

# OFFBEAT FOOD ENTREPRENEURS TURN THE ORDINARY INTO DESTINATIONS

by  
*Betty W. Stark*

**W**hen you arrive at Jungle Jim's International Market on Route 4 in Fairfield, Ohio about 20 miles north of Cincinnati, you'll know immediately this is not going to be your typical grocery shopping excursion.

If this is your first visit and you've arranged it ahead, you'll be greeted by a tour guide who for a modest fee will take you on an hour-long running walk through the sprawling 300,000 square foot facility. It's not unlike being welcomed by the chamber of commerce director of a mid-size town.

At a fast clip, you'll sprint past 140 varieties of honey, 1,600 cheeses, the international wine library featuring over 10,000 varieties (samples available if you're over 21), a 1,000 gallon "aquaculture" filled with live fish, lobsters and crabs, a made-from-scratch bakery showcasing decadent pastries, pies, cakes, cookies, tortes and rustic artisan breads, all shouting "calorie overload!"



**"If you can't find what you want at Jungle Jim's,"  
he shouts,  
"you don't need it!"**

You'll whiz along the 75-foot wall of beer (850 varieties: domestic, international, Natural and organic foods? Of course; there are hundreds, more like thousands of them.

Outlandish, exotic, mainstream and peculiar produce, all identified by country of origin. Cigars? Jim has a custom-built humidor sheltering over 100 premium brands. Exotic meats? You'll find ostrich, kangaroo, rattlesnake (try it; it tastes like chicken) elk, wild boar and bison.

Make a fast right turn at the sushi bar then slow your pace and linger at the Gourmet Meat Shoppe, salivating over the hand cut prime aged meats, free-range and Amish poultry, ducks, geese, kosher meats and homemade sausages.

If you're into hot sauces, look for the gleaming antique fire engine perched above Hot Sauce Heaven, a display of over 1,200 different varieties of the incendiary liquids collected from the remotest corners of the planet.



By now you are gasping, thoroughly overwhelmed by the magnitude of this sprawling extravaganza, this mind-boggling selection of global groceries, this United Nations of food. Need oxygen? Jim has that too. Stop by the Oxygen Bar and inhale deeply from variously scented air canisters to recharge your brain cells and revitalize your blood.

Just when you think you have seen it all, Jim Bonaminio, the founder and creative genius behind this one-of-a-kind Mecca for Foodies might whirl past, wrapped in a flowing blue robe, sporting a tall wizard's hat and carrying an imposing scepter.



The outlandishly garbed Bonaminio often cruises the aisles on roller skates, chatting briefly with startled newcomers and shouting greetings at regulars who number among the approximately 50,000 weekly visitors.

Overseeing his domain is all in a day's work for the gregarious, larger-than-life "Jungle Jim" who launched the enterprise from the back of a borrowed pickup truck in 1971, selling in 20-pound bags his lucky find of 45,000 pounds of

white potatoes rejected from a potato chip factory.

A college dropout, the 55-year-old Bonaminio has been coloring outside the lines for decades, creating the dozen or so buildings housed under one very complex roof from his never-ending collection of discarded construction materials.

Spend any time at all talking with the self-proclaimed "junker" and he will happily point out the baseboard that he resurrected from a construction site debris pile, the windows salvaged from an old depot, the fake Portopotty doors that open into spacious marble bathrooms, and the mint condition 1919 Boar's Head truck in the deli section.

Just before Bonaminio twirls away in a swirl of blue velvet cape, he'll invite you to return for a tour of his domain on the monorail cars that he salvaged when an area theme park went broke. The Food Adventure Tram is not quite ready-to-ride but the landing has been built and the tram should be up and running soon.

And, he'll add, there is his new location, currently dubbed Baby Jungle, under construction in Oakley, closer to Cincinnati. Bonaminio ticks off the statistics about the new complex: 75,000 square feet, an international cheese shop to rival

the current store, and his voice grows louder as he careens away toward the culinary cookware shop.

“If you can’t find what you want at Jungle Jim’s,” he shouts, “you don’t need it!”



*Photos courtesy of the Cincinnati CVB*

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## NORTHERN MICHIGAN IS HOME TO ONE MAN’S CHERRY REPUBLIC

*Meanwhile, over on the West coast of Michigan:*

Tucked up in the pinky finger of northern Michigan’s glacier-sculpted Leelanau Peninsula, across Lake Michigan from Wisconsin’s Door County, nestles the serene little town of Glen Arbor.

It’s a picture perfect summer place, graced with shaded lanes, tidy white cottages and a sheltered harbor set in the glacier-sculpted sweep of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Year-round the population of Glen Arbor is about 5,000 but in the summer---who counts?

Visitors stroll along the picturesque main street at a leisurely pace, enjoying the eclectic art galleries, upscale boutiques and small museums. And almost to a person, they stop at The Cherry Republic, the largest exclusive retailer of cherry products in the United States, selling over 150 different items, including their own cherry wines, from the Glen Arbor facility, the company catalog and a website ( [www.cherryrepublic.com](http://www.cherryrepublic.com) ).

It was a natural for founder and home town boy Bob Sutherland to set up shop in an area that boasts 1.3 million cherry trees, making it the largest producer of cherries in the world.



Bob doesn't really have a food background, but he honed his sales skills as a child selling smooth lake stones to tourists, then graduated to peddling t-shirts out of the trunk of his car.

His mother baked cherry pies and big chunky cookies in an effort to entice summer tourists to buy whatever son Bob was offering.

She continues to work at the operation, and the trunk of his car is there too, now a permanent sculpture a-fixed to a wall in one of the outdoor gardens.

The Cherry Republic is an easy-going place buffered by a dazzling display of perennial flowers tended to by "Westy" Roach, an official Cherry Ambassador and all-around good-natured woman who thoroughly enjoys her role.

The Republic's logo is "Life, Liberty, Beaches and Pie," and Bob's one steadfast rule is to never hire crabby people. He employs 75 locals during the summer, growing that number to 175 during the busy Christmas season.

Other than that, the affable owner who never took a college business course ("The company failed three times but I didn't know it.") just rolls along at a comfortable pace, experimenting with the next best thing to do with cherries.

*Photos by Betty Stark*

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