Mark Overbay, founder of Big Spoon Roasters, joins Matt for a discussion on the founding of his business, and how he has used social media and technology to grow his business. This episode is best enjoyed with a jar of Big Spoon Nut Butter in your hand!

Senator Elizabeth Warren's plan to break up big tech firms
Bon Appetit's piece on Big Spoon
Food and Wine's piece on Big Spoon

Welcome to TBD: Technology By Design, I'm your host Matt Perault.

I first tried Big Spoon Nut Butter when I was out in Bozeman, Montana. I was visiting friends and we went to Wild Crumb, an amazing bakery a few blocks from their house. I noticed a beautiful jar on a shelf. You could see the outline of a spoon etched into the glass on the side, and the label said "Almond Cocoa." Definitely had to get some. We took that jar in in the mountains where we were camping, so my first taste of Big Spoon’s Almond Cocoa butter was at a campsite surrounded by rocky mountain peaks, and we "ooh’d and ahh’d" at the balance of salty and sweet. Oh, and there are cocoa nibs... Mmmm. But how did Big Spoon get to Bozeman? The label said it’s made in Durham, North Carolina. How did a small nut butter company end up selling this product in a small bakery, in a small mountain town in the middle of the country? To learn more about that story, we talked to the co-founder of Big Spoon, Mark Overbay. He tells us about the Zimbabwean roots of Big Spoon, about how the company uses technology to reach customers, and gives us his thoughts on the impact of tech policy proposals on his business. So let’s get started.

Welcome, Mark Overbay. Founder of Big Spoon Roasters, thank you for coming on the podcast. Can we talk about the founding story?

Mark Overbay 1:29
Yeah.

Matt Perault 1:29
So how did you start a nut butter company? And why nut butter?

Mark Overbay 1:35
Sure. Well, I've been passionate about food for as long as I can remember... like I was always peeking my head in the kitchen to see, you know, what's going on. What are you cooking? How are you cooking that? Why does that smell that way? I grew up in a family of gardeners like the generation above my parents but not so much my parents. That was just in my DNA. I started a cooking club in college. But I was a liberal arts major, English, philosophy, film studies... I became a journalist after college and then always wanted to join the Peace Corps or do something like that... I had real wanderlust and applied to the Peace Corps service and got in and was assigned to Zimbabwe. This is in 1999. And I lived in, even by Zimbabwean standards, a very rural part of the country: no running water, no electricity, had to walk a couple hundred yards to a little well to get water. Lived in a mud hut, thatched roof and the community where I lived, they grew all their crops. They were subsistence farmers. That's all everyone did everyday... if you weren't school age, you were tending cattle or you're growing or preserving food. And one of the things the community grew was a type of peanut called, they call them ground nuts there, it's really closely related to the runner variety peanut.

Matt Perault 2:52
Okay. We don’t know Runner... So talk us through like different peanut varieties...
Mark Overbay  2:56
Yeah, so so peanuts are indigenous to South America. Probably Brazil, Peru, Colombia. The oldest known mention of peanuts ever I think was is from, now Peru and they would mix them with chocolate, you know, like the the pro-to Reese's experience a couple thousand years ago. And then obviously, you know, colonialism and global trade moved peanuts all over the world and they've been in Africa for a long time. So a runner peanut is a smaller kernel. Peanuts are a legume, of course, most people probably know that. And they come in various sizes of pods, of kernels, of densities, of oil content, but the runner peanut is what grows mostly in the American South East, it likes sandy soil, it likes heat, it likes humidity. That's why they grow so well and a lot of parts of Africa and lots of places in the world now grow runner peanuts. I think it makes the best peanut butter because the oil content is just perfect and it's a little softer. So it's not really designed for the, you know, the snacking out of hand when you roast it has a little bit because of the fat content. It's a little softer like closer to a macadamia nut. And when you mill it or grind it, the oils emulsify really well.

Matt Perault  4:22
Okay.

Mark Overbay  4:23
And it's just just coincidence, you know that that's what they grew, that's what they were growing in that part of Zimbabwe. And I love peanut butter... have since I was a little kid, it's always one of my favorite foods, you know, it would be one of my top three foods period. And I really missed peanut butter. I could not find it in Zimbabwe, you know, I'd go to the town and buy goods every couple of months. But the people that grew peanuts, they'd roast them over open fires and, a lot of people would mix them in stews, but some people would crush them with stones, like a mortar and pestle, into kind of a course peanut butter. And it was delicious just that way, but I really missed that sweet, salty, roasty classic, you know, trio of flavors in American peanut butter, and so I would add... I tried sugar, I tried local honey, I added salt, obviously, and coconut oil was something that I tried in Zimbabwe because it made it easier using the mortar and pestle stones to crush it up. Even though the fat content in runner peanuts is really good, when you're doing it by hand, a little coconut oil helps. And when I tried that with coconut oil, sea salt and local honey, it was one of the best things that I'd ever tasted and it just blew my mind. And the last thing I ever thought about when I was eating that was starting a business around it. I just thought I was having this incredible food experience as a Peace Corps volunteer and I was going to be really excited to tell people about it when I get back to the States. And that was that... so flash forward 10 years later in 2010. I had been living in Durham for a few years working for Counter Culture coffee, and I had just bought my first house I was in my backyard sanding a piece of wood, I'd recently met my now wife Megan. Life was good. And I got really hungry for my favorite snack. This is October 2010. Apples were in season and I was just craving a fresh apple with peanut butter. And for some reason rather than think about the, you know, grind your own Whole Foods peanut butter that I had in my pantry, I thought about what we made in Zimbabwe and how I can't find that. Why can't I have that? You know? It's so easy. And we're in a state that's a peanut growing state. We're in the middle of this craft food renaissance, you know, that had been going on for years: craft beer, craft cheese, craft everything. You know, every Farmers Market exploding with amazing products and I could not think of anyone doing truly small batch, handmade peanut butter. I went inside got on Google and tried to find it. Is anyone making this?

