[small biz] COLORADO COOL STUFF

BY ERIC PETERSON

BIG B'S FABULOUS JUICES

Nearly 30 years after Bernie Heideman started a cider-mill cooperative for the apple-growing hippies in Paonia, he passed the torch to second-season employee Jeff Schwartz in 2001.

"I didn't know anything about business at the time," Schwartz said. "I didn't know what an account receivable was."

But Schwartz has proven himself to be a creative and shrewd businessman in the time since, buying 16 acres of orchard just outside Paonia, opening a retail storefront onsite, and fostering sales growth of 400 percent. Now Schwartz makes nine kinds of Big B's Fabulous Juices, including the best-selling fresh unpasteurized apple juice, apple-cherry juice, and a new lemonade. The purchase of the orchards, he said, made for a perfect vertical integration.

"Now we can sell Big B's juices, we can sell fruit, and we can give a great discount to locals." $2 for 16 ounces to $7.50 for a gallon retail.

Made by Two Brothers Organic Inc. Hotchkiss, (970) 872-3065, www.freshapplecider.com Available at Delicious Orchards in Paonia and markets and convenience stores throughout Colorado.

LIBERTY PUZZLES

An attorney with a finance background, Christopher Wirth's career path took an abrupt turn when his family inherited a cache of hand-cut wooden puzzles from the 1930s.

"There was a jigsaw puzzle craze in this country during the Great Depression," Wirth said. "Most of them were made out of wood and cut by hand."

Surprised by the value of the puzzles — often topping $1,000 or more — Wirth decided to start a business. "My idea was to use modern technology to bring that into the $100 range."

Wirth employs laser cutters and computers to make puzzles bearing images of vintage artworks and vivid photographs; numerous "whimsy" pieces are shaped like people, animals or geometric patterns.

Founded by Wirth in 2005, Liberty has since grown to nine employees working five laser cutters for two full shifts during the fourth quarter. $30 to $95 retail for a 100- to 500-piece puzzle.

Made by Liberty Puzzles LLC, Boulder, (303) 444-1642 or (877) 744-1442, www.libertypuzzles.com.

CARD PARLOUR DARTS

In 2006, Charles Hanes was simultaneously playing in a Texas Hold 'Em tournament and watching a dart tournament on TV, and the retired IBM exec mentally synthesized the two into a new game, Card Parlour Darts. Hanes' dartboard has a traditional layout, but features face cards on the outer ring, lower cards on the inner ring, and a Joker as the double bull's eye.

"I deal two cards to each player," he said. "Then you throw three darts to make the best possible hand."

Before the idea could get cold, Hanes scored a patent and a manufacturing deal. Less than two years later, he landed a deal with Dart World and today has hopes to make the game his new full-time job. $64.95 retail.

Made by Card Parlour Games LLC, Louisville, (303) 665-8856, www.cardparlourdarts.com. Also available at www.dartworld.com.

NEWTON RUNNING SHOES

Danny Abshire started working on Newton Running Shoes in the early 1990s, but he turned the corner after enlisting longtime Boulder real-estate developer and runner Jerry Lee as an investor in 2005.

The shoes use a patented system of hollow chambers and "actuator lugs" that act as levers and recycle energy from their impact on the ground into their next stride forward.

"We have an action and an equal and opposite reaction," said Abshire, noting that the colorful shoes take their name from Sir Isaac Newton. "It works off some fairly simple principles. We were astounded nobody had done it before."

Lee and Abshire launched the colorful shoes by selling them directly to athletes at Ironman expos last year, leading to a soft retail launch that quickly snowballed into about 100 retailers in the U.S. and international distribution. Lee said both he and Abshire wear Newton shoes while they run long-distance. "I'm the marathon guy and Danny is more the 50-, 100-mile guy," Lee said. $155 to $175 per pair retail. Made by Newton Running Co., Boulder, (877) 860-7695 or (303) 442-1113, www.newtonrunning.com. There is a retail locator on the website.