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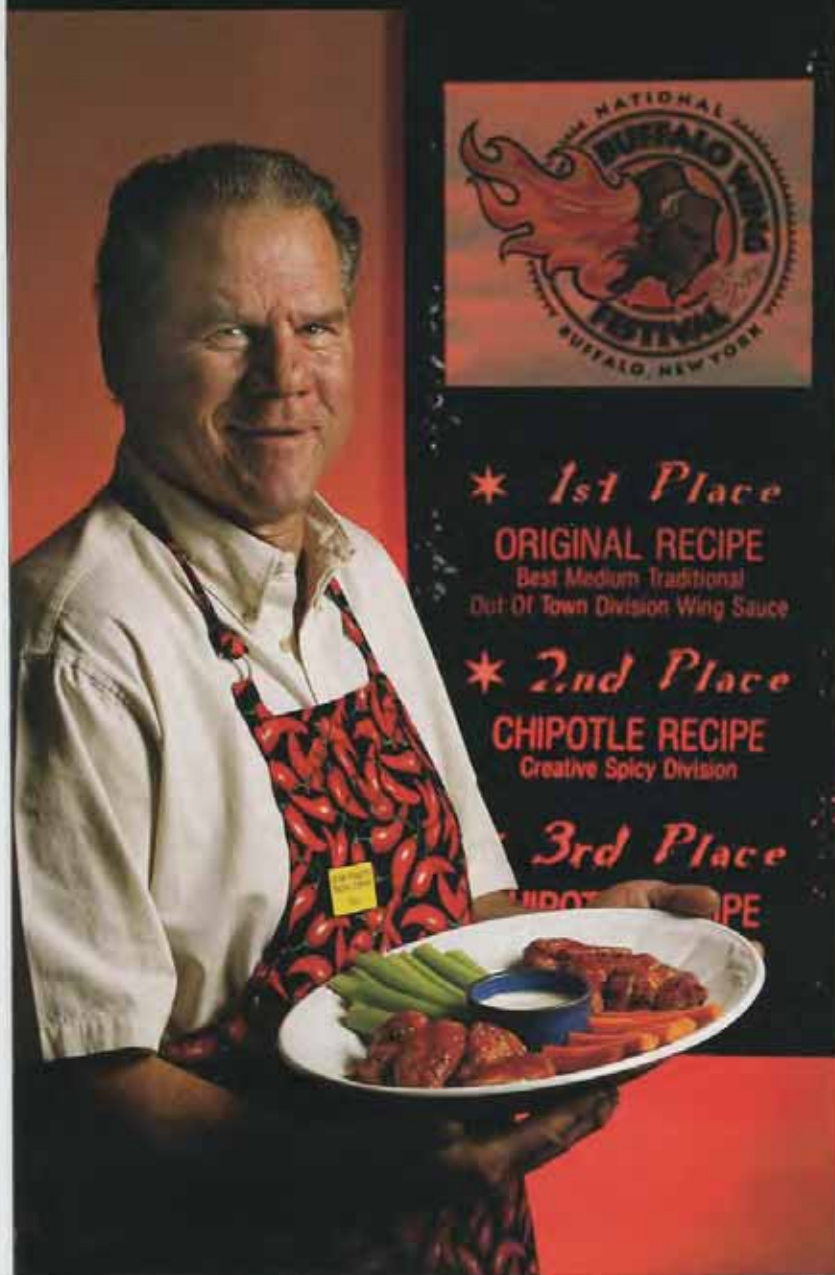
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Spice Up Your Life with Captain Spongefoot



Story by Cindy Kleh

Photos by Byron Hetzler

Most who know Paul DiBello would say that his personality is much more flammable than his award-winning hot sauces. He is not into the macho "my-sauce-is-hotter-than-your-sauce" war. He'd rather win you over with complex tastes than burn your taste buds.

Over decades of hosting informal football parties in Grand County, DiBello has honed his art of making hot sauces that don't overtake the food and numb the palate. He knew he had exceptionally tasty sauces, and after stepping down two years ago as competition director of the National Sports Center for the Disabled, he started the Captain Spongefoot Trading Company.

DiBello was frustrated with the inconsistent quality of hot sauces available in stores and restaurants. His sauces tasted so much fresher because they are naturally blended. They have no added preservatives, thickeners, sweeteners, MSG or food coloring. The leading commercial hot sauces also added extra capsaicin (the heat element of hot chilis) to make up for the flavors lost in the processing. They burned his mouth so much that the flavor of the food it was supposed to enhance was lost.

"These sauces excite the palate; they don't burn it," explained DiBello, who got the nickname "Captain Spongefoot" when he owned a sailing business on Lake Granby. He lost a thumb, a finger and both feet to frostbite in a harrowing 1974 ice-climbing expedition, and in earlier years, prosthetic feet were made of a spongy material. When he worked around boats, his feet were constantly wet, and so he squished when he walked.

DiBello dabbled with gift hot sauces for friends and family, and then took first place in the prestigious 2004 National Buffalo Wing Festival in Buffalo, New York, for the Best Medium Traditional Wing Sauce. He also earned second place in the creative spicy category and third place in the barbeque division in a field of more than 100 entrants.

He knew he had the goods, and that it was time to launch the Captain Spongefoot Trading Company. His first two sauces, the original wing sauce and chipotle table sauce set sail from a kitchen in the old Charter School in Granby, which was torn down in 2005. DiBello was scrambling to find a commercial kitchen up in Grand County, and found a production facility in Aurora instead.

"The materials were being hauled up from Denver and being produced here and sent back to Denver, so it's more efficient," he said. "My goal is to grow the company to the point where I can afford to move production facilities back up to Granby."

DiBello says that since starting the Captain Spongefoot Trading Company, he hasn't had a day off except for sickness. While enduring a succession of serious illnesses that kept him in and out of hospitals, he has managed to win two Scoville Awards: a first place in the packaging of his Colorado gift box set and a third place for the chipotle wing sauce label. The most recent accolade was the three second-place finishes among 900 competitors at America's Best Food Show in Anaheim, California.

DiBello has also managed to pick up retail stores including 16 King Sooper/City Markets outlets and a number of restaurants that wanted his lip-smacking sauce, many bottled under a custom label designed by the Trading Company.

The Captain has also come out with the Original Buffalo style wing kit, for wings made in the microwave with better-than-sports-bar taste. These wings don't have the sauce frozen on ahead of time; the sauce is applied after cooking for juicy wings ready in minutes that make you want to stand up and cheer.

His newest sauce, "Z - Sauce," is a bright, exciting flavor that DiBello developed specifically for the new wing connoisseurs. This flavor is built around time-honored Asian elements, with just a hint of wasabi. DiBello says it is gaining a huge following among younger generations who want a non-traditional wing sauce. For now, this sauce will be served at Lost Boys Burgers and Shakes in Winter Park.

He also has a recipe up his pirate sleeve for a high-end fresh center-of-the-plate cranberry sauce called "Sweet Heat." Arrrrrrgh, Matey!

Captain Spongefoot has an extensive Web site, with recipes for the

Captain's Pizza, Buffalo Wing Chicken Blue Cheese Salad, Lisa's Southwest Hollandaise and a Bloody Spongefoot cocktail.

DiBello hopes to get the sauces sailing with enough wind to allow him to semi-retire and sail the world someday. He's more than likely to arrive at his destination, simply because "failure is not an option at this point in the business."

He managed to win five Paralympics gold medals and seven World Championship gold medals in ski racing; he directed the finest disabled ski competition training center in the world; he was honored by Esquire magazine as one of "America's New Leadership Class: Top People Under 40 Who are Changing the Nation." If anyone can navigate this business into a safe harbor, it's DiBello.

DiBello hopes to get the Captain Spongefoot label out on more store shelves and restaurant tables. He wants people to taste the difference between his naturally blended sauces and other "circus sauces." "Our sauces are not somebody's bottled-up anger nor are they a painful bodily function. We don't play the hot, hotter, hottest game. We're about flavor, flavor, flavor!"

To find out more about the Captain Spongefoot Trading Company, call 970-887-1043, or visit www.captain-spongefoot.com. For local sales outlets, go to page B-14.