Matt Perault  7:12
What did you search for?

Mark Overbay  7:14
Handmade peanut butter. Small batch peanut butter. Fresh roasted peanut butter. I couldn’t find it. So I was like, "Well, I’m gonna go to Whole Foods and buy some peanuts and roast them in my oven and make what I did in Zimbabwe."

Matt Perault 7:29
And so between the Zimbabwe experience which was 10 years before and now, have you made your Zimbabwean peanut butter?

Mark Overbay 7:37
In that style?

Matt Perault 7:38
Yeah.

Mark Overbay 7:39
Yeah, I tried once.

Matt Perault 7:40
Okay, but only once... so it wasn’t like you came back and it just became like your regular way of making a snack for yourself.

Mark Overbay 7:46
No, ironically, no, because I did become obsessed with making everything else from scratch. I got really into cooking when I got back from Zimbabwe because I was just on my own with a little propane stove cooking every day. So when I came back to the States and I had this whole grocery store, and you know, modern kitchens, I got really, really into cooking and I made my own hummus and made my own mustard. Like everything I made myself. But no, I didn’t.

Matt Perault 8:14
Is that because you just, like, you associated the peanut butter with the place so much and it was hard to translate that?

Mark Overbay 8:19
That’s a great question. I’ve never really thought about why I didn’t just start making that for myself earlier. I think that it just still didn’t occur to me, that was something I could do. Like I think...

Matt Perault 8:32
Even though you had done it, unlike making mustard or making hummus...

Mark Overbay 8:35
But it was like magic. It was like a dream when I did it, you know, like it didn’t feel real.

Matt Perault 8:41
Yep. Because you’re experienced there was so different from all your other experiences...

Mark Overbay 8:45
Yeah, exactly. I wish I had had the idea years earlier then Big Spoon would be a much more mature business.

Matt Perault 8:54
Uh huh. So you so you, you like do this quick Google search to see if the anything else in the market? You’ve run out and gotten your products?
Mark Overbay  9:03
Yeah. So, yeah, a couple miles away the Durham Whole Foods. This was... they don’t offer this anymore, but at the time, you could get a burlap sack of local North Carolina raw peanuts, pecans are also harvested in the fall. So they had raw pecans and I immediately thought, oh my god, a peanut-pecan butter blend would be incredible. I’ve never seen a pecan butter. I’d never seen a nut butter blend like that. But I just had the idea in the moment. And so took them home, roasted them and roasted the peanuts and pecans on sheet pans in my oven. I had a KitchenAid food processor. And I already had great local honey. I already had great sea salt. I already had virgin coconut oil. So I wanted to create what I had made in Zimbabwe using a food processor. But I was so obsessed with this peanut-pecan butter idea, that’s what I made first. And so it was just fresh roasted peanuts, fresh roasted pecans, raw honey and sea salt, no coconut oil. And it was, it was awesome. Like I was so happy with it, I was like I would drive, you know, a state away to buy this. I would definitely buy this online. I would definitely buy this at a farmers market. So I kind of set that aside and then worked on trying to recreate what I made in Zimbabwe with the coconut oil, honey and sea salt, with just peanuts. And when I had those two products in my hand, I definitely didn’t think of it as “products” at the time, I thought this could be a business, right then. Because I’d tasted nothing like the peanut butters I just made in my home kitchen on the market. And I followed business enough through, you know, my job as a marketing-communications person at a coffee company to know that this is a huge market for peanut butter, obviously, peanut butters, almond butters, nut butters. And if we had a business that represented a higher level of quality, of sustainability, of transparency, of ingredient integrity, that would attract people because that doesn’t exist now. And it seemed like a viable business idea.

Matt Perault  10:17
And then so what happens next? Because I assume all of us have great business ideas. There are few people who actually take those ideas and go out and make them happen. You have this job at Counter Culture coffee, which is a great coffee shop, coffee roaster. But now you’ve got this new idea for this other company. How do you actually make that happen?

Mark Overbay  11:29
Yeah. Well, farmers’ markets are an important part of our Genesis story because farmers’ markets, and by that I mean, you know, it’s a it’s a member organization that they have a, you know, a set of or a piece of land where this group of farmers and food artisans get together and sell every week, once or twice a week. It’s a really common concept, but they’re all definitely not created equal. And the farmers’ markets around here, particularly the Carrboro and Durham farmers’ markets are really well run and they have very strict rules about who gets in, and like proximity rules and...

