

PMR 123

**Making Millions with Momma's Salad Dressing, a Conversation with
Tessemae's All-Natural Co-Founder Greg Vetter**

Tony: Hey paleo nation! I'm Tony Federico and you're listening to Paleo Magazine radio, the official podcast of the original lifestyle publication.

Everybody knows that mom does it best; whether it's her homemade lasagna, chocolate chip cookies, apple pie, or if you're Tessemae Vetter, a signature salad dressing.

As the mom of 3 active boys, Tessemae had to figure out a way to get her kids to eat their veggies. She succeeded by whipping up a simple combination of lemon juice, olive oil, mustard, and salt. Tessemae's dressing was not only a hit with her own kids, there are even instances of salad dressing theft perpetrated by her son's friends.

Hearing this story alone would be well worth your time, but what comes next is the real kicker. After years of eating the house dressing, Tessemae's oldest son Greg decided that there really was something special about that signature blend. With a bit of stage craft, Greg convinced Whole Foods, and then his mom to go into business bottling the family recipe and the rest, as they say, is history.

Today on the show I'm joined by Tessemae's all natural co-founder, Greg Vetter. In our conversation we discuss his experiences as a college athlete. The lightning bolt of inspiration that convinced him that he needed to quit his job and start Tessemae's. How he used a Tupperware of romaine lettuce to convince Whole Foods to carry their product. How he, his pregnant wife, his mom, and his brothers built the business over the course of many late nights and weekends, and what it's like now to be running a multi-million dollar company.

All right Nation, it's time to grab a fork and start digging in. Paleo Magazine Radio starts now.

He everybody welcome back to another episode of Paleo Magazine Radio. I'm here with Greg Vetter, the original founder of Tessemae's All Natural. Welcome to the show man.

Greg: Thank you for having me, I'm very excited.

Tony: Let's start with the beginning. I think that always a good place to start. What was your original interest in health and fitness and food; where did that come from?

Greg: My brothers and I; I'm one of three boys, I'm the oldest of three boys. We were just typical wild boys. We played sports every season and we were lucky enough to play in college and then professionally.

Tony: What did you play?

Greg: We played Lacrosse.

Tony: Okay, wow!

Greg: Nutrition is just such a critical piece to the overall performance of an athlete. Your in college doing the normal college deal, you start to figure out really, really quickly that what you eat, how you sleep, how you act really affects your performance.

Tony: Were you trying to pull the late night parties and all nighters and then get out there and play the next day? Did you have a couple come to Jesus moments?

Greg: Yeah-never games. We were very disciplined about not drinking and partying before games. Definitely in college, prior to practices and whatnot. If there was a party we were definitely going. You really start to learn about hydration and sleep, and when should you drink versus not, and is a a 48 hour rule, or a 72 rule and what does that do to your overall performance? That snowballed into all of college and then I passed that down to my brothers, and then they implemented it as much as they could. We continue to just continue and research and build off of all of that.

Tony: I'm curious. What did those early kind of rules look like? Obviously those things change as you get older, but I'm curious as to what that looked like for you in those college days.

Greg: I would say the big thing that changed was just the massive consumption of dairy. We would just crush whole milk, whey protein, in massive quantities.

Tony: I'm sure your mom loved going grocery shopping.

Greg: I mean, we had so much food. It was caloric, that was the focus. It wasn't just ... Now we are very much, "Okay, let's look at what we're eating, the macros, the calories, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom." Back then it was just, "Let's eat as healthy as we can and then just as much as we can consume."

Tony: Any epic food moments that stand out in your memory?

Greg: Epic food moments. In terms of making the wrong decision?

Tony: You know you hear ... I've got some clients who have kids that are football players or basketball players and they have these sort of team dinners and I just hear these stories about they're just putting down meatball subs and they're just crushing all these, like you were saying, high calorie foods. I'm just thinking to myself, I couldn't even imagine getting up off the couch, let alone competing with that sitting in my stomach. I think sometimes it's just a different mindset with athletes.

Greg: Our team dinner, I look back on it now and I literally don't know how I played in games the next day. We would go to this little Italian place and get fettuccine bolognese. We would all split veggie pizza, that was our idea of being healthy.

