

## Business

# As J.P. Licks Opens in Wellesley, 'Organic Growth' is Goal of Founder

"Most people want to start a business," says Vince Petryk. "I wanted to start my own little world."

By [James LaFond-Lewis](#) | [Email the author](#) | March 24, 2011



On Sunday in [Wellesley](#), Vince Petryk celebrated the opening of the 10th [J.P. Licks Ice Cream Cafe](#). Ten is a nice number, a decade of stores. Of course, the 10 stores were not opened in just a decade, it has been 30 years since [J.P. Licks](#) opened its first store, but that rate is telling. It partly explains why J.P. Licks continues to succeed. There has been very little grasping, very little overreaching, very little growth for growth's sake. It's a very JP point of view. Licks is about locale, simplicity, and about serving children, not so much about corporate expansion.

Petryk, the business's founder, has created a small kingdom in spite of all that. Certainly, when he was being bullied as a young boy or when he was studying psychology at Temple University he never imagined that he would become an ice cream shop owner, let alone a local ice cream king. With the passing of Bailey's, Howard Johnson's, and Steve's as well as the decline of Brigham's, and Baskin and Robbins, J.P. Licks rides along in leisure mode becoming something of a legend as it adds fiefdoms to its [demesne](#).

Petryk has no plans to arrest the growth, nor to fast-forward it, although he said that it has picked up a little momentum lately. He has developed something he calls organic growth. He is the company's search engine and laughingly describes his job, opening one new location every three years, as something of a pleasure.

Talking about how his identity has become tied up with J.P. Licks over the years he comments, "It's funny because, most people want to start a business. I had a grander idea, I wanted to start my own little world." He motioned around the room, his comfortable and not overly neat office, which resembles a den more than a corporate headquarters "That's what this office is representative of, really, it's got all the parts of my brain in it."

Pleasure is what the ice cream business is all about, for Petryk and for the customers. He reports that he works a modest week in the corporate office above the JP store, but as with many chief executives, although he has made himself unnecessary to the day-to-day business, the problems and challenges of the company constantly occupy his thoughts. Although he has an operations manager who handles almost all of the daily details, he is far from being an absentee owner. He is on site most days and clearly enjoys his position.

It isn't as though he's without worry. At one time, not so long ago, the 56-year-old was so concerned about losing his memory that he had himself tested for early onset Alzheimer's. Thankfully, tests were negative but he speculated that maybe he just had too much on his mind. Forgetting things might be a kind of overflow.

The route to his ice cream kingdom was anything but straightforward. Growing up in a small mill town about seven miles outside of Philadelphia, Petryk was picked on from the time he was about eight years old until he was a sophomore in high school. He was verbally abused, beaten-up and embarrassed. It got so bad that when he was a freshman, he considered suicide. Finally, when he became one of the few boys with a girlfriend in his all-boys high school, the teasing stopped. That was when he realized how disingenuous the attacks had been all along. That realization set him free. He acquired a kind of popularity that he didn't particularly value but ironically served to get him elected as the vice president of the student council.

After high school, he went to Temple University where he earned a degree in psychology. Ultimately realizing that he would not be pursuing psychology, he went to work washing dishes in Philadelphia's only homemade ice cream shop, a place modeled after Steve's Ice Cream (at the time wildly popular) by a Somerville, Massachusetts man who had seen Steve's operating first-hand and taken the concept to Pennsylvania. Petryk's parents weren't too happy about it, but that didn't last long as he quickly moved through the ranks, ultimately becoming the store's manager.

He recalls how ice cream had taken over his thinking: "I kind of have a psychoanalytic view of life. I'm often more interested in why people do the things they do than what they do. I would see some of my customers out on the street...and they weren't always the nicest people, but I saw this weird thing happen, they came in and they got up to the counter to order their ice cream and they became nice people...The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was ice cream. My theory is that ice cream takes people back into a childhood state."

Petryk realized that everyone, even adults, were basically buying ice cream to satisfy the child inside.

After outgrowing the Philadelphia ice cream shop, he got married and started on his way to JP, which today he describes as his true emotional hometown. He worked for a while as a manager in the Wendy's Hamburgers chain where he learned the business end of fast food, something he knew he had to do before he could open his own shop. While at Wendy's he became a new-store-opening specialist. It was the hardest job in the operation, but it served him well. In 1981, he and a business partner each invested about \$25,000 and J.P. Licks was born. Just a couple years later, Petryk bought the partner out for \$100,000 and the long slow growth began.

Even with nine other locations, the converted firehouse at [659 Centre St. in Jamaica Plain](#) is still the jewel in the crown. Serving somewhere in the vicinity of 300,000 scoops of ice cream last year, it is going strong year round and is certainly one of the busiest places in JP. Additionally, the summertime customer count is typically five to seven times higher than in winter. Everyone in JP knows about that line. On summer nights it's always there, but it moves.

Petryk remarked on the competition during his early years. "I realized that most homemade ice cream wasn't very good. Häagen-Dazs (sold mainly as a pre-packaged product) was vastly superior to almost anything out there. Ben and Jerry's was good if you liked all the junk in it. I made good ice cream. It was simple ice cream, simple recipes because that's what ends up tasting better, the simple straight forward things." He added "But it was really the serving end of it that amazed me."

Petryk recalls that speed was one of several essential ingredients that the company learned to include in its product. He taught his employees that the most important thing to provide a customer (all those adult children with their kids) was a happy experience, but that the chance to deliver that experience was lost when someone walked impatiently out of a line that didn't move fast enough. That was a path to the competition. There's no doubt he has succeeded. It's a rare night when someone gets too grumpy waiting for an ice cream cone at one of his stores.

As is often the case in a well-run business, efforts in one area of planning pay off in another. In the case of service, Petryk says that they won't open a store until everything is right, the right location, the right management team, the right production capacity. That's what he means by organic growth. The company has to be ready to grow. To those ends, managers are carefully groomed and well-paid, almost all their locations are "A" or "B+" real estate sites and all the ice cream is made in the JP commissary where five gallon batches are turned out in seven minutes and quality and consistency are carefully controlled. That's cranking!

While Petryk has no specific plans for a next store, he is open to whatever direction his organic growth methods take him. Although he suspects that there might be some small number of JP local purists who will be offended, he notes with a certain amount of professional interest that Manhattan, the nation's food capital, doesn't have an ice cream shop worth mentioning.

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