Matt Perault  12:09
What are proximity rules?

Mark Overbay  12:10
Like you have to be so many miles from the market. I can’t remember what that is now, but it’s a pretty small radius. And you have to like, basically do what you say you do. And so if you if you made pickles, let’s say, and you applied and, the application process is really competitive as well, they’ll taste your product. And by virtue of your interview and application, you might get into the farmers’ market, but before you can actually sell at the farmers’ market, they will come visit your production. “They” meaning board members of the farmers’ market and verify that you’re actually doing it the way you’re saying you’re doing it. You’re using the ingredients that you’re claiming to use.

Matt Perault  12:50
Wow.
So it’s a rigorous process.

Yeah. Cool. So you're like now you're in farmers' market in the community.

So the Durham Farmers' Market was not accepting applications that year... they were full. The Carrboro Farmers' Market was. And so there were over 50 applications for one spot, and we got that one spot.

Wow.

And I had the idea in October 2010. The application time is over the winter. So we were going to launch this business one way or the other. And “we” meaning my, actually my co-founder, Megan, my wife now, then girlfriend. We spent the next three months working on the name. I named the business after my dad. His nickname is "Big Spoon," because when I was about six years old, I wandered into our kitchen, and he was standing there with a giant spoonful of peanut butter he was eating right out of the jar, and I just called him Big Spoon and it stuck. So I had the name immediately, but we were working on the brand identity and the logo and I wanted the logo to feel pre-digital. Because, you know, again, we’re kind of a reaction to the over-industrialization, the over-homogenization of the food industry, of packaged foods. So I wanted it to have that kind of timeless feel. And then working on recipes, I wanted to have at least four or five different peanut butter based nut butters to launch when we launched. And I didn't assume we’d get into a farmers' market and start selling in spring. But I was confident that even if we didn't get into the one of the two big ones, the Carrboro or Durham Farmers' Markets, we could find a smaller one to get into. And so I spent that time applying to farmers' markets, and we got into Carrboro, and were able to start selling in April of that year. But by getting the press that we got right off the bat, Bon Appetit blogged about us within a few months of us selling at the farmers' market, which led to Food and Wine asking for a sample and then their editors said our peanut-pecan butter was one of the seven best things they tasted all year. And then The Wall Street Journal wrote about us in their Top 50 Influential Things that year. That just led to tremendous amount of interest from retailers, as you can imagine. I mean, we had Harris Teeter and Walmart sending emails to our website, which at the time, was just a static photo and an email address, “info@bigspoonroasters.com,” no e-commerce, no Facebook page because that felt like too much work. But I did have a Twitter account @BigSpooners.

Okay. That you were using?

No, not really. I mean, it just felt like...

You needed a node on the internet. You had a presence...

Exactly and I mean, I would use it to say, "See you at the Carrboro farmers' market this weekend." And, you know, maybe one person would interact with that, you know, a week. But
the attention we got through just traditional media showed me that we had a viable business idea, very quickly.

Matt Perault 15:59
I’d love to talk about risk aversion because that seems like a huge issue. And I’m kind of curious about how you broke through. Launching out to establish what you described as essentially an entirely new business. You are doing Google searches for this product. And you can’t find anyone who’s actually offering exactly what you’re contemplating offering. You’re essentially creating some version of a new market... that feels incredibly scary. Obviously, like, you know, you’ve been incredibly successful, but I can imagine when you were doing it, that it was really scary. What was that like? And what were the things that you did to try to get through that fear?

Mark Overbay 16:37
Well, having an amazing partner was instrumental to being able to launch this business and that’s Megan, because she worked for Duke at the time, had a very had a very stable job and made a good salary and you know, had great benefits and you know, Megan, has always shared my passion for the the values and the methods and the just the mission of Big Spoon Roasters. And so that made it really easy to me, I really had a safety net the whole time financially, you know, when you’re talking about financial risk...

Matt Perault 17:20
Right.

Mark Overbay 17:21
Otherwise, yeah, it was a, it was a risky venture, in terms of this might not work out. And from the beginning, I always had the feeling, and I kind of still do, that I make something I’m really proud of, that I would love eating every day. And I, I’m always going to be happy to spend the money and the resources and the time to create what I’m creating, even if it’s just a few jars for myself every week. And if other people like it, and it resonates with them, and they’re willing to pay me to make more of it, then that’s like gravy. You know, I never set out to start a business with any kind of exit goal, and still don’t have an exit goal. I never set out to do something that would be on trend and fit into some kind of momentum of the food industry. It was really just something that I felt like I wanted to exist in the world and I thought that other people would appreciate too

Matt Perault 18:25
Yeah.

Mark Overbay 18:27
And there’s no there’s there’s no social risk to me in what I did, like I’m really proud of what we do... I think, yeah, the jumping into the unknown felt risky. But I wouldn’t say that my jump to Counter Culture felt like a bigger risk. It’s just that I was alone then. I was single. So you know that the partnership part with the second risk is is everything. I don’t know if I could have pulled it off.

