

JAKOB'S BASLER LECKERLY

TAKING OVER A SWISS LEGACY COOKIE COMPANY

*An Interview with Andreas Kuster,
owner of Jakob's Basler Leckerly, Switzerland*

It can't be easy taking on a new business where the product not only has a long and storied history but is also part of a nation's cultural heritage. Just ask Andreas and Charlotte Kuster who in early 2017, decided to purchase Jakob's Basler Leckerly, Switzerland's oldest cookie-making company.

The company's official founding dates to 1753, however, it's true roots go back even further. There was a time when the Basler Leckerly cookies were produced by people in their homes. However, the local guilds determined that only coffee shops and bakeries would be permitted to sell these treats on a commercial basis. If you search hard enough, you can find a write-up about the company that predates their 1753 founding. Jakob's Basler Leckerly received a gold medal in competition

in the 19th century and got recommended in the 1844 Baedeker Switzerland travel guide.

Today, Andreas and Charlotte continue the rich history and tradition that goes into producing these cookies. Their goal is to give a breath of fresh air to tradition and to build on a world-famous name.

Their four Leckerly varieties continue to be hand-made in the factory each day, using select raw materials such as honey, almonds, flour, sugar, candied fruit and spices.

Recently Tharawat Magazine had the opportunity to sit down with Andreas and talk about the company history, what it's like to be in business with your spouse, and what the future has in store for this iconic cookie company.



PICTURE:
Charlotte and Andreas Kuster,
courtesy of Jakob's Basler Leckerly

The Basler Leckerly is a treat known by just about everyone in Switzerland. But for readers around the world, tell us a little bit more about what the core products are of this huge Swiss legacy that you've taken on.

Jakob's Basler Leckerly has been producing cookies for 265 years. The Basler Leckerly is a very traditional cookie which was invented in the 17th century. It was a time when suddenly sugar, almonds, candied lemon and orange peel as well as spices were more easily available to consumers. People in the city of Bern or in some parts of Germany developed a gingerbread type cookie. But in Basel, we developed something which is even better than gingerbread.

The people in Basel started to make these cookies in their homes and sold them in the streets to tourists in the 17th century. Often these were sold by families who were trying to generate a side income. The guilds who controlled Basel at the time decided they would not allow private people to sell and produce cookies for the public. That was the time our company became bigger and bigger. 265 years later, here we still are!

You come from a traditional corporate career and so does your wife Charlotte. Did you know anything about cookies when you took over this business?

I will give you two answers. From a personal point of view, every Basel family is producing these cookies at home. So, growing up, I knew how exceptional Leckerly taste, how to make them and what the ingredients were – honey,

almonds, orange peel, lemon peel and spices. From a business point of view, the clear answer is 'No', I had absolutely no idea. My wife was working in the communication & marketing department of The Coca-Cola Company Switzerland and on Swiss television's food channels.

What happened to the previous owners and why did they let you come in and take over?

About four years ago we moved back to Basel after living in New York and Zürich for many years and I was looking for companies that had a legacy to take on and that I can continue. So in March 2016, my wife encouraged me to call this woman who was the owner of Jakob's Basler Leckerly. I called her and said 'I hope I'm not overwhelming you with my question but I'm interested if you would consider selling your company'. She said she was interested. And that was the moment when I got really, really nervous. I was prepared for her to hang up. But I wasn't really prepared for a yes.

I think the reason why my wife and I were successful is that we took the first meeting with the previous owner together, as an entrepreneurial couple. She had a few candidates to whom she was interested in selling. But she said that when she saw us walking into the office it reminded her of her husband and herself when they took on the company. She wanted to find someone who would grow the business but also who would run it as a family business with the same dedication and passion as they did.



PICTURE:

*The preparation of the sugar icing,
courtesy of Jakob's Basler Leckerly*

PICTURE:

Cutting of the Leckerly cookies, courtesy of Jakob's Basler Leckerly.



“When we took over, we were delivering our cookies to five resellers (...) Today, we have more than 20.”

