

# The Connection

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Photo by Michael O'Connell

Chris Capell

After 20 years of being a graphic artist, Chris Capell was looking for a way to spice up his life through a career change.

"After 9/11, that was the point where it seemed to turn," said Capell, sitting at the counter of his partially renovated Fairfax home.



With a the glut of artists on the market and the advent of computer programs like Pagemaker and Photoshop making it easier for businesses to do their own design work, Capell knew it was time to change.

"I realized that if people didn't want to pay me to develop their image and develop their company, I'd do my own," he said. "I decided to pick my own favorite passion and kind of created the company around that."

Capell's passion was barbecue and the company that he helped to create was Dizzy Pig, which produces dry rubs for grilling meat, chicken and fish.

Dizzy Pig's 10 rubs boast enticing names like Tsunami Spin, Dizzy Dust and Jamaican Fire Walk and are sold through its Web site [[www.dizzypigbbq.com](http://www.dizzypigbbq.com)] and select outlets across the country.

"We mix all of the seasonings here in our basement," said Capell, assuring that USDA makes regular visits to his production facility. "We're still a teeny company, but we have customers in every state and stores in almost every state are carrying our stuff."

As a small company, Dizzy Pig has relied on some word of mouth to slowly expand its reach. Capell said that often it's the customers who provide leads on possible retail outlets. "They'll send us the stores they'd like to see it in and we'll send them a kit."

Locally, Dizzy Pig is sold at Whole Foods Markets. Capell has even put on a grilling demonstration at the Whole Foods in Fair Lakes.&lt;b>

ANOTHER WAY &lt;b>that Capell promotes his business is by entering barbecue competitions. The impetus for this strategy came from Dizzy Pig's need for a little self-affirmation.

"People say they like it, but we started doing competitions to see if people were lying to us," said Capell. "We wanted to find out how we did in a blind judging situation. Using all our rubs on the competition food, turning it in, in a blind box, where the judges can't tell who it is. That's how we'll really know. That's how we did the first competition."

Since then, the Dizzy Pig barbecue team has won 10 grand championships. Up to two years ago, the team was averaging four or five wins per year. "Half of the contests we we're entering, we were winning," said Capell. "We had a pretty good stretch."

Things were put on hold for a bit about two years ago, when a fire damaged Capell's home, where Dizzy Pig's two full-time — including him — and one part-time employees work. According to Capell, an ember tumbled out of the vent in his cooker, which was located down his driveway, a place that he's been grilling at for eight years. The ember blew 20 feet into the garage, setting it on fire.

"I was inside the house," said Capell. "The fire marshal said, 'My God, everything had to line up just perfect for that to happen.'"

Despite the setback, Dizzy Pig stayed in business and eventually returned to competition.

ON OCT. 24 &and 25, the Dizzy Pig team will be in Lynchburg, Tenn., for the 20th Annual Jack Daniel's World Championship Invitational Barbecue.

"It's really the big game as far as barbecue competitions go," said Elizabeth A. Lewis., judge and media relations representative for the event.

Each year, 20,000-25,000 barbecue enthusiasts descend on the small Tennessee town of 361, which is more famous for its whiskey than its barbecue.

This will be Dizzy Pig's fifth year in a row in Lynchburg, having earned an invitation with a victory at the New Jersey state championship.

"It's a very prestigious competition, with 60-65 domestic and 10-20 international entries each year," said Lewis. Over \$30,000 in cash and prizes will be presented. The top six finishers in each of the categories receive a jug.

"We have two jugs for sauce and we've got a sixth place in ribs and chicken," said Capell. "We've gotten an award every year, but as far as overall, we've usually been right in the middle of the pack. Hopefully, things will be a little better this year."

Aside from the competition, the Jack Daniel's World Championship includes performances by cloggers and musicians, artisans, games and activities for children.

"It's bigger than Christmas in Lynchburg," said Lewis.

When Capell is not competing or mixing dry rubs, he's strategizing on how to take his basement company to the next level.

"We've got a lot of interest internationally — Australia, Denmark, Germany," he said. "That's my next goal, to get some distributors set up overseas and start shipment out that way." In the meantime, he anticipates staying in the basement for another year.

"One thing I found out early is that you've got to sell a bunch of rub to make any money," said Capell.