Matt Perault 18:59
So you started with a pretty bare bones internet presence, but now obviously your presence has grown just as your business has grown and developed. And I assume that as your presence online has grown, you’ve developed some views about the tech policy issues that are in the news so much these days, like breaking up Facebook and Instagram. So for you that would mean that might mean the positive things about it, or the alleged positive things about it are like now there are these two different companies that are otherwise combined that are
competing against each other. So maybe they compete to offer you like a better advertising product. That’s possible.

Mark Overbay  19:28
Yeah.

Matt Perault  19:29
It seems to me like there are convenience downsides for you, like right now you can advertise it across both platforms with one advertising tool. I think, I don’t know how much you’re concerned about, like cyber-security issues and stuff. But like, Facebook has 30,000 people working on safety and security. Presumably, you’d feel more comfortable than if Instagram spun off as this significantly smaller company. What do you think?

Mark Overbay  19:52
Yeah, we only started doing paid social media ad buys this year.

Matt Perault  19:59
Oh, interesting.

Mark Overbay  19:59
Yeah. Really small ones too. You know, we’re 100% bootstrapped. We’re in our ninth year, we’ve never had any outside investment. We did a little bit of bank debt to buy some equipment. So everything that we do is is funded by our invoices, you know, it’s all funded by cash flow.

Matt Perault  20:20
Wow.

Mark Overbay  20:21
And every marketing decision, like every paperclip that we buy is a seriously considered decision, because it affects anything else that we want to do... like invest in you know, the agriculture side of our, you know, our supply chain, invest in the best possible ingredients that we can, amazing packaging, great benefits for our employees, living wages. Everything, you know, obviously has a cost and so marketing and advertising was always the very end of that and I have a background in marketing and copywriting for other companies when I worked for a consulting firm and then when I moved here to work for Counter Culture coffee, I was really their first full time marketing person.

Matt Perault  21:00
Right.

Mark Overbay  21:01
And we didn’t do any advertising ever. Like we wouldn’t even buy an ad in a coffee trade magazine. That was just sort of the culture there...

Matt Perault  21:12
Interesting.... the counter culture there.

Mark Overbay  21:13
The counter culture there... that I inherited, but I also, when I talked to my counterparts at other companies that were spending a lot on like ads and trade magazines. They were constantly telling me "Yeah, you know, my boss wants me to spend this money and get this because he’s friends with the publisher, but we never see anything from this." And, I like, I just started to kind of develop my own opinions about advertising. And most of them came down to the fact that it
doesn't really work if you're a scrappy brand, like trying to get by on the quality of your products... That's a rambling way to get to the fact that at Big Spoon, you know, advertising buys, is like that’s the last thing we wanted to spend money on because of all the things that are important to us in terms of running our business...

Matt Perault 22:05
Interesting...

Mark Overbay 22:05
And only in the last year have we started to a little bit, and we've outsourced that to a tiny little agency that does that.

Matt Perault 22:14
That’s surprising to me because I think like what tech companies say about how small businesses use their products is that it's this really important tool of discovery and brand engagement and I think your marketing, like when people pick up a jar of Big Spoon there, it seems like there are all these deliberate decisions you've made about making that like a beautiful experience... like in the first jar that I bought, you have the spoon actually etched into the glass. So you feel the spoon in the glass. And then you know, the label was so carefully designed and the way you talk about ingredients are so careful. It’s from my, from looking at your Instagram account, like it seems like promoting that sort of beauty and the close connection between the customer and the food, and the producer and the food, is so important. So I would think for your product, social media advertising would be really important to reach new customers. Is that the case?

Mark Overbay 23:14
I think it's, I think that's yet to be seen. Because, to me social media and the way it's grown to be basically an advertising medium, and now there are thousands of one person advertising agencies calling themselves influencers... that industry is I, to me, there are pros and cons. So the pros are yes, the relative ease of access to millions and millions of people by you know, creating organic content and then paying what you can to reach, you know, X number of people, rather than, you know, going to the top 50 periodicals in the United States and looking at their pricing for an eighth of a page, a quarter page, a half page...

Matt Perault 24:09
Right.

Which is going to be alive for, you know, a few seconds in somebody's hand and probably miss... so print advertising is definitely, I mean, it's been dying a slow death for a long time.

Mark Overbay 24:18
Yep. And it's expensive too, right?

It's still very expensive. Yeah because the cost you know the cost per square inch of printing hasn’t really gone down... if anything it’s probably gone up. But so, the access to people through social media is good. I think what’s tough for a business like us is we are small, we are self-funded, and we are innovative. We're like, you know considered an innovative first mover in business speak, you know, we created a category of handmade small batch nut butters when we came out into the into the market in one farmers' market in 2011. And since then, nut butters have become a much bigger trend. Dozens of businesses pop up all over the country every year. And the language around, you know, handcrafted, all-natural, small batch, incredible integrity ingredients. None of those terms are patentable, you can't trademark those terms. They’re also not regulated by FDA. Like even natural, the word natural doesn't mean anything. If you see it on a package...
Matt Perault  24:34
So can we can we pause there, because that seems like an important concept. So what you mean is that there’s no regulated definition of "natural" so you can put it on a label, and it means something to you, but it might or might not be true and there’s no standard meaning for what it actually is.

