

Thinking — and growing — local

By Dave Yanko



Caitlin and Julie Olauson at The Local Kitchen in Saskatoon

Photo by: Hogarth Photography

Caitlin Olauson co-owns and operates a company that produces tasty and healthy snack bars using locally sourced produce such as lentils, flax, saskatoon berries and quinoa (yes, Saskatchewan produces quinoa). And she says her experience with The Local Bar shows that there's great opportunity and support in Saskatchewan for other entrepreneurs who believe in a buy local approach to business.

"I think it's important to have a connection to your food and where it comes from, to

know what's in it and who made it," says Olauson, who comes from a farming family and operates Olauson Food Products in Saskatoon with her sister Julie.

"It seems like such a big, missed opportunity to be shipping produce across the world and buying it back as finished product."

She says Saskatchewan has the infrastructure, incentives, support services and people to help turn ideas for food products into reality. "I'm

continually amazed by how often people are willing to sit down and have a coffee and just tell you everything they know about social media, or about building a website, or how they did this or that to start up their own business," says Olauson. "I thought it was going to be a mean and scary business world out there, but people are just really helpful."

Olauson got her taste for entrepreneurialism while studying food science at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Agriculture.

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Putting the (electric) pedal to the metal

By Virginia Wilkinson

Saskatchewan entrepreneur Roshan Thomas wasn't looking to create an international export business four years ago when he first built a motor for his pedal bike.

But that motor inspired the development of a company that is now selling electric pedal bikes around the world. Located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Biktrix sells five different electric bike designs as well as bike conversion kits.

"In the past two years, we've sold bikes into the U.S., Canada, Iceland, Dubai, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, U.K., Scotland, New Zealand and India," said Thomas.

An emerging star on the international stage, Biktrix had very modest beginnings.

Thomas was a 24-year-old computer engineering graduate from the University of Saskatchewan who needed a reliable and affordable vehicle for travel to and from work. He wanted an electric motorcycle, but found them financially out of reach; as a result, he began looking into electric pedal bikes. Unable to find something in his price range, he built himself a motor and attached it to his pedal bike.

It was the beginning. His motor was so effective that he was able to travel at speeds of 32 kilometres per hour, catching the attention of Saskatoon pedestrians.

"These are pedal assist bikes—you need to pedal for the motor to work. People used to stop me and ask how I was going so fast. A few people wanted to buy, so I took their bikes and converted them to electric. That's pretty much how Biktrix got started," he said.

In 2014, he initiated a Kickstarter campaign to raise funds for the development of his first elec-

tric Fat Bike. The campaign was a major success ... and Biktrix was born. Thomas sold more than 50 bikes through the campaign, raising \$100,000, which he invested into the company.

His goal was to create the ultimate electric bike: a high-quality vehicle that would allow the biker to "ride anywhere" and at an affordable price.

Thomas travelled to China to learn more about building electric bikes. This experience helped him both with bike design and production. In the end, he sourced the frame construction out of Taiwan; however, all Biktrix designs are developed and all bikes assembled by his three-person team in Saskatoon.

Initially Biktrix offered two different designs: the Juggernaut, a heavy duty, all-terrain "ride anywhere" vehicle; and the Stunner, a sleek electric cruiser that travels more than 60 kilometres on a single charge.

In 2014, Biktrix sold just a handful of bikes; in 2015, sales grew to more than 100; in 2016, over 300 were produced and sold, and sales in 2017 are climbing. All sales are done online, cutting out reseller costs and enabling Biktrix to price products below their competitors.

"We get e-mails from customers every day who tell us they've ridden to places they've never ridden before—and they've pushed themselves on the bike, because they're able to get out much more often," he said.

Thomas notes that a company with smaller product runs has a great ability to be nimble and iterate quickly, incorporating customer feedback to create new editions of current models. Biktrix is now on its sixth edition of the Juggernaut and third edition of the Stunner.

