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## Passed the bar, now passing the popcorn

### Former law clerk uses legal savvy to open unique shop

BY JAMIE LOO

*Law Bulletin staff writer*

For some, the loud beeps of an alarm clock on Monday mornings is an annoying harbinger of the start of another work week.

For former attorney Benjamin Zion, it's a sweet sound.

And his alarm clock is a digital thermometer that tells him that his caramel has reached 249 degrees Fahrenheit and is ready to be mixed with popcorn.

Zion, 30, is co-owner and the culinary creator behind Popcorn Asylum, a new gourmet popcorn shop at 2823 N. Lincoln Ave. The store sells a variety of caramel and cheddar popcorns and some flavors you don't typically associate with everyone's favorite movie snack — strawberry balsamic; peanut butter and jelly; and kalamata olive.

The work is quite a change for Zion, who just two years ago was experimenting with popcorn recipes in his small apartment kitchen and giving it away as a law clerk working for the City of Chicago Law Department.

"At some point I realized I was doing the cooking because I wanted to and I was going to the courtroom because I had to," Zion said. "So I decided I would flip the script a little bit and do the popcorn for a living."

#### From court to cooking

It all started with his colleagues' insatiable appetite for popcorn.

Zion, a former law clerk who prosecuted misdemeanor cases for the city from 2009 to 2012, said he and his co-workers often talked about their mutual love of food. He brought cookies, cakes and other goodies to his office downtown and Cook County branch court on 111th Street.

The one thing everyone regularly requested was his caramel corn.

"He always asked us for our opinions," said Yvonne Spradley LaGrone, senior corporation counsel and Zion's former supervisor. "We loved giving input because it meant that he would bring in more for us to eat."

Court clerks, judges, attorneys

*To see a video of Benjamin Zion making popcorn, visit [chicagolawbulletin.com](http://chicagolawbulletin.com).*

and public defenders raved about the popcorn and told Zion he should open up his own shop. He kept making more and taking orders.

After a while, he couldn't afford to give the popcorn away for free. So court staff would buy it at cost by paying for ingredients.

It got to the point where Zion was spending at least three hours after work making popcorn in his kitchen. In 2012, Zion left the Law Department to pursue the popcorn business full-time.

Zion asked his brother, Tim, and longtime friend, Justin D. Platt, a fellow John Marshall Law School graduate, to join him as business partners. Despite not being a popcorn fan, Platt was sold on the business idea by Zion's caramel corn.

"I realized I could be really helpful with the legal stuff so he could focus on the cooking," Platt said.

Platt handled the partnership agreement, lease negotiations, contracts and accounting. Zion's brother, who is an auditor for the U.S. Treasury Department in New York, helps with tax and regulatory issues.

Having a law background has helped them navigate the legal and business issues involved in a startup such as understanding regulatory codes and handling contracts and invoices.

"It (law school) gives you the confidence to trust you know what you're doing," Platt said.

Their first potential legal dispute came over the name for their cheddar-and-maple mix.

Several companies use the name Chicago Mix for similar popcorn combinations, so it appeared the trademark had been diluted. Within two weeks of using the name on their menu, they received a cease-and-desist letter from a company in Minnesota. They changed their name to Asylum Mix.

That issue aside, Zion worries about other legal matters such as the liability that could arise if an unpopped kernel makes it into a bag and somebody breaks a tooth.

"It's funny the things a law degree makes you stress out about when you open a popcorn shop," he said.



**Popcorn Asylum co-owner Benjamin Zion shows off a fresh batch of caramel corn at his store. Zion is a former city law clerk who left his job two years ago to pursue his passion for food.** *Jamie Loo*

#### The 'food genius' at work

Mondays are cooking days at the shop. The popcorn is popped around 8 a.m. and the rest of the day is spent cooking flavors, mixing, bagging and vacuum-sealing the product. Zion also spends time developing new flavors.

"We've had a couple of false starts and things that didn't work but that's sort of the fun of it when you have your own place," he said, pointing to vegan yeast as a flavor that didn't work.

"You get to do what you want and if it doesn't work it's still a fun experiment."

Zion has no formal culinary training so it's really been all experimenting and learning for the past decade. In college, he got hooked on the Food Network show "Good Eats," which explored the science of food and cooking techniques in a light-hearted way that was more reminiscent of shows such as "Bill Nye the Science Guy" than traditional cooking shows.

"I got my first lessons from (host) Alton Brown in fructose and sucrose and how much of each kind of sugar you want in everything," Zion said reflecting on his early caramel corn batches.

A gourmet popcorn maker is similar to being a candymaker with some elements of baking involved. Balancing ingredients, understanding chemical reactions and temperature are crucial skills. A

friend whose wife went to culinary school gave Zion her pastry textbooks which he said has been invaluable in helping him learn these techniques.

Popcorn Asylum's flavors are inspired by things that Zion, Platt and Zion's brother like to eat such as S'mores, bananas foster, chocolate and chili cheese. The snacks contain no artificial flavors, and the only flavoring that is not made in the store is the cheddar.

The store's most popular flavor, peanut butter and jelly, took the longest to perfect because the peanut butter consistently burned. The strawberry balsamic vinegar also took a while.

"The first time I did it, I used entirely too much vinegar and it tasted like salad," Zion said.

In the roughly three months since the shop opened, it has already garnered quite a bit of attention including a mention on a Zagat list as one of "11 Chicago Food Artisans to Watch."

Popcorn Asylum's online store at [popcornasylum.com](http://popcornasylum.com) launched in late March with shipping available in the continental U.S.

The Lincoln Avenue store also features outsider art, which is art that is created by untrained artists.

And giving out samples at events and talking to people about the popcorn is all part of the fun.

"It's one of the reasons," he said, "I like doing this every day."