Tony: Oh yeah, the old veggies on the pizza of course.

Greg: Right. We would crush a calzone afterwards, eat the bread that was there and the defense had a dinner together before every game. You look back on it now and I can remember just being very tired the next day and just feeling slow. As the game goes your adrenaline is pumping and everything else, and you kind of wear out of it, but you know it has been a journey for sure.

Tony: Yeah, and you certainly have youth on your side I think at that point. Of course like everybody time goes on, and I'm assuming you concluded your college sports days and started getting out into the working world. Did you have an idea of starting a food company or what was your original professional path?

Greg: So right out of school I was doing employee benefits and I was playing professional lacrosse. I did that for a couple years.

Tony: So you're still athletic, still training.

Greg: Yep, still training, still evolving the eating side of all of it. When I came home from work one day, and the salad dressing was missing from my house. I had never planned to start a food company, but the universe just shot a lightening bolt down there and I said, "Hey, if a man's going to steal another man's salad dressing, I'm going to bottle it."

Tony: Tell me the whole story there. First of all, this is a homemade salad dressing. Is this something you made or your mom made?

Greg: This has been the same dressing that my brothers and I have eaten since we were 10 years old.

Tony: This is like the family/house recipe.

Greg: Exactly. Which is now our lemon-garlic dressing.

Tony: Nice. So you had your own personal stash and there's a thief I guess?

Greg: Yep. Two liter bottle and had a nice little theft in the house. Tracked down one of my buddies and he took it and I couldn't believe it.

Tony: What did he say? Did he -

Greg: It was awesome. I was like, "Dude, what are you doing?" He's like, "I just woke up this morning jonesing for your mom's dressing and I knew the code to your house. I came in and I took it and I'm over just eating salad right now."

Tony: Totally unashamed.

Greg: Right. He was like, "Hey man, let's have lunch together." It was pretty funny.

Tony: That was the thing where you're like, "Okay, if he was willing to go to those lengths to swipe it from the fridge, we've got something good here."

Greg: Well think about that. Take a minute and think about it. Have you ever cared about salad dressing to the point where you break into somebody's house?

Tony: Would I commit a felony for the sake of salad dressing? I've never done that, no.

Probably I'm imagining it's pretty good. Tell me a little bit about that dressing. How did your mom make it? What was the sort of secret sauce, if you will?

Greg: It's super simple. Olive oil, lemon, garlic, homemade mustard, sea-salt. That's it. Yeah, it was the topic of conversation at every tail gate that we ever went to. It was, "Make sure your mom brings the dressing." We've just kind of keep things with food as simple as possible. That has all evolved into where we are today.

Tony: I'm sure there's a lot that kind of happened between that pilfering of the salad dressing and Tessemae's becoming a full-fledged company. What did that look like? What did that process ... How did that unfold?

Greg: I just started cold-calling the local Annapolis Whole Foods.

Tony: Really? So you just went right there.

Greg: Yep. Just went for it. I finally got a guy on the phone and I told him that I was a food manufacturer and I wanted them to carry my -

Tony: Nice, bold move.

Greg: I got a meeting and I walked in with a Tupperware container. It was just romaine lettuce with lemon-garlic dressing on it. The guy looked at me like I was smoking crack. Opens the Tupperware container, licks the dressing off of the lettuce and looks at me and goes, "You have something really special here." I was like, "Cool!" I got a meeting with the regional office. We got in for the grand opening of the Annapolis Whole Foods May 1st, 2009.

Tony: At that point, once he sort of recognized the quality of the product, was it a mad dash to get a production run going?

Greg: No doubt about it and I think that's the best way to describe it. They gave us 200 pages to fill out to be a food manufacturer and so I started Googling my way through these documents. We became an actual food manufacturer. We got a certified kitchen, which was a rib restaurant in Annapolis.

Tony: Nice.

Greg: We would make it at night. We would hand-fill all the bottles and hand label them and hand wax it. I guess we had that meeting in February. February, March, April it took about 3.5 months and we were ready to roll.

Tony: Who was working with you on this at the time? I know your brothers are involved in the business, was that kind of a day one thing?

