**Orlando Business Journal**

Spice World CEO Chris Kiser discusses growth strategy, innovation

# Spice World CEO maps growth strategy

Leader discusses how he will continue to grow the 77-year-old produce company

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Spice World's CEO discusses how he will continue to grow the 77-year-old produce company.

From growing radishes in his grandmother's backyard as a child to cooking the family Thanksgiving turkey on a wood pellet grill, Chris Kiser appreciates a homemade meal.




Based in Orlando, Spice World has become known for its products available in grocery stores across the country. Shoppers can find its items at places such as Walmart, Publix and Sprouts Farmers Market.
GISELLE BRAVO AT LUCKIE & CO (COURTESY FROM SPICE WORLD INC.)

Ever since he graduated from college, Kiser has worked within the food and beverage industry. From roles with Anheuser-Busch, Campbell's Soup Company and Pinnacle Foods, this relationship with food has been all-encompassing.

It also continues to be through his current role as CEO of Spice World Inc. in Orlando.

"Food is certainly functional," Kiser said. "It serves an important role in nutrition and such, but it's also extremely emotive. When you think about food and when it's present, it's when we're happy or sad. It's present when we're winning or losing, it's present at weddings and it's present at funerals. It encompasses so many vignettes of life, and so, I just, I've always found that quite fascinating."

Spice World has become known for its products available in grocery stores across the country. Shoppers can find its items at places such as Walmart, Publix and Sprouts Farmers Market. Its products include bags of peeled ginger, bottles of squeezable garlic and jars of seasoning blends.




A look at Spice World's different products.

PATRICIA TOLLEY

Spice World has been in business for 77 years and has 1,250 employees. Five hundred of those employees work at Spice World's Orlando campus along Orange Blossom Trail.

Kiser said the company has posted a 6% compound annual growth rate since he joined — a trend that held before, during and after the pandemic. Spice World declined to share its revenue with *Orlando Business Journal*.

Kiser's appreciation of growing fresh produce and his curiosity to innovate home-cooked meals have played a role in this steady growth for Spice World. During his tenure, he expanded the company's research and development kitchen to create new products while introducing new variations of its classic bags of fresh garlic.

Kiser sat down with *OBJ* and shared his recipe for success. He discussed the process of crafting new products, navigating economic challenges and more.

**How has business been since you became CEO?**

There have been 20 or so new products that have come to market in that window. We've grown the organic business, and the underlying business has grown, and we've grown through innovative products. The good thing about this business is it was growing before COVID, it grew during COVID, and it's continued to grow after COVID. I think a lot of people were concerned after COVID subsided that maybe the growth trends people saw from at-home eating might wane. We've really not seen that.




Chris Kiser, CEO of Spice World Inc.

SPICE WORLD INC.

**What does the process look like for creating new products?**




One of Spice World's chefs seen inside the company's Ann Caneza Culinary Innovation Center. This space is named Spice World's co-founder and is dedicated for testing, trying and creating new products.

PATRICIA TOLLEY

We have a process called stage gate, which is a structured approach to innovation and development. Product concepts have to come through certain screenings and certain testing. They have to pass certain hurdles to get to the next gate before they can get to the end of the line and actually be brought to the market. As part of that, you can imagine there's products always at various levels. So, we work on them in that regard.

We also call it the funnel. It's the new product funnel where we routinely ideate. So, at any one time, there could be 100 or 150 ideas or concepts in the funnel.

**How are you ensuring this company continues for the next 75 years?**




Inside the Spice World's headquarters in Orlando there is a sign paying homage to company's history.

PATRICIA TOLLEY

I read a Wayne Gretzky quote once that says that good hockey players skate with the puck. The great ones skate where the puck is going. I think, for us, that analogy holds a lot of merit, which is we've got to stay ahead of the flavor trends with our foods. We have to stay at the forefront of that, so that we're thinking about the future in a way that ensures that our products continue to stay relevant.

I don't think there's any real risk of garlic, ginger, onions and shallots becoming less relevant, because when you look at the analogs, the fastest growing food analogs are all Asian-based products. You look at all those foods — these flavor profiles are all central to it. This one item we launched was built on that premise, a garlic and ginger blend. It's a fusion product, basically recognizing that consumers use both of those flavors together.

We've got to stay on the forefront of that flavor curve. If we do that and we hire good people and we take good care of them, we reward them and help them grow and build their careers. In turn, they'll take good care of our customers, and our customers will continue to consider us an important product.




Seasoning Blends was one of the new products Spice World launched since Kiser joined in 2021.

SARAH KINBAR/OBJ

**What economic challenges are Spice World facing, and how do you navigate them?**

The biggest near-term challenge for all of us is going to be fuel cost, diesel fuel especially. We make these products in facilities that then need to be shipped to retailer facilities that then need to get to stores. Diesel fuel has run up fairly dramatically in the past few weeks because of the situation in the Middle East with Iran, and we are a bit concerned about that. We won't have a ton of control over it; we're not in the petroleum business. We don't refine diesel fuel, so we'll be subject to the markets. There are only so many mechanisms you can put in place to overcome this.

We do have a very good transportation partner. They work really hard to make sure that our loads are efficient, we're maximizing our capacity and that we're trying to take miles out of the system by combining loads and doing other things. We'll have to be really smart in the coming weeks and, hopefully, not the coming months. Hopefully, we'll get some relief here and things will calm down a bit and oil will flow and maybe take some pressure off.

**What does the future look like for Spice World?**

We would love to add to our portfolio by buying a business or aligning with a business that can be additive or something that maybe allows us to expand. We've done a lot of work with consumers about our brand and our trademark and where they would give us permission to play. Some of that stuff we don't do today is appealing, and we may venture into those waters as the near-term future comes to pass.

We're deeply rooted in the produce perimeter — that's who we are. You're not going to see us in the center of store, that's just not our game; we love the produce aisle.