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Q&A with David Rutkauskas

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TULSA — After he left college to enter the world of entrepreneurship, David Rutkauskas' father was skeptical.

"It was a risk at the time," Rutkauskas said. "My dad was hesitant because he wanted me to be the first Rutkauskas to get a degree from college. I told him, 'If I don't make this successful for you, I'll go back and get my degree.' He said, 'OK, that's fair.'"



So he left — and he never went back.

In 1996, Rutkauskas and his wife, Camille, saw a void in the fast-casual eating arena, so they started

Camille's Sidewalk Cafe. Two years later, they began selling franchises.

As of last week, they had 111 franchises in 38 states, including Puerto Rico, and 1,000 franchises under contract. This is also the first year Camille's was named one of America's top restaurant chains by Restaurants and Institutions magazine. Camille's was No. 313 on the list.

"We open one every six days somewhere in the world," he said. "We're going to be in all states and throughout the world in 10 or 12 years."

And Rutkauskas isn't slowing down. He's busy with two other fast-casual franchise concepts, Coney Beach, a gourmet hot dog and hamburger chain that opened this summer in Tulsa, and FreshBerry Natural Frozen Yogurt, which will open in eight weeks. Both concepts and Camille's are under parent company Beautiful Brands International, which Rutkauskas formed in 2006. He is now president and chief executive officer.

Rutkauskas' next plans are to launch at least three additional fast-casual chains, including a salad franchise, a barbecue franchise and a pizza franchise.

Rutkauskas recently sat down with *The Oklahoman* to talk about his early aspirations to become an entrepreneur. The following is an edited transcript of the conversation.

Q: *I'm sure you get this all the time, but how do you pronounce your last name?*

A: (laughing) It's *Rut-koss-kuss*.

Q: *What is its origin?*

A: Well, it's very interesting. I'm Lithuanian. My grandparents — my dad's mother and father — immigrated to the United States in 1918 on a boat to Ellis Island. They settled in New York City for about four years. They didn't speak English, and they didn't have any money when they got here. They eventually settled in Pittsburgh.

My grandfather would always tell me, because he came from a communist country at the time, 'David,

this is the greatest country in the world. You're free to be whatever you want to be. You could be president of the United States. You could be an astronaut. You could be a baseball player. You could own your own business.'

Now, looking back at it, I think that that made an impression on me. I really do. I think having immigrants as grandparents has helped me to be a more successful entrepreneur.

Q: How long have you lived in Tulsa?

A: I've been here my whole life. My father, Otto, was born in Pittsburgh and grew up very, very poor and became a school-boy athlete in Pittsburgh. Tulsa University signed him to a football scholarship in 1950. He took the train to northeastern Oklahoma and in the spring of 1950, came to Tulsa and saw how beautiful and green and clean and how nice everybody was.

He tells the story he got off the train, kissed the ground and said, 'I'm never leaving this place.' And he didn't. He met my mother, who was a native Tulsan girl, at Tulsa University. I came around in 1961.

Q: Where did you go to college?

A: I went to college at Oral Roberts University (on a baseball scholarship). I'm an only child. I was real close to my mom and dad, and I love Tulsa. I won't ever leave Tulsa.

Q: What was your major?

A: I studied business, but I probably did a lot more chasing girls and more partying than really studying, looking back on it. I left my junior year to strike out on my own, so I don't have a degree.

Q: When did you know you wanted to be an entrepreneur?

A: I think it goes back to when I was a teenager. I always wanted to work for myself. I always wanted to be my own boss. From athletics, I was competitive, and I always felt like I was good at working within a team. I always wanted to build a

team of people and start a business.

Q: So what did you do after you left school?

A: I was about 23 or 24, and I started a little deli in an office building here in Tulsa. It was called The Health Deli. It was like 250 square feet, and it had 400 or 500 people in the building. I did it with my mom and dad. We just kind of struck out on our own. It was really ma and pa. We had the deli from about 1986 until 1992.

Q: What happened between the creation of The Health Deli and Camille's Sidewalk Cafe?

A: The Health Deli actually expanded to another location in 1988. It was way, way ahead of its time. We had smoothies, wraps. Our tuna and chicken salad that we have today at Camille's are some of the original recipes we had at The Health Deli. They're my mom's recipes.

I met Camille in 1989, and she came in to the family business, and we continued to make it successful. Then in 1990 we started another business called The Casual Athlete, which were sportswear stores that we put in super regional shopping malls, like Woodland Hills Mall (in Tulsa) and Penn Square Mall (in Oklahoma City).

We ended up with nine locations in nine different malls in four states, and we had that from 1990 until 1998. Then back in 1992, we sold the delis.

Camille and I would travel to Wichita and travel to Penn Square Mall checking on all our employees and our businesses, and inevitably, we would have to eat and find ourselves in the food court. The selections just weren't appealing to us. I remember we left Penn Square Mall, came back to the Woodland Hills Mall, and Camille mentioned to me that we should bring a version of the deli inside Woodland Hills Mall. She said, 'I don't think there's anything fresh and healthy for the average soccer mom that's the one in the mall all the time.' And that's what we did. We called it Camille's Sidewalk Cafe, and we opened it in October of 1996 inside Woodland Hills Mall.

Q: How did you and Camille meet?

A: She was back from (Oklahoma State University) on a break, and she was looking for a summer job. She came to work at The Health Deli with us. I like to tease that my dad hired her and found my wife for me at the same time. We just had a connection immediately. Within days, we were on our first date, and we've been together ever since. We'll celebrate our 17th wedding anniversary in November.

Q: *How integral has she been with the company?*

A: She's the president of the company. She's incredibly integral. I would say all the recipes and the new products that we roll out, she has her hand in all that. She's an amazing woman. She's a mom first and takes care of our house and takes care of me, which is a full-time job, and still manages time to help me run our company.

Q: *Was it your idea to name the deli franchise after her?*

A: It was my idea, and she didn't like it at first. (laughing) She was like, 'Oh, I don't want my name out there. Let's call it something else.' After a couple of days, I talked her into it. People are very in awe when they meet her because she's Camille.

Q: *Do you cook?*

A: No. You don't want me in the kitchen. I can make a peanut butter sandwich for my son. It's really not my thing. That's Camille's thing, and she enjoys doing it. We have healthy, flavorful meals just about every night except Friday night — we always go out to dinner on Friday night. For lunch, everyday we eat at Camille's.

Q: *So do you get away very often as a family?*

A: The last three or four years, we made a rule where when I get home at 6 (p.m.) or 6:30 (p.m.), we don't talk about business. We talk about the kids. We talk about family things. We talk about what movie we are going to watch. And we take two vacations every summer. We just recently got back from Destin, Florida. We're going to Colorado in a couple of weeks.

Q: *Where is your favorite place to go?*

A: Probably my favorite place in the United States — other than Tulsa, I love Tulsa — would be southern California.

Q: When traveling across the country, what do you tell people about Tulsa?

A: I tell people that it's clean; that it's modern; that the people are awesome; that the pace of life is perfect; that it's a family-oriented city; that it's sophisticated. It's artistic; it's entrepreneurial; and it's just a great quality of life.

Q: Do you have any idols in the business world?

A: There are three people that have really inspired me. One is Barry Switzer. The next person is Bob Stoops. And the other person is a musical artist named Jason Mraz. He is wonderful. His music inspired me to do Coney Beach.

Q: If you could get your hands on any other existing franchise, which one would you snap up?

A: There's one in Knoxville, Tenn., called Bar-B-Cutie that I really like. It reminds me of Coney Beach, but it's barbecue.