Mark Overbay  25:49
That’s exactly right. And the word organic was like that for a long time. Believe it or not, not until the USDA finally passed its organic standards... I can’t remember what year that was. It’s been over a decade now. So that organic was actually strictly defined and in order to put, you know, certified organic or organic on your label, unless it’s pertaining to one ingredient, like you can say made with organic peanuts in your whole product isn’t organic, but at least that’s regulated now. Natural is not. Neither is, you know, handmade, handcrafted, small-batch, artisan. So, unfortunately, you get a lot of businesses that just pop up because it’s a trend. So it’s basically marketing companies that run these and a lot of these are really well-funded. And so they can afford to go out and spend, you know, 10 or a hundred times our marketing budget on social media ads, and reach way more people, but they could do that in any medium. But the fact that they can do it on social media just disadvantages us and it dilutes everything that’s happening. There’s just so much noise. That’s, that’s my biggest frustration with our foray into social media advertising... it’s just like our voice just still feel so small.

Matt Perault  25:51
Uh huh.

Mark Overbay  26:05
...In the goop of noise that’s out there. No pun intended. For the amount of social media stuff they do. So I wish social media was more, was more organic. I actually think there should be no paid advertising on social media. But I’m also in the minority of people that I think social media shouldn’t be treated like a public utility. It should actually be a paid subscription. Even if it’s like $5 a year. $2.99 a year. I don’t know something, that makes it really economically accessible for most people. At least that way, you’re opting in, right...

Matt Perault  27:54
...to the data collection.

Mark Overbay  27:55
Right. And maybe you’ll be more thoughtful about what’s happening with your data or maybe even, like, touch your settings, which most people don’t. But from a content perspective, you know, I wish that social media you only see, "you" being the user, the member, what you opt into. Like no company could ever push content to your feed that you didn’t already like or opt in to see their stuff...

Matt Perault  28:26
Right. Which would mean taking advertising out, right? Because for organic content, you choose what you follow. And then you, I think a lot of people don’t understand that in a newsfeed for instance, that’s usually comprised of content that you choose to like, it’s either friends or family you’re connected to or it’s pages you like, but then there is also advertising real estate in your newsfeed that businesses can pay to reach you that way. So you’re saying you’d prefer a world where companies make their money on subscriptions... There’s no, there’s no advertising real estate so there’s no way to get access to a news feed by paying. It would only be organic.

Mark Overbay  29:05
Yes. Although there's I see nothing wrong with you know, let's say you're in your Facebook interface and you have your feed. And then there's another tab over here that's like it says "news." If you click over to news there, you know, fill it up with all the ads that you want. But I think the way social media has evolved is there's no line between what's news and what's your organic content and what's advertising. It's just all in one feed.

Matt Perault  29:36
Uh huh.

Mark Overbay  29:36
And to me, like, I'm kind of a purist and that I want our products and our work to be celebrated and shared for the sheer force of its goodness. Right. And and for that to happen organically.

Matt Perault  29:56
Uh huh. So that's, so I guess like one question I have, then as we could talk about the paid, we've been talking about the paid side. And there's also this organic side.

Mark Overbay  30:06
Yeah.

Matt Perault  30:07
For both, you benefit from the data that people share, right? So you can, through advertising, you can target your products more effectively, and thus, it's cheaper to reach more people who are likely to be customers of yours. And on the organic side, you know, you're, you're sharing information with people, they may share information with you, I assume you do some customer service via messaging services and that type of thing. But your view of data collection seems to be that you'd prefer that there is less of it, or that there is less, there's less advertising based on data collection. So I'm kind of interested in that since you seem to be a beneficiary, I would think on the business side or a potential beneficiary of people sharing data with tech platforms.

Mark Overbay  30:58
Well, to backup some, I haven't really researched this. So I don't I don't know the thought behind this. But I know that early on in the business when we opened a Facebook page, and we'd post something, it would immediately get X number of likes. And then as the, as Facebook changed and the algorithms changed, those numbers would go down, down, down. Because it was all about pay for play, in terms of the number of people that would see it. That's frustrating, because it seems like the whole thing is, the whole system is funneling you into a relationship where you need to actually pony up money in order to reach the people that have opted in to seeing your content. And that's frustrating, but it's a private company, they can do whatever they want to, you know, we will use it to the best of our ability. Again, I don't see social media as this public utility that everyone who, you know, has has an opinion about it should necessarily have those opinions taken seriously by those who run it.

Matt Perault  32:06
Yeah.

Mark Overbay  32:08
But as a business who uses it, right, as a service, you know, just like we would use a printer, it would be wonderful if a social media medium existed that really connected people and businesses that opt in, like, in real time, like when we put up a post, right, it should appear in everyone's feed who opts in to our content?
Yeah. So I think there are two challenges in doing that from a product perspective. The first is that, I think part of what you're experiencing where you say, reach is declining, is there's more demand for that space in someone's newsfeed. So if there were only like 10 businesses that had a Facebook presence or an Instagram presence, and there were a small number of users and people who were connected with those 10 businesses weren't connected with like many other friends or you know, other, you know, other businesses, then you could see every piece of content that was posted. In a world where there are millions and millions of businesses and people are connected with many of them. And people are also connected with friends and family, there has to be decisions about how to fill up the content of your newsfeed. And so that's the work that an algorithm does is figuring out what's the best thing to show you. And as that has become more competitive, because there's more, there's more content...