Greg: There were in college still. In the beginning it was them helping me on the weekends. It was my mom helping me. It was my dad helping me. It was my wife, she was pregnant at the time with our first child, she was helping. I had anybody that was willing to help make salad dressing from 11 PM until 3 AM whisking dressing in bowls at a rib restaurant.

Tony: Now were you still holding down your other job or had you gone all in?

Greg: In the beginning, obviously this is before we had our first demo. Yeah I still had my job, I was still playing lacrosse. When we did the first demo we ended up setting a national sales record for Whole Foods.

Tony: Oh wow!

Greg: We sold 660 bottles in 5 days in one store.

Tony: An in-store demo, just in case somebody is not familiar with it, that's when a representative of a company comes out and they're kind of sampling their products, correct?

Greg: Absolutely. It was me standing there-day 1. Then I brought my brothers out and we demoed for 4 straight days and it was crazy. We literally built our business off of doing in-store demos across the country.

Tony: Wow. At what point, I guess at that point really is when you realized that you had a full-fledged opportunity to have a business and do it full time. Did you make that mental switch at that point? Is that when it really clicked?

Greg: The mental switch was definitely made after that first day. I bankrolled it myself. We bootstrapped it for the first 2 years just out of my income that I had, and then we liquidated our 401k's and then we took a bunch of credit cards out and so on and so forth. Year one it was, I still had my full-time job, we were doing it. My brother graduated, my brother Bryan. He started with us officially May 1, 2010. That's where we really started to get the mojo going because he was our first full-time employee and we grew from there.

Tony: What was the biggest challenge that first year? Were there any sort of make it moments or spots that you thought you might not pull out of?

Greg: Yeah for sure. I remember going out to breakfast with the CFO of this massive construction and development company, just looking for guidance. I was 26 years old and I was just trying to talk to people that had done it before me. It was just like, "Hey, this is what we're doing." He sat there and he goes, "If you have something that people want to buy, you need to never ever lose that momentum, because people will spend a lifetime trying to figure out, for example, a bottle of dressing that people actually want to purchase from you." I called my brother, this was probably in March or 2010. "Hey man, you're either going to come on board here full-time or we're going to have to shut this thing down, because I can't do it myself at night with a full-time job, bankroll the whole thing, and just do it all from A-Z. He's like, "All right, I'll do it." That was really the first make or break moment.

Tony: How did that feel I guess at that point when you had that conversation?

Greg: It got very real. We had to pay him a salary -

Tony: He wasn't going to be an intern?

Greg: Yeah, nope. We had to ... We were now buying raw materials at a mass

scale. We were growing stores on a weekly basis. We were doing so much and this was all in addition to everything else we were doing. The whole mentality of burn the ships that's really how we viewed it. We had to make it work or we were all going to be in some very serious trouble.

- Tony: You got your brother on board and rallied. I guess that was really the turning point when the company became, like you said, it got real.
- Greg: It was my brother and my wife. My wife did all of the invoicing and making sure that we were buying all the raw materials and they were arriving and doing all of that stuff. Bryan was really making it and delivering it. Combining all of that with demos on the weekend it really started to become real.
- Tony: At what point did you give up your "regular" job and come on board as well?
- Greg: That was, I think it was January ... It was a year and a half in. It was January of 2011, or December of 2010. It was right when my second child was born. That got extra real. Then I had 2 kids and here we go. Salad dressing full time, no stable income, let's try and get it done.
- Tony: Yeah man, I'm just thinking to myself, if I were in that position, there would certainly be some stress there. There would certainly be some concern. But I'm sure it was pretty exciting too. If we're looking back now with the benefit of hind-sight, it worked.
- Greg: Yeah. It's one of those things, it's just a struggle. The struggle is so purifying in a sense and you evolve at such a faster rate because you're putting forth such a crazy effort. You look back and you're, "Yeah obviously that was the right decision." You try and look forward as much as you can and it looks very promising and bright, but you just have to live in the day and you've got to fight that fight and do everything you need to do to continue growing and to not lose momentum and just kind of build the brand.
- Tony: Do you feel like you're able to keep your own personal health in line at that time? I know there are sacrifices that inevitably have to be made and for a lot of people, when work ramps up, when they're business is coming into life of it's own, you know there own personal health can suffer and you're a new parent on top of it.
- Greg: I've always tried to maintain and keep my health. That to me, if I'm stressed out, I don't drink, I'll go for a run or I'll go to the gym. That has always been something that I've done. I've been lucky enough to make that just a very critical part of this journey, which is keeping health and leading by example and trying to represent the brand to the best of my ability. That's who we are. Our mission statement is to simplify food and amplify life. If things get stressful and if I start eating Twinkies and chugging brown liquor, I don't know if I'm really representing who we are.
- Tony: Sure. Yeah it's not just a ... You're not doing it just to make money off of a market that is out there, this is something that comes from within you. It's an expression of how you live.