Unique to Biktrix is the bike's motor, which is built into the centre of the frame rather than attached on the wheel. This provides more balance to the bike and enables the company to offer bikes in all-wheel drive models.

Customer response has been so positive that many are coming back for second or third models for family members or friends. "We have people riding our bikes from age 20 up to 95!"

Over the past two years, Biktrix has expanded into other model types, and in 2016 launched a folding e-bike. "We've been selling it mostly to people who have RVs, or to commuters. They can fold it up and take it inside with them. It's a really nimble and versatile bike," Thomas said.

Thomas says 2017 will be a "super" exciting year for Biktrix. The company is launching a line of new models in May, including a conversion kit for wheelchairs.

It will also be opening a unique showroom in Saskatoon's Farmer's Market site to allow prospective purchasers to test out their line of bikes. Thomas is in the process of securing similar space in markets around the world, to showcase the bikes and enable people to experience them before purchasing.

Despite the fact that the company has just three years of sales under its belt, Thomas believes the company is on the cusp of rapid and substantial growth.

Their goal? "To be THE electric bike company of choice ... and to help people of all ages and backgrounds experience the joy of riding," said Thomas.

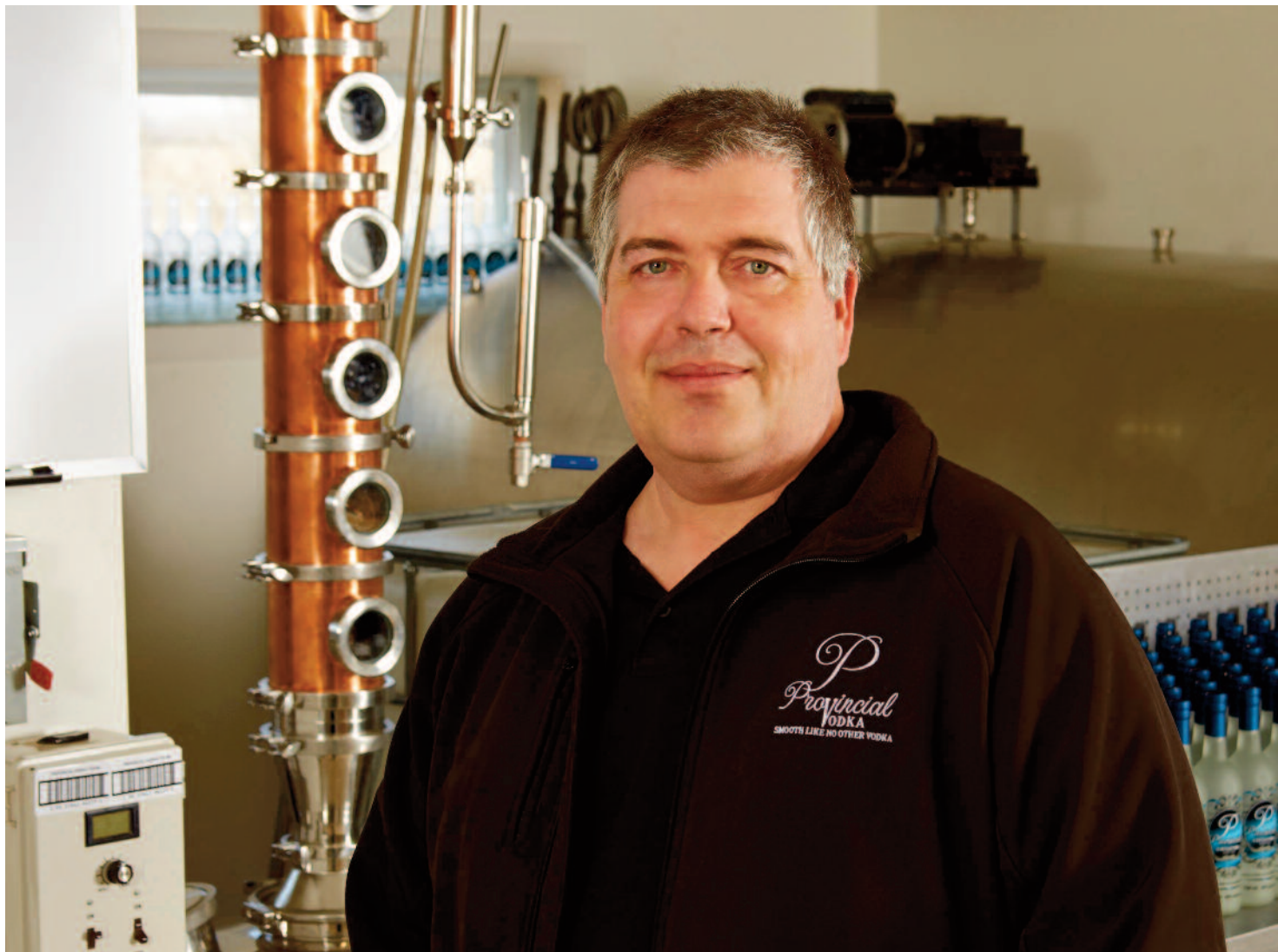


Roshan Thomas, founder of Biktrix, with the Juggernaut

Photo by: Calvin Fehr Photography

“Uncompromisingly smooth”:

By Dave Yanko



Paul Riben, Owner and CEO of Radouga Distilleries

Photo by: Kevin Hogarth Photography

The recipe Radouga Distilleries uses to produce its acclaimed Provincial Vodka is a valuable trade secret. But Radouga National Marketing Director Cliff Skene says the water from the interglacial aquifer beneath Radouga's production facility at Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan is one ingredient he's happy to talk up.

"The easiest way to describe it is that a regular aquifer is like a lake in the ground while an interglacial aquifer is a lake that's actually preserved in the glacial ice in the ground," says Skene.

"It's the unique mineral composition of the water to which we attribute a lot of the quality of our vodka."