Mark Overbay  33:31
Sure...

Matt Perault  33:32
...Then any individual business is going to there's going to be less, you know, your reach is going to go down. And the other thing that I know that Facebook did, I don't know if other platforms have done something similar, is try to prioritize friends and family content over page content, because they were feeling kind of what you described, like there's a lot of noise in my newsfeed. I actually don't really want to see all this stuff that I signed up for, you know, two years ago. I really just want to see like baby photos from my cousins or something...

Mark Overbay  34:00
Which I think is great.

Matt Perault  34:01
Yeah. What about other policy proposals? So like one big one that's been talked about mainly by Senator Elizabeth Warren, who's running for president, is the idea of breaking up big tech companies. So that would be, you know, separate Facebook and Instagram, or disentangling various advertising products that Google has, for instance, is that something that's of interest to you given your business? Or is that does that seem like a positive thing? Does that seem like a negative thing?

Mark Overbay  34:33
I'm completely neutral on that. If Facebook and Instagram to take that example, were separate companies are our lives would not change at all.

Matt Perault  34:45
Mm hmm.

Mark Overbay  34:45
I mean, it would not. I just don't see how that would affect us at all.

Matt Perault  34:50
What about just the sort of the experience of trying to use those products as a business owner?

Mark Overbay  34:57
I mean, obviously, if things changed so that, like, if for instance, ad rates went up because of that, that would suck. And we would have to deal with that and see if, you know, we could still afford to pay the small amount that we're paying, you know, for some for some ad content now... I just think people crave transparency. And that's what, I say "people" in general mean, our customers I think are attracted us because of our transparency, the integrity of our process,
you know, we can tell the story of every ingredient down to the farm. But for us as a business, I think other than just out of pocket costs for you know, the ad buying that we’re doing, and using the services if I mean, if the steps and red tape involved in signing up as a business, to use the services, to reach people through through ads or even through organic content. If that became more cumbersome for any reason or different, you know, that would be annoying.

Matt Perault  36:03
Yep. So I think the kinds of things that it would mean would be that you would, obviously you do have to do separate advertising for Facebook and Instagram, for instance. And to serve Google ads, there might be more choices about, you might have to make more choices about different components of the advertising experience. Are those things that seem like they introduce friction in a way that feels challenging to you?

Mark Overbay  36:28
No, I mean, honestly, if I ever worried about the fact that we’d have to, like login to two sites to post ads, then I’m, something’s wrong with how I’m spending my day. That’s just not of consequence to me.

Matt Perault  36:42
So obviously, e-commerce is a big part of your business.

Mark Overbay  36:45
It’s about a quarter of our business.

Matt Perault  36:46
So on the on the e-commerce side, do you hear anxiety from customers about like, how you store credit cards and people who are skeptical about, kind of, the transaction process or about the information that they’re giving you?

Mark Overbay  37:00
Less than one half of 1% of people, even among e-commerce customers, ever bring that up. I mean, and that number is getting smaller every year. I mean, I think I was the first person I ever saw at a farmers’ market with a Square Reader, you know? And this was at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market...

Matt Perault  37:24
Yeah...

Mark Overbay  37:25
...and it's an amazing farmers' market...

Matt Perault  37:26
A couple miles from here.

Mark Overbay  37:27
It’s probably one of the more educated groups of customers at a farmers’ market in the world. I mean, just the community education level of like, Carrboro/Chapel Hill is just really high in general.

Matt Perault  37:40
Yep.
And a lot of like, super tech savvy people... but even so, the first you know, couple of weeks that I had the Square Reader at the farmers' market people were like, "Oh, no, like, I'm not going to give you my credit card info. I need you to..."

Write it out by hand? Cause that will be much more secure?

Mark Overbay  37:58
Yeah, or they're, you know, they're like, "I need you to take a personal check or whatever." And most people pay cash at a farmers' market, for one thing, but we wanted to give people the option.

Matt Perault  38:09
Yeah.

Mark Overbay  38:10
And it was just interesting, because there was just so much more fear around that then. And I don't know if cyber-security has gotten better, or more, we've just taken for granted the fact that our credit card is going to be out there in a million places every time you buy gas every time you do anything.

Matt Perault  38:25
Yeah.

Mark Overbay  38:25
So to answer your question, no, I don't think that's a big concern.

Matt Perault  38:29
So we've talked a lot about like privacy issues, competition issues, a little bit about cyber-security... payments, which you're bringing up is another area where there's a lot of attention in the tech community right now. Facebook released its intent to develop a blockchain currency and digital wallet, that's added on top of that, I would think payments would be a tech issue that would be of real concern and focus for you because it's so important to your business. And I don't have strong views on like whether Libra is the answer. But it seems to me like it's really good to have tech companies innovating in this area, because for most people, the payments experience is so shitty. It's expensive, it's cumbersome. When I go to a farmers' market with cash, I come home with like 12 nickels, and I don't know what I'm ever going to do with them again.

Mark Overbay  39:16
Yeah.

Matt Perault  39:16
So I would think you would have investment in, maybe not any one particular technology, but would like, want there to be more efficient and more secure and cheaper methods of payment. Is that something that you spend time thinking about?