You're a first-time entrepreneur taking over a legacy company. What are the things that have been easy and what are the things that have been hard?

As you mention, this company has a huge legacy. So we had the opportunity to build on what was already there. However, the flip-side to that coin was a lack of modernisation. The newest machine 15 months ago was 50 years old. The company didn't own a computer. The company acquired its first computer the last year. Beyond that, it didn't have standard procedures. For example, if there were any issue and they had to do a product recall, they wouldn't know what batch the cookies were from. Until recently our orders came in through a fax machine. Now we've introduced standardised procedures, and we have harmonised branding. There's still a long way to go but we're heading in the right direction.

When we took over, we were delivering our cookies to five resellers who placed the brand in the airport stores and a few small fine-food stores. Today, we have more than 20 resellers with two significant fine-food store chains in Switzerland. We have a clear branding strategy which goes nicely with larger fine food and gourmet stores.

How is your marriage after you started working together?

This was an eye-opening moment for us. We have a very good marriage, we get along extremely well. With the notable exception of when we are both

here at work. We can discuss strategy or operational topics at home or outside without problems, but when we're here in the company at the same time, it doesn't work. Both of us get too engaged. So we had to figure out how we would split up the responsibilities.

The added challenge was that we had our baby right around the time we took over the company. It was like having two babies at the same time. After Charlotte's maternity leave, we divided up what she takes care of and what I take care of. My wife is focused particularly on social media, communication & marketing. I'm here on a day-to-day basis, executing overall business operations. Having this separation is working out very well.

How competitive is the cookie market?

I would say the cookie market in Switzerland is stable. There are a few elements of the cookie market that are growing. The Fine Food manufactured cookies are growing faster than the other. Switzerland has a slight population growth and we have a nice GDP growth.

We have a brand which has not been seen on the market for many years. It's kind of like if you have a painting from a famous artist that hasn't been on the market for the past 50 years and then it reappears. Initially, people are interested in it. Whether they remain interested in it is a different question. What is helping us is the quality of our cookies and that our main competitor is a large industrial cookie producer. They've moved it from

PICTURE:

Carefully hand-wrapped boxes,
courtesy of Jakob's Basler Leckerly

“We are really excited about building up this market, but also in building the infrastructure to be successful in the long run.”

the premium segment into more of the standard segment. Our market is the premium market. We haven't advertised our cookies for the past 80 years and the company is still in business.

Beyond that, we're looking to increase our reputation in the city of Basel, which is where we are best known. We have so much untapped potential in the city so we're focusing our efforts here for the near future. We will then start expanding our company in Switzerland and abroad. By then, we'll have the foundation with end to end processes, building on the impressive history, strengthened and more modern business habits which will enable Jakob's Basler Leckerly to grow further.

Are you going to bring more cookies to your range?

We are currently producing four different cookies. The nice thing about our company is we have one recipe out of each century our company existed. The oldest cookie that we are still producing today is a recipe from J.J. Steiger, a previous owner who lived from 1736 to 1813. We have a recipe out of the 19th century which features sugar icing, orange and lemon peel and a variety of spices. We added a chocolate Leckerly in the 20th century as well as an almond cookie that has more than 50% almonds. We will add another cookie recipe in the 21st century.

I should also mention that Jakob's Basler Leckerly is the oldest chocolate

producer in Switzerland. We have an advertisement for chocolate from 1804, which is about 15 years older than Cailler who claims to be the oldest chocolate manufacturer in our country. But for the near future, we will likely not focus on chocolate, as our cookies offer enough potential.

What is your and Charlotte's vision for Jakob's Basler Leckerly?

Just 15 months ago, the company was sort of an unsophisticated bakery store with four exquisite products. And we're now on the path to develop into a fully-fledged cookie company, with a proper identity, proper branding, and a distribution network which is growing more and more every day. Looking ahead, we need to make sure we have the capacity with an infrastructure suitable for the 21st century. We are really excited about building up this market, but also in building the infrastructure to be successful in the long run. How annoying would it be if our sales exploded and we could not keep up producing the cookies? So we have to think about how we do that today, not in two or three years.