

# Brothers repurpose former mall space for food business



LAURA GREENE | HPE

John Ritner, co-owner of Pinnacle Foods Co., places a fresh made batch of jalapeno cheddar biscuits and herbed sausage gravy into a freeze-drying machine at the company's commercial kitchen in the former Westchester Mall.

**BY PAT KIMBROUGH**  
ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER

**HIGH POINT** — Growing up in High Point, brothers Ben and John Ritner took many a road trip to go backpacking all over western North Carolina.

The drab freeze-dried campfire food they brought along was not among the highlights of their treks, but it inspired their startup business that's now based partly in High Point.

Pinnacle Foods Co. produces freeze-dried meals in a commercial kitchen in the former Westchester Mall. John Ritner said the six varieties of meals are cooked in small batches with fresh, natural ingredients that deliver high protein without preservatives and extra filler.

"Our target market is definitely campers and hunters and backpackers," he said. "That's one of the things that got us into this business. There's other backpacking meals that are mass produced and the

ingredients are terrible and the product kind of makes you feel bad after."

The brothers started the business in 2019 Missoula, Montana, where Ritner and his wife, Sarah, lived for five years.

The couple moved back to High Point to raise their kids near their grandparents, and Ritner, who attended culinary school at Guilford Technical Community College, found production space in the old Canterbury's restaurant in the mall, now Providence Place Towne Centre.

It wasn't as simple as cleaning up the space, which had been vacant for 12 years, and moving his equipment in, because the city dubbed his business a minor manufacturing operation.

"I had to rezone the kitchen, which was a very lengthy process," Ritner said.

The business still has a

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presence in Montana, which his brother handles, while Ritner handles chef duties in High Point with his brother-in-law, Alex Kawachek.

"It's a huge kitchen — 3,200 square feet, which is great for us," he said. "It leaves us a ton of room to expand in the future. Right when we moved in, we doubled our production and added five more freeze-drying machines and got going."

Ritner said Pinnacle Foods uses a type of freeze-drying technology that preserves 97% of the nutrients in food without extra fillers and additives.

The end product comes in a four-ounce bag with a five-year shelf life, he said. You eat it after "reconstituting" it with boiling water, stirring it and letting it sit for 12 minutes.

Pinnacle Foods doesn't have a storefront but instead sells its meals through its website,

pinnaclefoods.co, and wholesale to outdoor stores.

Ritner said he thinks the company's products can find markets well beyond backpackers.

"I think freeze-drying is going to blow up," he said, mentioning the proliferation of survivalists or "preppers" who stockpile goods to be ready for natural disasters or breakdowns in the social or political order.

"A lot of preppers have freeze-dried food stored up in their basement or whatever, for whatever happens, because many of the brands have long shelf life," he said.

Then there are those who don't like to spend a lot of time preparing their meals, who might want the simplicity and convenience of freeze-dried, he said.

"We are excited to be back in the Triad and thrilled with the growing number of small businesses here and the excitement that locals have here about supporting small," Ritner said.