

Young Seattle entrepreneur named best in state by SBA

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By Hope Belli Tinney, Washington SBDC

SEATTLE – Grant Jones, owner of KuKuRuZa Gourmet Popcorn in Seattle, has been named the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Washington State 2015 Young Entrepreneur of the Year.



Jones and his wife, Ashley, opened their first gourmet popcorn store in Bellevue in 2009 and have opened 16 stores since, including three in the Seattle area and 12 overseas. The SBA award recognizes entrepreneurs under age 30 who have achieved exceptional success.

Long-term strategy, flexible adjustments

The Joneses first began experimenting with gourmet popcorn by making test batches in their home kitchen. They moved their “test kitchen” to the garage where they had more room for specialty equipment.

They opened their first store with 12 flavors and now sell up to 20 kinds, from traditional favorites such as caramel or cheddar or dark chocolate to innovative combinations such as truffle fromage porcini, kiwi grapefruit and maple bacon.

Read an earlier article about the business at <https://news.wsu.edu/2012/12/06/gourmet-popcorn-meets-export-franchise-demands/#.VUuZxU10yFA>.

“Grant is a voracious reader, and he’s also careful about seeking out advice or counsel from more experienced entrepreneurs,” said Rich Shockley, advisor at the Washington Small Business Development Center (SBDC) office at Highline College. Jones began meeting with Shockley in 2012 for assistance in structuring international franchise agreements.



Grant Jones opened his first gourmet popcorn store in Bellevue in 2009.

“Grant is thoughtful in his decision-making,” Shockley said. “I’ve been impressed with his ability to create a long-term strategy and then make adjustments based on changing conditions or new information.”

International enterprise

The Washington SBDC (<http://wsbdc.org>) provides no-cost, one-to-one advising for small business owners who want to start or grow their businesses. The Washington SBDC is supported by Washington State University, the SBA and other institutions of higher education and economic development.

Over the years, Jones and Shockley have continued to work on a variety of issues, including developing international license and franchise agreements to bring capital and talent into the brand and restructuring company debt with the help of an SBA-backed loan.

“Grant is a classic entrepreneur because he sees things differently than most people do,” said Duane Fladland, state director of the Washington SBDC. “Where others don’t look twice at things that, on the surface, appear to be pretty mundane – like popcorn – he sees opportunities and envisions how to capitalize on them. The history of free enterprise is full of stories like that.”

Home grown in Seattle

The Joneses’ first venture was Seattle Microfarm, which was a personal vegetable gardening service. Homeowners would contract with Microfarm to set up vegetable gardens, which could also become part of a community supported agriculture program (CSA) managed by Microfarm.

The Joneses opened their first store, Popcorn Pavilion, in 2009 in Bellevue with limited personal funds, investment from family and a small SBA loan. In 2011 they bought the KuKuRuZa popcorn store in downtown Seattle and opened a third store in Ballard in 2012.

In early 2015 they opened their fourth Seattle area store at Alderwood Mall in Lynnwood. All four stores are now called KuKuRuZa (<http://www.kukuruza.com/>).

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