- Greg: There's no doubt about it. It's cool because our culture it really represents that. When people come and visit our manufacturing facility, which we call the tree fort, they walk in and they're like, "I can't believe this is real. I can't believe you guys make salad dressing and condiments out of this facility with music and bright colors, and people that are smiling but working really, really hard." We live and breathe it. We try to represent the brand to the best of our ability.
- Tony: Obviously you started off bottling in a rib shacks off hours. Tell me a little bit more about your new facility and just kind of where it is and what it looks like. You mentioned it's got a different vibe than I guess a normal manufacturing facility.
- Greg: Yeah, it's 36,000 square feet in Essex, Maryland; which is essentially Baltimore. It's 7 miles outside of Baltimore city. It is a representation of Tessemae's. We have I guess 10 offices in the front, and they're all painted label colors. We have a big group eating place. We have a test kitchen. All of our manufacturing is done here. We have a little retail shop here. It's just who we are. We moved in here I guess 2012 and we were only in 2 regions of Whole Foods. At that point it was about 50 stores. I go off and sign a lease, a 5 year lease for this 36,000 square foot spot where we could not afford. We could only afford about 8,000 square feet and we just said, "There's no way that we're going to be able to be the company that we need to be without this place." We just doubled down and said, "All right, this is either going to work or we're going bankrupt very quickly."
- Tony: What was your strategy really to make that space work? Were you still focusing on Whole Foods? You mentioned the in-store demos, were you sending out representatives to spread that throughout the Whole Foods nationwide chain?
- Greg: Yep. We went region by region. Every region we got into we then hired somebody there to kind of represent that region and build out the demo force. That whole model has evolved a lot. I think we over demoed a lot in the beginning. Our brand has grown, our company has grown, we've evolved. We've evolved about the way we think about our marketing tactics in-store and just across the county and it's just been a wild journey.
- Tony: Now I remember the first time I saw a Tessemae's salad dressing. Now, to give you a little background on myself, I've been in the fitness industry for over 10 years at this point. I've been reading labels and really always hoping to see something that actually has real ingredients on the back. I don't know how many thousands of salad dressings I'd scrutinized at all sorts of grocery stores in my time. I had this moment where I'd go over to the refrigerated section, I'd kind of look over and see this bottle that's got this weird, sort of whacked cap on it, and a little anchor on the front. I'm like okay, "This is kind of interesting." Caught my attention. Pull it down fully expecting canola oil, xantham gum, you know, all that kind of stuff. I see olive oil, I see lemon, I see garlic. I'm like, "Whoa!" This is the first time I've actually seen a real salad dressing like the one my grandmother would have made, at a store.
- Tell me a little bit about the feedback you get from your customers. I'm sure other people are equally as blown away as I was.

Greg: We have a whole wall in our manufacturing, it's a hallway, in our manufacturing facility that's called the love wall. It's a wall of thank you notes. I've got like 500 and counting. That's probably about 5% of the Facebook messages, and Twitter responses, and Instagram comments that are just so amazing that we print them out and put them on the wall, just saying, "Thank you for making something that doesn't suck." That was the mindset behind it, right? If we do something the way it's always been done, then we're going to get the same results that those people have always got. We didn't want to do that. We wanted to do something ... Now I'm about to have my 4th child, or my wife is, not me.

Tony: Yeah, got to give credit where credit is due.

