

# Final Sgt Peps Story\_mixdown

## Mode interviewed Sam and Sean, the former owners of Sergeant Pepsi

Kwasi: What's happening, people? Quasi from Moto on the Mic had the pleasure of interviewing Sam and Sean, the former owners of Sergeant Pepsi, one of the more missed restaurants on campus. It was a really good conversation, and I really feel like I wanted to get their story out. So the episode's right here. Hope you guys love it. Take a listen. What is happening, people? Welcome to Mode on the Mic. We're doing a little bit of a different episode today. Today we're going to talk about one of the more missed restaurants on the Storrs camp. Today we're going to be talking about Sergeant Peps. It used to be around the. Around, like, where the Science Research One center is, like, near where old Huskies used to be as well. Now I'm here with Sean and Sam, the former owners of Sergeant Peps. So maybe if each of you guys just want to go and, like, introduce your guys self really fast, just, like, talk about, like, just your name, what, where you're from, and maybe when you started at Sergeant Pep's initially, before you guys owned it.

Sam: Okay, I'll go first. Hi, I'm Sam. I was more so the manager of Sergeant PEPs and ended up marrying the owner of Sergeant PEPs while working there. And I started there when I was about 18, 19 years old back in 2009. And as far as where I'm from, I would basically say I'm from here now.

Shaun: my name's Shaun And, yeah, I ended up being the owner of Sergeant Peps I moved up here in 2007 for UConn to go to school. And it started as just kind of my school job, and then I was managing it, and then eventually I was just owning it. You

know, I graduated and I was like, hey, whatever. So, yeah,

Sam: That the best thing you can do with an English degree is buy a pizzeria.

Kwasi: So both of you guys went to UConn, right?

Sam: No, I did not go to UConn.

Kwasi: Oh, where did you go?

Sam: I didn't.

Kwasi: Oh, okay. Okay. So then, like, how did you end up, like, up here then?

Sam: I came up here for a party that Sean and his roommates were throwing and basically just stayed when I met Sean.

Kwasi: That's actually really cool, though. So then where does, like, the ownership aspect come into, like, how did you guys end up, like, owning the store?

Shaun: My first year at Peps, I was not, like, I was an interesting employee. they actually apparently almost fired me. I mean, we had this thing where, you know, a lot of. Obviously a lot of our employees were College students.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: So when the semester ended, a lot of people would graduate, a lot of people

would drop out or whatever else. So, you know, it was always kind of. We'd close over the summer and then in the fall, if they liked you, they'd be like, hey, you want a job again? Or they would wait to see if people reach out to them first.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: So apparently I was one of those people that was just kind of like, if he calls us, maybe we'll see if we got a spot for him, but if he doesn't, we're not calling him back. So I took my time. I took a week or two when I moved back up in the fall, and then I called them and they're like, eh, whatever, we'll try it out. But then they liked me, apparently. I just, I don't know, changed over the summer. I guess.

Sam: You grew up.

Shaun: I guess so. so I was kind of like, not entitled so much, but I was like a manager at that point.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: It was like me or one or two other guys that were like students, but also kind of like their go to people when it comes to pretty much everything. We did pretty much everything in the store other than like payroll and ordering food and, you know, taxes, like scary stuff like that. the owners, I guess we'll call them California guys for now. At the time. Ah, two dudes from California. Well, one was from California originally. The other one had moved there, but he had gone to Yukon way back in the 90s.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: so he kind of roped the other guy into this when he was offered to buy the place and come back to Connecticut. the two of them were running Peps. They actually opened a Mexican restaurant in that same plaza. And they put a lot of time and effort into that and it didn't do very well.

Sam: Senor Pepes, for those who might remember, by the way.

Kwasi: Yeah, Senor, Pepes. They were not original of the names.

Shaun: Yeah, well, they wanted to kind of be like a spin off of Peps thing.

Kwasi: That's cool though.

Shaun: the problem was they kind of. They put everything into that. They spent tons of money, you know, renovating the area and it didn't go well. And I think they were both just super burnt out from that.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: So one, of the two, he got a job offer out in California to go back. The other guy was like, you know what? I'm going, I'm going to.