Mark Overbay  39:29
It is, so we have payments coming in from seven or eight places with credit cards. And it is a lot to keep up with. And I don't know, you know, I don't know a fix for that. I can't imagine consolidating all that into one like master payment site...

Matt Perault  39:56
But innovation in the payments area that makes it easier for you and easier for customers is generally something that would be helpful...
Mark Overbay  40:03
Yes, definitely. You know, and in terms of the currency, you know, I don't care what currency we're paid in, as long as it gives us the ability to pay our vendors. And you know, and then pay us, you know, as employees.

Matt Perault  40:20
Yep.

Mark Overbay  40:21
As long as that conversion works and is easy, and it's not something we have to think hard about, then that's great.

Matt Perault  40:26
Awesome.

Mark Overbay  40:27
Yeah.

Matt Perault  40:27
Sort of from the ground up, take me through how you would think about reaching a new individual or a new market. So winters are cold in Maine. People there in the winter are going to want your delicious cocoa... Chocolate sea salt, sorry, I was using an old name... Yeah, chocolate sea salt, almond butter. You know, they will like it. There will be people there who like it. You're thinking about, you know, some of the college towns in Maine, Waterville where Colby is, or something, for instance. What happens next? How do you go and sell something to someone or some market there? Or is that not even the right process?

Mark Overbay  41:08
Let's see, I get out my vintage typewriter, and I type a letter to the mayor of that town and ask if I... no. Let's see, I'm... If given that challenge, that's not really the way I would approach it...

Matt Perault  41:27
So tell me how you would approach it. Like what? How, how do you identify a place that you think there are people who are going to like your product? And you want to get your product in their hands?

Mark Overbay  41:36
Uh huh. I don't really think about the world that way. But I think about it more like who are the retailers?

Matt Perault  41:47
Okay, so let's start there, then. How do you identify the retailers?

Mark Overbay  41:53
So yeah, taking even a step back from that... So Big Spoon Roasters, we represent a set of values, a way of doing things that is unusual in packaged food. And for the most part, people that those values and those methods resonate with are tuned into a certain set of retailers in their orbit where they can go to find those things. Yeah, there's e-commerce where people can find those things. And that's increasingly that's why we do as buys is to try to reach people there. That's why we are on Amazon Prime now. But the physical retail experience is still where most people buy their food. And there's like, you know, the indexes of specialty food retailers have natural food grocers, have natural food co-ops. There are trade shows like, the Natural Products Expo East, Expo West, there's a specialty food association of America. Every state
has specialty food associations. The membership to those associations and natural food shows are retailers. And so we can go in through a website or you can order a print membership directory of the specialty food association and have thousands of retailers in every town in America, which may or may not be a good fit. And so, you know, if we look at our sales goals, and where we want to grow and where we have very little representation, or where we have a lot of representation and want to strengthen that... That's usually the way I'll go about it. I'll look and see what stores are out there. And then if they have a website, I'll definitely check that out. If they have a social media page, I'll check that out. And see if they seem like a good fit for us. And if they do, I'll send them an e-mail and introduce myself. And if I don't hear back, I'll call. And then try to just get the right person on the phone so that I can ask if they're interested in I'll send a sample... usually when we send a sample, and not to toot our own horn, but somebody actually tastes our products then they typically want to bring our products in.

Matt Perault  42:57
Yep. Tell us a little bit about what you make... You make nut butters, you make nut butter bars, tell us about the product line.

Mark Overbay  44:17
Yeah we have two product lines as you just mentioned, fresh roasted nut butters and we call them handcrafted nut butter bars. Because they really are made by hand, our nut butters. We use fresh roasted nuts. We toast nuts on sheet pans. We roast different nuts at different temperatures. We have a nut mill that has custom milling plates on it that we can adjust the setting on to get different textures for different nut butters. The peanut butter that I made in Zimbabwe that inspired the founding of the business was a really coarse peanut butter, still spreadable, but like pretty big pieces of nuts. And I love that, so I wanted to create some nut butters like that but also some with a little bit of a finer texture as well. And so our textures are unique to the nut butter, but also I think unique to us as a business, like we don't call any of our nut butters particularly creamy or crunchy... where you know, creamy and crunchy in the industry, creamy just means it's been milled a bunch of times so super fine particle size, and crunchy means they take creamy and then throw chunks of nuts and that's fine. I mean... ours is a more uniform particle size across the nut butter... but it's a proprietary grind setting basically. And so we have lots of different recipes we make right now. 13 different nut butters and we have a classic peanut butter with fresh roasted peanuts, wildflower honey, sea salt, virgin coconut oil. One of our best selling nut butters is Chai spice, peanut almond butter blend. That's actually the recipe I created for our wedding. Because my wife, Megan, and co-founder, she loves chai tea, drinks it like almost every day, or did for years. She's moved on. She's in a coffee phase right now. And I had recently started making nut butter. And so we wanted to make wedding favors for our wedding. And I filled these little three ounce jars with Chai spice peanut almond butter to represent both of us. And the the wedding guests flipped out over it. They really did and they're like you have to start making this and selling it. And so we did and it's our best seller, I think every year since then...

Matt Perault  46:41
It might be my favorite.

Mark Overbay  46:42
Oh cool!

