awareness Month and was inspired by Laurita's own journey in dealing with an autism diagnosis.

"For myself, with the experience my



family has had, the autism diagnosis was devastating,” Laurita said. “I really didn’t know what autism was and when we got the news, I was blown away. I didn’t know what happened because my son was typical. He was progressing as a typical child and he regressed. We couldn’t figure out why. When my wife and I started our research about autism, the first thing that showed up was Generation Rescue, and they were extremely responsive. I reached out to them and within a week we were sitting down with the director of the organization and Jenny McCarthy and they immediately got to

work helping our son and family. For us, we want to show our appreciation as much as we can by giving back to them and the autism community. My wife and I are dedicated to it, Andy is on board and we do everything we can to raise awareness.”

Laurita and his wife are actively involved in Generation Rescue beyond what they are able to do with The Little Kernel. The two are keynote speakers at the organization’s conferences. Additionally, Epstein and Laurita are happy to use The Little Kernel to aid Generation Rescue in raising awareness.

The founders of the popcorn company are also looking to expand their reach beyond solely contributing to autism. With new product ideas in mind, they are thinking of other causes to get more involved with too. One important charity that is close to Epstein’s heart is the Cristian Rivera Foundation, a charity looking for a cure for pontine glioma, a type of tumor that lodges itself in the brain stem.

“We’ve all become very active in the charity, raising awareness and money to help,” Epstein said. “When you get to a certain point in your life and you’ve experienced the wins and losses, you start to realize I’ve been lucky where I don’t have any children who have any types of challenges. They don’t have pontine glioma like my friend’s son had. You look at that





and realize you have to start giving before you have to give. When Chris and Jacqueline found out the news about their son, they didn't know where to turn. They received that guidance, and it was a wake up call for them too. They wanted to step out of their comfort zone and help other families. It wasn't just about them; it was about helping others deal with the circumstance and help make things better across the board."

The Little Kernel is determined to be more than just an average popcorn brand. Epstein and Laurita are hoping their contributions and the awareness they bring will make an impact on more than just the consumers; they hope to make a change in the world.

"We want to make a difference, that's what makes all the difference," Epstein said. "We're not going to hide behind the fact that we have a profitable company. We want to build a great company and we want to enjoy the benefits of having a goof company as it grows and progresses. We want to remember to give back and be grateful for the little things in life. We're going to continue to be who we are. We're going to build a business and focus, but we're also going to stop and smell the roses along the way and do everything we can along the way for whoever we can."

Built on friendship and passion for their work, Laurita and Epstein are proud of what The Little Kernel has been able to do and what it has been

able to give back. The founders are both grateful for the reviews they have received and the impact they have started to make, and Epstein encourages people to try the popcorn.

"At the end of the day, we have an amazing product," Laurita said. "We think it tastes great. We're trying to build a brand with purpose. We really want to take people along for the ride. We want to build a company that gives back. I always say that what's going to be my legacy? I want to leave something more than just my body. And we're trying to do that by not just building a great brand, but also helping people as much as we can. I think that's so important today to give back and help others in need. I've been in business for over 30 years, been part of some great things and great companies, but at the end of the day, there's nothing like helping someone that needs to help and it's the greatest satisfaction I've had."

More information on The Little Kernel can be found at <http://thelittlekernel.com>.

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