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Shaun: And moved his whole family out. So they had me, I think right around then I graduated UConn M. And I was kind of like, what's next? And I was a little burnt out on school, so I was just like, I'm just gonna work and relax and, you know, not have to

worry about having papers to turn in and all this other crap and just kind of chill. And they were like, do you want to be our GM for while we're in California? And I was like, sure, why not? That was, that was only about a year because, you know, the first semester, everything was fine. The second semester, when things weren't going the way that they want, you know, California guys wanted it to go, but then they didn't have any real control over what was going on. They were kind of freaking out and they were thinking people were stealing money and stealing food and we were faking the sales and all sorts of other stuff. So they were like, if you're interested, you can just buy it because we don't want to deal with this whole, you know, long distance relationship thing. So that's kind of. That's where that went. That's how that happened.

### **Sean M. Took over Peps when he graduated from college**

Kwasi: Now when you talk about buying it, like, they just, like, was there like a, like an offer that you had to end up, like, negotiating? Like, how did that end up happening?

Shaun: Yeah, and that's why it's tough to say exactly when I was like, the owner officially. They had some, past debts from the Mexican restaurant that they wanted to take care of. It was like a no money down kind of.

Kwasi: Right?

Shaun: Yeah. Because they knew I had no more. I just graduated college. I didn't have any money.

Kwasi: So, like, do you, you don't, like, still owe them now, right?

Shaun: No.

Kwasi: Gotcha.

Shaun: No, we paid it off in not long at all.

Kwasi: Gotcha. All right. That's pretty cool, though.

Shaun: I think we were paid off in, like, 2013 or 2014 when Sean M. Took over.

Sam: We changed the business pretty drastically.

Kwasi: So, like, what was, like, the number one change? If you could think of anything that, like, was, like, the most impactful, we.

Sam: Might have differing opinions on that. But for me, attitude.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: The way we treated staff and customers was pretty different. What would you say?

Shaun: The old owners kind of had an attitude of, like, these are college kids. They're always going to try to, like, I don't know, cheat. Cheat their way into free food.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Kind of stuff. And although there are situations like that that, you know, we

didn't, we didn't like that stuff. they, I think, were a little bit too quick to shoot, people down that had, like, legitimate issues. And I think it got worse as.

Sam: Time had gone on, they became bitter and a little overly defensive.

Shaun: Yeah. So someone would be like, hey, my pizza is undercooked. And they'd be like, that's impossible. The oven cooks like perfectly.

Sam: We came in and we were still basically kids.

Sam: Maybe relating to most of our customers a little bit more than the old owners.

Kwasi: Right.

Kwasi: A lot of people remember Sergeant Peps like fondly now. And do you guys find that like surprising at all or.

Shaun: Not hugely surprising? Like we kind of. Because when I first started working there, Peps was kind of like the place. And obviously there were a lot less restaurants up at Yukon at the time. But there's still several, right? There were still plenty. And Peps had a huge reputation and it kind of bothered me that that had gone away a little bit. M. You know, keep in mind this is like early 2010s ish. So we kind of wanted to refoster that and make it like the Yukon Pizzeria again. So we. I don't know, that was a big thing that we were pushing for and trying to, you know, make friendly with clubs and organizations on campus and things like that. Because that was another thing the old owners did where people would ask for donations and stuff like that and be like, absolutely not. We're not wasting our time with that.

Sam: When we took over, we were throwing pizza at everyone.

Kwasi: So then as time goes on, you own it for X amount of years. What led to like more of like the closing down part.

Shaun: the big one was just being tired.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Because I usually ran the pizza line and especially, I mean if anyone's been in Peps late night, it got absurdly busy and it was physically exhausting running a pizza line like that. It was just hard. but then a lot of the other, you know, normal stuff, you would expect that things were getting more expensive everywhere.

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Shaun: Insurance was a lot of money. We had to, we didn't have to have. You know, there's a couple different kinds of insurance for alcohol.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Which we didn't have to carry full blowout. And like insurance like a bar would because we didn't serve, any alcohol. But we did have to have special insurance because we had tons and tons of drunk people coming down from the bar every single night.

Kwasi: Right.



Shaun: And if, you know someone's drunk and they slipped and they fell and they hurt themselves, we would be on the hook for that without this particular insurance. And normal insurance would not have covered that. So that just kind of went up and up and up and food cost and a lot of the equipment was Kind of old.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: So we were replacing what we could. But that stuff, commercial restaurant equipment is expensive, so a lot of that kind of stuff. And that wasn't it. It wasn't, you know, that was just kind of wearing on us.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Obviously, Covid was huge because for a while we thought that was, that was the end of PEPS anyway, because, they closed the whole campus.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: And although we're very, very busy during the semester, as soon as the breaks come around, everyone disappears. And, you know, we would have like a third of the tenth of our normal business over the summer.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: And that's like three or four months. It's like a long stretch. That's, you know, basically we would have to kind of shore up some money during the school year. And when Covid hit and everyone just left over spring break, suddenly we lost like two huge

months of sales to cover that. Summertime.