There's no question that many people are discovering that Provincial Vodka is a quality product. Enthusiasts include two panels of judges who awarded it a gold medal at The New York Wine and Spirits Competition in August last year. The blind taste tests pitted Radouga's product against some of the biggest vodka producers in the world. "We were competing with very old, very established international brands with

Radouga Distilleries



a lot of history behind them,” says Skene. “In his tasting notes, one of the judges wrote that Provincial Vodka is ‘uncompromisingly smooth.’” The vodka won a silver medal at the 2015 competition.

Radouga also produces Provincial Spiced Vodka as well as Apple Pie and Blueberry Pie liqueurs. Company products are available at Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority (SLGA) locations as well as at in-

dependents, restaurants, bars and pubs. Participating liquor stores in Alberta now carry Radouga products, and the firm has applied to enter markets in British Columbia and Manitoba. Entering the U.S. market is one of Radouga’s big goals, and Skene says he expects to hear the result of its U.S. application very soon.

Radouga owner and CEO Paul Riben launched Radouga Distilleries in 2014 following years of market research. In spite of its short time in the marketplace, Radouga already requires a much bigger building to keep up with demand. When the company’s new facility is completed later this year, Radouga will be producing its small-batch, boutique products in a 6,000-sq.-ft. building adjacent to its current property on Riben’s farmland, just outside of Blaine Lake. The new structure is about five times bigger than the one it will replace. Skene, who’s been with the company since 2015, says Radouga has eight full-time employees including its Saskatchewan sales staff. The company has enlisted an agency to handle out-of-province sales.

When contacted for an interview, Skene had just received notice that SLGA had approved Radouga’s application to sell Provincial Vodka in 1.14 litre bottles, the metric-sized bottle that replaced the 40-ounce vessel. The move will come with better shelf placement at provincially owned liquor facilities and allow Radouga to better compete with the big, name-brand vodkas that all come in the 1.14 litre size. “With the bigger bottles we’ll get a bigger real estate footprint in the stores,” says Skene. “It’s better optics.”

