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FOOD & LIFESTYLE

5 Minutes With... Vincent Petryk of J.P. Licks



J.P. Licks founder Vincent Petryk at his Jamaica Plain store.

GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Topic



Vincent Petryk
Projects Reporter, Boston Business Journal
2 hours ago

Vincent Petryk

Title: Founder and owner, J.P. Licks

Age: 66

Education: Temple University, degree in psychology

Residence: Jamaica Plain, Boston

It wasn't a childhood love of ice cream that got Vince Petryk into what would become a lifelong career serving the favorite treat of so many. It was discovering, when he worked at an ice cream shop next door to his house in Philadelphia, how being in an ice cream shop transformed his sometimes-crabby neighbors into happy, polite people. Petryk first thought he'd be a priest, then tried psychology. After earning his bachelor's degree, he nonetheless started working at the bottom: as a dishwasher. He worked his way up to manager of that ice cream shop, then found his way working for Wendy's opening new restaurants. Finally, 40 years ago, he opened the first of what would eventually be a Boston area institution: J.P. Licks. Today, the company has 17 shops and more than 300 employees.

Petryk is no longer the 26-year-old ambitious enough to start his own business yet fearful enough to initially worry about opening his doors only for no one to walk in. But Petryk keeps the quiriness that J.P. Licks has been known for since its early days, employing tattooed and pierced college students that Petryk - who calls himself someone who never really fit in - identified with. Just take a look at the cow's head jutting out of the company's flagship store and home office in Jamaica Plain.

This year marks your 40th anniversary. Did you ever think J.P. Licks would make it this far?

I am amazed by that. In a way, having 17 locations over 40 years is pretty fast. It's not exactly Wall Street expansion, but we tend to open in clusters within 18 months of each other. It purely depended on the locations available.

I should have been out of business early on because I was undercapitalized. In January 1982, I called my suppliers and said I was running out of money and couldn't pay them until the spring. Every one of them laughed at me and said I didn't know how to play the game. I was supposed to wait until I got a notice that money was due, and keep buying time from there. They told me my start was so strong that it was just winter that hurt our business.

All my suppliers carried me through the winter, and I was able to pay them back, and that was history.

I never had aspirations for more than one store in the beginning. But after a year or two, I realized I wanted to do more. I really enjoyed designing the store, which became my work hobby. I'd research lighting features, flooring and all that, which is why each location looks different. I'm lucky after 40 years I still enjoy my job. Not a lot of people can say that, and I feel very fortunate for that.

Hiring continues to be the biggest challenge 40 years later. This is maybe the worst I've ever seen it, with such shortages. The federal stimulus and unemployment benefits are hurting abilities to hire enough workers.

With the length of time J.P. Licks has been around and its level of success, have you been approached much about franchise or buyout opportunities?

We get a few buyout offers, and some franchise offers, usually about three or four a year. We actually put a link on our website about franchise opportunities, and it takes you to a page that says "sorry, we don't franchise." That probably filters out a lot that we used to get. I only very briefly in the 1980s considered it. But there was way too much involved with it.

You've said "que sera, sera" about your plans for the company, meaning you sort of take it as it goes. Do you still feel that way?

I still don't have five-year plans or anything like that. I get approached for talking to business students in college, and I get a kick out of talking to kids about the business. My business is so operations-oriented that all the bookkeeping experience isn't going to help you if you don't have a good product.

Have you thought of what will happen to J.P. Licks after your time running and owning it?

My two daughters both worked for the business in college. But neither is interested in the business, which is fine with

me. I'd love to sell to my management staff, to be honest with you, but I was told no bank would take them. But that makes no sense to me. They're the ones creating the wealth.

Do I see myself at 76 doing this? Probably. At 86? Probably not.

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