

Cleveland's own Dave's Cosmic Subs is about to spark a national craving, founder Dave Lombardy says (slideshow)

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CHAGRIN FALLS, Ohio -- "Cosmic" Dave Lombardy still remembers when his million-dollar idea for **Dave's Cosmic Subs** first hit him. He was standing on the back porch of his clothing store and pointed to a little red house across the yard.

"You know what, honey?" he told his wife, Mary Ann. "That could be a cute rock-and-roll sub shop." She slapped her forehead with both hands and said: "Oh my God, you're going to drive me crazy!"

That was 1997, and unsuspecting Clevelanders were about to develop a major craving for his "far-out" subs -- a hunger that's about to spread nationwide.

Dave's Cosmic Subs, now with **18 franchised locations in Ohio, Georgia, and Texas**, is expected to more than double in size within a year, Lombardy said.

One franchisee is about to open the first California shop -- "on Seal Beach, right off the Pacific Coast Highway," and others are itching to open stores in Colorado, Montana, and the tri-state Maryland/Virginia/Washington, D.C. area.

"When you're in business, you work hard, you struggle, and then you start getting hot, you know what I mean?" Lombardy said. "I'm getting hot. I think I'm going to open up something like 25 to 30 stores this year."

He is also launching a new **DavesCosmicSubs.com** website, from which he will sell his homemade Dave's Cosmic Sauces and Dave's Cosmic tie-dyed shirts as well as promote future locations. Dave's sauces are also sold at **Heinen's stores**.

Lombardy **started out with no clue about how to open a sub shop**, but he knew a good sandwich when he



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Dave's World Famous Sub, from the Cleveland Heights location.

Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer file

saw one. His late father, Chuck, used to own Seaway Foods, and when the teenaged Dave got home at 1 o'clock in the morning, his father would always be waiting up for him. He'd make them Italian capicola sandwiches with Swiss cheese on Alesci's Italian bread, "with red ripe tomatoes dripping over our hands, so we'd eat them over the sink," Lombardy recalled. His father would turn to him and ask, mid-bite: "So, how was your date?"

"That's probably subconsciously how I got into the sub business," Lombardy said, his fingers curling around the memory of his father's sandwiches. "I know great ingredients. There's a big difference between a ham sandwich and a great ham sandwich."

"Dave had always told me the story of having sandwiches with his Dad late at night, and nothing would shock me when he came up with an idea," Mary Ann Lombardy said. "I said, 'All right, fine. Whatever you want to do.'"

The day he got the idea, "I went out to every sub shop in Cleveland -- there must've been about 40 or them -- and I bought one of every kind: turkey, ham, salami," he said. "I put them all out side-by-side and looked at the bread, the meat, the condiments, everything."

Eight months later, on March 7, 1997, Lombardy opened Dave's Famous Subs in that very house, infusing his love of food, music and the '60s into everything from the menu to the psychedelic decor. (He later changed the name to "Dave's Cosmic Subs" to avoid confusion with **Famous Dave's BBQ**.) Beneath hand-painted portraits of Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon and Jim Morrison, he served up the kinds of sandwiches he had always craved.

When he couldn't find the kind of crusty Italian bread he wanted for his subs, he bought his own bakery so he'd never have to worry about running out. "You'd be surprised how much bread I sell with eighteen stores," he said.

It took a few months for Dave's to find its groove, but once the villagers discovered it, they streamed into 1,000-square-foot shop almost nonstop. The rainbow-colored store still has the loudest paint job in Chagrin Falls.

"After two years, someone came in the store and said: 'I love your concept. I want to put up 250 of your stores.' I said: 'You do?' That's the first time I thought of franchising," he said.

That offer didn't pan out, but soon thereafter, Lombardy sold his first franchise, a second Dave's Cosmic Subs near Fairmount Circle in University Heights, near **John Carroll**

University. His stores now stretch from

Geneva, Ohio, to Atlanta, Georgia, to San Antonio, Texas, attracting scores of new fans along the way. He sold the Chagrin Falls store to former customer Eddie DeTomaso in April 2013.



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Devoted customers have covered the walls of Dave's Cosmic Subs in Chagrin Falls with heartfelt endorsements like "God bless salami" and "Dave's subs are the best in the universe."

Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer

His shops boast over 30 sandwiches, but the best-seller is still "the No. 1," the Original Dave's Cosmic Sub: Pepperoni, Genoa salami, prosciutto, lettuce, tomatoes, sliced banana peppers, onions, fresh garlic, herbs, and provolone cheese, all smothered in Dave's Cosmic Sauce.

"David Letterman's been here, William Baldwin, Jamie Lee Curtis, Geraldo Rivera," Lombardy said of the Chagrin Falls store. "Whenever Bernie Kosar comes in, he points to this [autograph over the doorframe] and says, 'Do the chicks love it?'"

Stories about what people will do to satisfy their "Dave's crave" abound. "We've had many people come get subs on their way to the hospital while the wife is in labor, or fathers getting them for their wives after they deliver," Mary Ann said.

"Today, this little girl came in who just graduated from preschool because the only place she wanted to eat at was Dave's. **She was all dressed up and everything.** How cute is that?"

Brandon Lombardy, their 28-year-old son, grew up eating the subs but didn't decide until recently to join the business.

"The first thing he did when I told him was stick me behind the counter" to wait on customers, Marlon said of his father. "I'm fully committed to this," he added.

Mary Ann has always stayed in the back of the house, helping out in the kitchen and training dozens of employees in the culture of Dave's.

"Our philosophy is that we want each of our customers to feel good when they come in.

You've got to know your customers, remember what they've had before, and suggest they try something new," she said. No matter how much the company grows, she is adamant that "we really want it to have home-town feel."

"We don't want to be just good; we want to be legendary," Mary Ann Lombardy said.

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Brandon Lombardy, whom Cosmic Dave named after Marlon Brando, is learning the family business from behind the front counter of the Chagrin Falls store, but said he wouldn't have it any other way.

Lynn Ischay, The Plain Dealer