Matt Perault  46:42
Yeah, the Chai Spice is delicious. It's really good.

Mark Overbay  46:44
Thank you. Thank you. Yeah.
Matt Perault  46:45
And then you have, in addition to the kind of the standard line of bars and the standard line of
nut butters, you also do these exclusives... so one that you did a few months ago is the
Carolina Reaper nut butter which uses this, I think, South Carolina-born, hottest pepper in the
world, Carolina Reaper pepper. Now you've got the hazelnut line...

Mark Overbay  47:08
The chocolate chocolate chocolate?

Matt Perault  47:09
Yeah, exactly. So what are some of the exclusives that you do? How do you come up with
those ideas?

Wow.

And and then we got a lot of angry emails from people who said, "You know, come on, I just
got this. You know, I just saw this social media post about this Merge peanut butter, and you
know, my friends are sharing it. And now you're already sold out." And so we said, "okay, well,"
you know, we, we told the world that we'll make more. And so we made another batch and I
think made 300 jars and posted that the next day... it sold out in like an hour. It was like, I don't
know how long we can keep this going. But okay, let's tell everybody, let's tell him that we'll
make another batch. And so we made another batch. And it took like three hours for that to sell
out. And then finally I was like, "You know what, like, let's, let's just stop it right now." Let's tell,
thank everybody. We're sold out. We've clearly like, hit this amazing nerve with this exclusive,
you know, scarce batch thing. So I get it, but like we can't... because it was disrupting our
normal production at this point. So, okay, let's stop this. Thank everybody. Let's think about
how we can integrate some kind of small batch exclusive products into our normal production
calendar.

Yep.

Mark Overbay  50:03
And I mean, it's not rocket science. It's peanut butter science. We basically, I have this trove of
recipe ideas for nut butters...

Matt Perault  50:15
That sounds super fun...

Mark Overbay  50:16
...I have dozens of ideas for nut butters, right? So we only have so much production capacity.
So yeah, this limited batch program allows us to dip into that, which is really fun. And we have
the calendar set out for the next year for our limited batch offerings, but I'm not going to...

Matt Perault  50:26
You're not even gonna preview one?

Mark Overbay  50:36
No, that's gonna be a surprise.

Matt Perault  50:38
All right, stay tuned on on social media. Let's try some nut butter.

Mark Overbay  50:44
Yeah!

Matt Perault  50:44
Does that sounds good?

Do it.

So do we... I know, as you said, your nut butters are... emulsified oil is a key component of them. So I've seen, just from like looking at your website, it looks like the stir on top is like a key question, a question you often get asked.

Mark Overbay  51:02
Yep.

Matt Perault  51:03
So is that the is that the first step with a Big Spoon nut butter is like stirring the top?

Mark Overbay  51:08
Definitely. So the jar we just opened is very recently produced. I mean this, this was probably made. Yeah, this is made less than a week ago. And there's very little oil separation, as you can see... so what happens is with any kind of ground nuts, whether it's big particle size or small particle size, over time, the cell walls that you've broken will start to leach oil and the oil that's already leached out and emulsified, among the the bits of of nut will slowly start to rise to the top while the solids sink, that's just gravity. So that's why you know in a store you might see, in one of our jars of nut butter with the layer of oil on the top, because the oil is risen to the top and the solids have sunk down. Among those solid sinking down are also crystals of sea salt, things like chunks of ginger, things like bits of cardamom and the Chai spices, cocoa nibs in the case of our chocolate sea salt, almond butter. So to really get the experience that we designed, you need to stir from the bottom of the jar all the way to the top. If you just stir the top then the bottom is going to be super dry when you get down there and you won't have any salt at the top. You're gonna think we make a terrible product.

Matt Perault  52:31
All right, so we don't want that so would stir at the top.

Mark Overbay  52:33
Yeah, but this one is not that separated. So you don't even really need to stir it much at all.

Matt Perault  52:38
So do you want to talk us through what we're tasting?

Mark Overbay  52:42
Absolutely. So the first thing you should taste are the fresh roasted peanuts. And then you'll get a hit of salt and a roundness and a slight bit of sharpness from the honey. And then you should finish with salt as well. But the three big components - the trio of flavors with this peanut butter - are the fresh roasted peanuts, the honey and the sea salt. If if you take the honey away, yeah, it's less sweet. But we use so little honey, it's really there to, to me it just brings out the salt more. More like it's not a real honey forward flavor. And the sea salt that we use is Jacobson Sea Salt. It's incredible hand-harvested sea salt from the Oregon coast. And we exclusively use his sea salt in all our products. And we haven't always though, we couldn't afford it for a few years... But now we can and it's amazing.

Matt Perault  53:46
It's delicious.
Mark Overbay  53:47
Thank you...

Matt Perault  53:47
Straight from crushing peanuts on rocks in Zimbabwe, to a jar, to our mouths. Thank you.

Mark Overbay  53:56
Absolutely. Thank you.

Matt Perault  54:02
Thanks so much to Big Spoon co-founder, Mark Overbay, for coming on the podcast today. This has been TBD: Technology By Design, a podcast hosted by Matt Perault. Produced by Sarah Cromer, with music by Velvet Negroni.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai