Mike’s Amazing founder comes full circle

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Michael Leffler (BSM '91) is the founder of Mike's Amazing Foods, the fast-growing condiment brand whose boldly flavored mustards, mayos, vinegars and cooking oils have become a retail phenomenon.

When Michael Leffler (BSM ’91) got the call inviting Mike’s Amazing Foods to be a sponsor of the New Orleans French Quarter Festival, he almost turned down the

offer.

New Orleans was the city that had helped launch him on a 35-year career in the food industry, but Leffler had never considered doing business there. Then something clicked.

“I woke up the next morning and said, ‘*Of course, I want to do that!*’” he laughs. “I had never thought about giving back to the city in that way, but then all the dots started to connect. It was a way for me to get involved in New Orleans, help job creation and be part of Tulane again.”

Mike’s Amazing Foods may be a newcomer to New Orleans, but to customers in the Northeast, the company’s boldly flavored mustards, mayos, vinegars and cooking oils have quickly become home kitchen staples. Since launching the brand in 2020, Leffler has built Mike’s Amazing into a retail phenomenon, gobbling up shelf space faster than Joey Chestnut gobbles hot dogs.

“We’re the fastest-growing condiment company in the country,” he says. “It just keeps snowballing.”

Leffler’s path to the top of the condiment world began at Tulane, where he first encountered the intoxicating mix of food, music and culture that would shape his career. After earning an accounting degree, he set aside plans for law school to join the family business, a producer of oils, sauces and cooking ingredients for foodservice clients across the Northeast. He rose to CEO and led the company for nearly 25 years.

When the family sold the business in 2016, Leffler found himself at a crossroads.

“I wasn’t done,” he says. “My goal at that point was still to make a product and put it on a retail shelf, and that didn’t happen at the old company, so it felt incomplete for me. It wasn’t about the money. It was the food, it was creation, it was brand, and it was building. Those were the things that excited me.”

After waiting a year for his non-compete agreement to expire, Leffler launched Chefler Foods to continue his pursuit of a retail breakthrough. One of his first big decisions was what to call the new brand. He didn’t want to name it after himself — that would fly in the face of his team-first philosophy — but eventually he had a realization.

“People want to buy products from people,” he says. “They don’t want to buy from corporations. As crazy as it sounds, I felt like I had to sacrifice my name for the good of the company, because that’s what was going to differentiate us the most from Heinz and Hellmann’s.”

Vertical integration was another pillar of the company’s strategy. Chefler Foods operates a fleet of more than 60 trucks to ensure nationwide just-in-time delivery. The company also manufactures its own blow-molded plastic bottles, a rarity for a company its size. But where Mike’s Amazing really differentiates itself is in its marketing.

Challenging the conventional wisdom that men don’t buy groceries, Leffler invested heavily in sports marketing — partnering with high-profile teams like the Yankees, Mets, Red Sox and Phillies, emblazoning stadiums with the company’s logo, and running television commercials during NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL games, the Olympics and even the Super Bowl. Mike’s Amazing currently has partnerships with 28 teams, and Leffler hopes to grow that number.

“The culture has changed,” he says. “Men today actually do a lot of cooking and shopping, so by investing in sports marketing, we’re connecting with them to build the brand.”

Leffler is applying that same strategy to growing Mike's Amazing in New Orleans. He’s already partnered with the Saints, Pelicans, and LSU and Tulane athletics, and he’s sponsored community events including the French Quarter Festival, NOLA Funk Fest and the National Fried Chicken Festival. But his commitment to New Orleans doesn't stop with marketing. He’s also offered internships for students and provided support for essential nonprofits like Son of a Saint and Preservation Hall.

“There’s a lot of good stuff that has happened to me, and I need to make sure it goes back around,” he explains. “The thing I get the most reward out of is being able to give back.”

This fall, Leffler will return to campus to serve as a guest lecturer in the Hospitality Management and Entrepreneurship certificate program, helping to teach a new generation of students about opportunities in the food business. For Leffler — whose passion for food and business was first stoked at Freeman — it’s a full-circle moment.

“When I entered business school, I never would have thought any of this was possible,” he says. “Who would have thought mayonnaise could take you this far?”