



# Small Business Spotlight

## Tender Heart ditches donuts for gluten free cookies

By Jessica MacLean for the City of Sedona



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SEDONA, Ariz. – "I started off in Massachusetts as a donut shop manager. I was about 265 pounds." After an online search suggested cutting out bread, Joshua Vailokaitis, **Tender Heart Bakery** owner, did just that. "Within three months, I'd lost over 100 pounds."

He moved to Colorado, then Arizona, and was studying to be a health coach. Discovering a knack for baking vegan, gluten free cookies changed everything. Since Vailokaitis was an Indian Gardens employee at the time, they were the first location to start selling his cookies, followed by Interdependence Natural Foods and Lulu's Chocolate Lounge, which became Synergy Kitchen and Lounge.

"From there we spring boarded. At home I was probably doing about 20 boxes a week. Two years later, we're making roughly 400 to 500 boxes a week. As we expand and get into Natural Grocers, we'll probably reach about 2,000 boxes per week," says Vailokaitis.

Tender Heart Bakery is joining forces with Hortensia Martinez of Core Probiotic Foods to open a gluten free, vegan kitchen and grab and go location in west Sedona. They share the space at 1710 State Route 89-A, each using half of the kitchen. Prior to his new digs, the commercial kitchen at Synergy Lounge and Kitchen gave Vailokaitis extra space for storage, a large refrigerator to cool his cookies, and bigger

kitchen space than his home kitchen.

"It really propelled my business forward and got me to an amazing spot," says Vailokaitis. "Now that I have samples into Natural Grocers corporate and I've started to expand my market towards Prescott and Phoenix, I had to move out of the Synergy kitchen to allow someone else to come in, so that I could have even more space."

The large commercial oven at his new location has space to bake four trays of cookies at a time, increasing production even further.

"I'm shipping online as well, which didn't start until Synergy. I didn't have the space at home," Vailokaitis recounts. "I ship online through Shopify, across the United States."

Filled with ingredients like almond butter,

ingredients and smiled as one should when discussing their grandma. "I created Ginger Pecan cookies, which sparked me the very next day to ask what happens when I take the ginger out. So, I came up with Cinnamon Walnut cookies. Now we have eight different flavors of cookies."

Tender Heart Bakery brought on a team that sells cookie flavors like Chocolate Peanut Butter at farmers' markets, including the Sedona Community Farmers' Market, the Flagstaff market, and a market in Scottsdale.

As the company grows, the entrepreneur hopes to eventually move from 1099 independent contractors to having a team on the payroll, as well as giving employees more responsibilities and hours.



*Tender Heart Bakery Owner, Joshua Vailokaitis, pictured with Core Probiotic Foods Owner Hortensia Martinez (left), and team members Jacqueline Rose Kallina and Serena Hehnke.*

almond flour, and maple syrup, Tender Heart cookies are soft and wholesome.

"Salted Maple was our original product." Vailokaitis wanted to tie the energy of his second flavor into where he started: Indian Gardens. "As kind of a thanks to them, I started using an espresso that they roast themselves to make an Espresso cookie. A double chocolate espresso with ground up espresso beans and cacao powder."

"From there I sent some cookies home to grandma in Massachusetts as my first shipping test. She sent me a little hand-written note that says, 'Josh, I really loved your cookies. Can you make me ginger cookies?' Of course, I need to do this for grandma," the entrepreneur stirred

A budding relationship with a farmer in the Verde Valley may soon provide a local source for pecans. Big, buttery, blond, grade A pecans from Camp Verde speak for themselves. The region is so ideal for growing pecans that the town holds an annual Spring Heritage Pecan and Wine Festival.

"That will allow me to start producing pecan milk, pecan butter, and pecan ice cream," Vailokaitis explains. "We'll probably start doing bottled alternative milk drinks: hemp seed milk and almond milk."

From weddings to birthday parties, Tender Heart Bakery is also getting into the cake baking world. But this world is vegan and dairy free.

"I thought it would be fun to do birthday parties

for kids with ice cream and cake, all vegan and gluten free," says Vailokaitis. "The grand dream is to keep making cookie factories, one in every state. I'd love to have one in Massachusetts to see my family."

When initially establishing his business, Vailokaitis contacted the Small Business Development Center at Yavapai College.

"The woman I was working with helped me with everything. Such a blessing. She helped me set up my LLC, look at the local laws, get in touch with the health department. I got introduced to a lot of learning programs. My favorite was a three-day [Business Bootcamp, hosted by the city of Sedona], kind of a crash course of creating your business plan. At the end you do a presentation on your business. That's where I met Molly Spangler with city of Sedona and Marci Taylor with Sedona XYZ. I formed a great network of people. [The city] has always been very helpful if I have any questions with how to move forward and all the different courses. If it wasn't for those programs, I don't think I'd be here today."

As a finalist at the Moonshot AZ Pioneer Pitch in April, Vailokaitis competed against other Sedona and Verde Valley entrepreneurs while improving his pitch and business development with mentors. Helpful courses took place for one month in preparation of the main event.

The Sedona Economic Development Department helps businesses create and keep jobs and opportunities in our community. For information on revolving loans, business education, and other business support resources, contact Sedona Economic Development Director Molly Spangler at [mspanglers@sedonaaz.gov](mailto:mspanglers@sedonaaz.gov).



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