Greg: Right. It's like, my kids have to be able to eat this. This has ... People regardless of their nutritional background, or allergies, or nutritional habits, or sensitivities everybody should be able to grab a bottle and feel super proud and trust that we're making the right decisions from a food manufacturing perspective to put in that bottle, that they can now enjoy it and pass it to their friends and tell them a story about it.

Tony: Now do you ever have any feedback from customers that isn't so positive? Because I think on some level people expect that salad dressing that is on the store shelf, it's not refrigerated, it's super homogenized, it's like that industrial strength salad dressing. Do you have to deal with those expectations is what I'm saying.

Greg: Usually not from the consumer, but from the retailers yes. It's such a new thing that's going on in food, with products that have a story and clean ingredients and cold-filling and all of this crazy stuff that is happening that has never happened before. People know about it, but their habits haven't fully changed. You'll have a conversation with somebody and they'll reference Hidden Valley Ranch or something. It's just like, "We're not talking about the same stuff here."

Tony: Right. It's basically a different language.

Greg: Right. I mean does everybody in the world like Tessemae's? I don't know. I would say no. I would say 8 out of 10 people love it. Some people still love Hidden Valley Ranch. If people love Hidden Valley Ranch, 9 times out of 10 they're not going to love Tessemae's for who we are and what we're doing.

Tony: Right. I think that if you're getting an 8 out of 10 that's not bad.

Greg: I would agree with you.

Tony: Tell me about some of your products. Obviously you started with that original dressing that was your mom's secret recipe. How has the brand-line expanded? What are some of your favorites?

Greg: I'm obsessed with our condiments right now. We make a fresh ketchup and a fresh barbecue, and fresh mustard. We have fresh mayonnaise now. That stuff, I have kids, if I can't get them to eat the kale salad in front of them, we're switching to chicken nuggets pretty quickly. It has changed the game for dinnertime because it's just so good. I mean our

buffalo sauce I could put that literally on anything and eat it.

Tony: That's definitely, hands down, that's my favorite right there. I think that is the everything sauce. Everything tastes better with that buffalo.

Greg: I mean we were eating it today at lunch. We're testing out a new ranch mayonnaise. Taking the spices of a ranch dressing and putting them in mayonnaise. We put it on a little hard boiled egg and then drizzled some buffalo sauce on top of it. It was just out of this world.

Tony: I'm all in on that. Awesome man! Thank you so much for coming on the show and talking about your company. Sharing some stories of how you traveled this path of entrepreneurship and seeking to make something different that you would be proud to serve your own kids.

Greg: I appreciate you having me man, it's been great.

Tony: That was Greg Vetter, co-founder of Tessemae's All Natural. You can find out more about Tessemae's, including their new line of condiments, by going to tessemaes.com.

On next week's show I'm joined by David and Robert Cordtz, founders of the award winning Sonoma Cider Company. Creators of all natural, gluten free craft apple ciders. Here's a preview.

David Cordtz: Well hard cider has been a part of this country since its inception. Prior to Prohibition, hard cider was the leading alcoholic beverage consumed in the United States. I think Prohibition kind of put a damper on it, like it did with wine and other things, but cider was a little slower to come back. It's been adopted by the Millennials, the demographic born in the 80's and 90's. Along with craft beer they've chosen cider as one of their beverages of choice. That's really the thing that's been a major factor in the cider category exploding in the last 3 or 4 years in the U. S

Tony: To learn more about how the Sonoma Cider Company crafts their award winning hard apple ciders, you'll have to tune into next week's show. Until then, you can check out our full archive of Paleo Magazine Radio episodes by clicking the radio tab on paleomagonline.com. If you noticed a few issues with paleomagonline.com, just wanted to let you know that we've been working on some major overhauls that will significantly improve the function of the site. As it usually goes with projects such as this, we'll be experiencing some temporary issues here and there. Please bear with us during the transition. We're working hard to make the site better than ever before and appreciate your understanding.

Paleo Magazine Radio is brought to you by the Paleo Media Group. Our show and music feature the song, "Light it Up", by Morgan Heritage and Joe Mersa Marley. Paleo Magazine Radio is produced by me and on behalf of everyone at Paleo Magazine, thank you for listening.