The larger bottles are a reflection of Provincial Vodka’s popularity and a more efficient way to sell product. But success brings new issues. Skene says craft distillers in Saskatchewan can now produce up to

200,000 litres of product per year—up from the recent limit of 50,000 litres—and still retain their craft designation. One of the advantages of the designation is the right to sell product on-site; however, Radouga hasn’t included a tasting and sales facility in its expansion plans and hasn’t decided whether it will add one in the future. The question may soon become irrelevant as company growth may make it ineligible for site sales.

“By our charting, we’re soon going to be producing in excess of 200,000 litres,” says Skene. If it came down to a choice between on-site sales and more volume and stature in SLGA stores, Skene says Radouga is happy to take the latter and compete with “the big boys.”

Radouga is proud of its Saskatchewan roots and never misses an opportunity to promote its heritage. “People tasting the vodka will often say ‘Wow, that’s incredibly smooth. Where are you guys from, anyway?’ And we very, very proudly say ‘Blaine Lake, Saskatchewan.’ And it never fails to draw smiles.”

Vendasta Technologies a tech startup

By Pat Rediger

When many people hear the words “technology startup” these days, they likely imagine a company working out of Silicon Valley in California. It’s understandable, because some of these companies—such as Facebook and Uber—have emerged as worldwide leaders.

But thanks to companies like Vendasta Technologies based in Saskatoon, the province is taking steps toward being known as the “Saskatchewan Valley.” Since forming in 2008, Vendasta—which sells digital solutions to local businesses—has grown by at least 50 per cent per year and works with 13 of the top 15 media companies in the U.S. and 1,700 total resellers, marketing to over 600,000 local businesses.

“We’re proud to be here,” said Brendan King, CEO of Vendasta.

“Being located in Saskatoon has a lot of competitive advantages. We don’t have the exorbitant office space costs they have in the valley, and that was especially helpful in the early years. We have a great talent pool coming out of our universities, and we tend to attract loyal people who want to stick around.”

He added that being a tech company based in Saskatchewan can be challenging, specifically when it comes to the ability to raise funds and find specialized/appropriate talent in the small, albeit expanding, tech ecosystem. In more traditional tech centres like San Francisco or New York, companies

have greater access to capital and people. “That said, the people we have found in, and attracted back to, Saskatchewan are perhaps our biggest asset.”

Like most startups that eventually find success, it was certainly not a clear path for Vendasta to reach this point. As King notes, the company originally wanted to build a social platform for homeowners to find and share inspiration for home projects and also find trusted home service providers that their friends had used. A couple of employees developed a plan and sought to secure financing, while the majority of staff took on contract work to help pay the bills.

King had previously started two successful computer retailing operations: Delron (1990-95) and CompuSmart (1995-2000). Most recently, he was working as the Chief Operation Officer for Point2 Technologies, a company he and other staff members left to form Vendasta.

“We were leaving a stable job to head into a very uncertain environment where we had to raise money and earn consulting contracts in order to eat,” King said. “As for my personal situation, it was even more of a leap of faith because I had just purchased a new home and had a baby on the way ... so you can imagine.”

As Vendasta built its platform, it discovered that homeowners were hesitant to share information about their home online. But as King notes, they discovered there was a

definite need for online reputation management, which set the company on its current course.

While a startup company might normally begin by reaching out to smaller companies, King said that approaching larger customers in the U.S. was actually a “logical place to start.” Vendasta’s first customers were newspaper and yellow page companies in 2010, which were experiencing revenue drops from their traditional print products. By “becoming industry and subject matter experts,” King said Vendasta was able to market to these companies.

“We started with consulting, then became a point solution provider, and we’re now a full platform,” King said. “Those changes came from a lot of heavy local marketing learning—from the industry, from our partners and from ourselves. We adapted and changed to solve the problems we’re facing and the ones we could see our partners were going to face. In all that change, however, I think we’ve preserved our startup mentality and our company culture.”

Vendasta aspires to be the top platform for selling digital solutions to local businesses. As King explained it, his company provides a “business-in-a-box” to any company that provides advertising or marketing services to local businesses.

