



SHANNON ARMISHAW PHOTOS

Each Smoke & Tears hot sauce is unique and made in small batches. The next drop of limited-edition sauces will launch April 13 through smokeandtears.ca.

In hot pursuit of a long-simmering passion

A pandemic pivot sparks the launch of T.O.-based Smoke & Tears sauces

WING SZE TANG
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The past year has torched the idea of “business as usual,” particularly for those in the world of food. But necessity can also stoke creativity, as Shannon Armishaw and Kevin Rickey, the Toronto-based co-founders of Smoke & Tears, could tell you.

The origin story of their new hot sauce company dates back more than 10 years, but it took the pandemic to turn a long-simmering passion into an all-consuming start-up.

“When the pandemic hit, we, like so many, saw the lives we were building and our plans for the future go up in smoke. We grieved the loss of what would never be, and then we got quiet,” says Armishaw, who finished her master’s degree in museum studies near the end of 2020 (at a moment when art institutions weren’t exactly staffing up). Rickey, a seasoned chef, was also in the midst of a job shift.

As lockdown gave the couple the breathing space to plot new possibilities, an idea that had been on the back burner — making a distinctive line of hot sauces — crystallized as an irresistible opportunity. “We realized, for the first time, we had nothing to lose,” explains Armishaw. “If not now, when?”

Rickey had created his OG hot



Shannon Armishaw and Kevin Rickey, co-founders of Smoke & Tears, used the lockdown to plot new possibilities.

sauce more than a decade earlier while working at the now-shuttered Murray Street, an Ottawa bistro that had landed on enRoute’s list of Canada’s Best New Restaurants.

“Matt Spicoli (Vandenberg) from Rideau Pines Farm brought in a bunch of hot peppers and said, ‘These things are very dangerous, very deadly.’ And Kevin was like, ‘Let’s experiment,’” recalls Armishaw, who was a part-time server at the restaurant while pursuing

her BFA. As Kevin blended that inaugural batch from peppers he’d smoked and pickled, the kitchen crew fled from the building. But the resulting sauce was so deep and bright, fiery and flavourful, it became an instant hit.

In the years since, Rickey continued to dabble in making his signature sauces, but primarily for gifting, once whipping up bottles as wedding favours for friends. He developed something of a cult following, but his

hot pursuit didn’t evolve into a full-fledged business concept until the past few months.

In December, the couple tested the appetite for Smoke & Tears by sending a menu of sauces to a small group of friends and family. “Kevin kept saying, you know, 20 people are going to order,” recalls Armishaw. The actual number quickly exceeded 1,200 bottles.

The keen demand was clear, inspiring Armishaw to self-school in the intricacies of entrepreneurship, e-commerce and even food styling. Devising the brand’s visual identity — including the symbol designs — came more naturally, given her art background. Start-up life required some ingenuity, too, like having to refashion a stainless-steel Ikea bread holder into a makeshift smoker. (They’ve since procured a proper, purpose-built model.)

Unlike many other hot sauces, Smoke & Tears isn’t solely about heat, and some of the offerings are quite mellow. Instead, Rickey draws upon the art and science of traditional pickling and smoking techniques, alongside a palate-awakening array of complementary ingredients: local honey and whole-grain mustard in one recipe, say, or molasses and espresso in another.

“I remember the OG sauce quite well and the ‘Smoke-scream’ sauce is modelled after it,” says Rickey. “It taught me that the smoke flavour can be a bully — it needs to be balanced

with the other ingredients. Otherwise, it will overpower everything.”

His concoctions are made to hit all the notes: spicy, smoky, sweet, salty, tart, bitter and umami. Add a vibrant dash to anything you wish, from marinades, salad dressings and soups to cocktails.

Among his current sauces, Rickey’s favourite is “The Spice,” featuring habanero peppers smoked with Canadian hickory, a medley of spices (cardamom, clove, cinnamon) and caramelized onion. “It reminds me of having tacos in a bright, bustling spot in Tulum, those first hungry bites at Nazareth, and all the places I can’t wait to visit one day,” he says.

The duo’s next drop of limited-edition Smoke & Tears sauces will launch April 13 through their new website at smokeandtears.ca, with future small batches rolling out monthly. (Joining their email list will get you first dibs.)

“No two batches of peppers are exactly alike, and we delight in the subtle differences in colours, tastes and smells,” says Armishaw. “With every passing week, as the flavours of the sauces deepen and expand, we embrace change and celebrate the fact that nothing lasts forever.”

The same goes for the pandemic and its attendant upheaval, too. “Just as smoke dissipates and tears evaporate, these days will soon become memories.”