“We provide these companies with a brandable platform that includes a complete marketplace of products allowing them to provide local business with every-

flourishes as



Brendan King Chief Executive Officer for Vendasta

Photo by: Chris Hendrickson Photography

thing they need,” King said. “Unlike other marketplaces, our platform provides a complete go-to market solution. We use big data and automation to help our partners market, sell and fulfill these products and ensure usage, and therefore retention and upsells. In short, partners that use our products are able to sell more things more easily, to more customers and make more money.”

As King is quick to add, the success of Vendasta can be attributed to the quality of the staff they hire.

“While it is difficult to find someone perfectly qualified for specific positions, we consider ourselves very lucky to be in Saskatoon. People don’t always enter with the exact right skillset, but they have the attitude, determination and work ethic to learn,” he said.

“While one of my co-founders has been based out of Vancouver since the beginning, over the years some of our Saskatoon employees had to move to these cities. They were extremely valuable and we were happy to keep them on as remote employees. We’ve since hired more team members in these cities and a few others—Augusta, Seattle and San Diego—as we find qualified, passionate people to build our team.”

Vendasta clearly knows how to create an attractive work environment as it has been voted one of the “10 Positive City Workplaces” in Saskatoon.

“Our philosophy is to try and take away from the daily mundane tasks to allow people to work harder,” King said. “For that reason, we’re always trying to eliminate those tasks. Groceries, breakfasts, lunches, yoga, flexible work schedules all help to do this. We also have great benefits, social

events and professional development opportunities, to name a few.”

The future of Vendasta looks bright as the company is expecting an increased revenue trajectory this year. The company is currently building an app store to help agencies and media companies diversify their product offering and see all their analytics, reporting and billing in one place. Vendasta is also creating the Local Marketing Index, which King said could be “revolutionary for our industry.”

“We are setting the industry standard for how a business is performing in context to other businesses in the same vertical and telling them what they need to do to get better,” King said. “As we add more products to our platform, our partners are telling and showing us that we will be able to help them be more successful.”

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In a research project during her final year in 2011, she was part of a team that developed a different pulse-based snack bar that won the provincial leg of a national contest and placed second in Canada. “It was my first exposure to product development. Then I got a job in product development and that helped me learn from some of the mistakes I made the first time around.”

It was at the Saskatchewan Food Industry Development Centre in Saskatoon where Olauson polished up her skills and knowledge about food production. The Food Centre is a non-profit organization that offers a full range of services to small and medium-sized businesses looking to add value to agricultural products. Today, she and her sister rent part of the facility for a day or so when they need to make and package a new batch of snack bars—they use crispy, ready-to-eat quinoa grown in Saskatchewan and processed by a local company.

It was also at the Food Centre where she learned about the Saskatchewan Agri-Value Initiative (SAVI), a Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture program that provides assistance to small and medium-sized businesses wishing to add value to agricultural products. She and Julie applied for and received a grant reimbursing them for 50 per cent of certain expenditures. “Starting a food business can be pretty expensive—you have upfront costs and you don’t know if you’re going to make that money back again. SAVI was incredibly helpful to us.”

Olauson, a new mom who recently earned a master’s degree in community health, recently launched The Local Kitchen, a firm with a “parallel ideology” to The Local Bar that she operates with two partners. “It’s a community shared kitchen space where we do cooking classes, workshops and kitchen rentals,” says Olauson, adding the company received help from the Women Entrepreneurs of Saskatchewan in organizing the enterprise.

“We’re trying to create a community of different food businesses that learn from each other. It’s filled with people creating food products.”

Olauson says that making nutritious products from whole foods grown in Saskatchewan suits her belief system and lifestyle. She thinks that helping others to do the same creates a synergy that bodes well for Saskatchewan’s economy.

“There’s an odd thing that happens with local food. As you connect with people, you grow together. I think the more that local food businesses can help each other out, the more it helps the whole industry grow.”

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