Kwasi: Right.

Kwasi: But you don't think that, like, Covid led into, like, it closing?

**If Covid didn't happen, do you think Sergeant Peps would still be open**

Was it going to close regardless or. If you don't. If Covid, like didn't happen, do you think it would still be open now?

Sam: Covid changed a lot in terms of even just staffing alone. Attitudes toward work and work being a priority, I think shifted when kids came back from the pandemic. These are kids that basically went through their last years of high school during the pandemic and they didn't want to go to college and start working. It was a lot harder to staff the restaurant. And with just a couple of main key staff, it just wasn't enough. And we were all working so much. It became really hard not to just be really burnt out from it.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Yeah. We just straight up weren't getting delivery drivers to even apply.

Kwasi: Yeah.

Shaun: Which is tough because I assume a lot of people were just doing, you know, ubereats and stuff like that. The real final nail in the coffin with the whole PEPS thing is,

Peps closing is the sale of the building.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Because our lease was month to month. And, we actually had someone that was going to buy the restaurant. we thought that was totally dead in the water because Covid happened. Because we had been talking to this guy before COVID that Covid hit. And we're just like, well, that's gone. But he was so interested. He still wanted to. He was just kind of like, oh, you know, he's big investor guy that had a whole ton of restaurants.

Sam: He wanted our name, he wanted the Sergeant Pep's brand, basically and our reputation.

Shaun: And he was very excited about it. And, our lease was month to month, and he didn't want to roll the dice on that, so he wanted a real lease. And our landlord just did not want to cooperate, which we found out after the fact. Part of that was probably because she was selling the building.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: So they didn't want her signing any new leases. so he eventually dropped out. And then when she finally told us, like, hey, I'm selling the building. You guys have another year. I would love to keep you on for that whole year, we were kind of like, nope, we're done with you. Goodbye.

Sam: It was a little demoralizing, Right?

Shaun: Yeah. And it kind of felt, you know, we had had lots of issues with her over the years, so that kind of felt like, you know what, maybe we'll just use this as the way to do it. Because we knew, you know, a whole nother year of Peps would have been nice. But, you know, in hindsight.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: but we didn't want to put all that time and effort in and then be running around because what we'd originally been told was May of 2024. It was basically like, once the students leave, you got two weeks to get everything out of there, and then we're knocking that building right down. which, you know, anyone who's been over there knows.

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Shaun: I don't know what kind of issues they're having with permits or whatever, but obviously they haven't done that yet.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: I just think their timetable hasn't worked out the way they initially planned.

Shaun: Yeah, we figured we'd rather kind of, I don't know, get back at the landlord a little bit and keep a little bit of money out of her pocket.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: And on top of it, kind of get to take our time getting everything out of there rather than rushing around like crazy people. Because, yeah, there were things. Getting the oven out of the restaurant was terrifying. It was enormous. And we didn't even have to do it ourselves. And it was still scary.

Sam: I wasn't a part of that. I purposely left so I wouldn't have to witness the dismantling of Sergeant Peps.

Kwasi: Yeah.

Shaun: Yeah. We had the oven, which was enormous. That our dough mixer is like a.

Sam: Thousand pounds and a thousand years old.

Shaun: Yeah. And we did not have. We did not have the equipment necessary to get that stuff out.

Kwasi: If students grabbed like a bunch of petitions and they were like, oh, we need Sergeant Peps to come back, like a thousand signatures come in, like, how would you feel about that? Like, obviously, I'm not trying to say, like, would you Bring it back. But do you think that, like, you would like, start like operating like a way of like bringing it back in some, like, shape or fashion? Like, would you like, try to see if like, someone with like, more money would be willing to like, partner with you guys? Something like that?

Sam: Like, we're gonna have different answers to that.

Kwasi: Do you have like, do you ever, do you ever have like a dream of like bringing it back in some way, shape or fashion?

Shaun: I mean, now that it's been gone for a while, maybe a little bit. But I don't know, I've thrown around the idea of doing more like a food truck type thing.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Because that seems a little bit more secure. Obviously I'm a little, a little scarred by dealing with, landlords.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: You know, if there was a way to find a building that we could own and not have to worry about that kind of thing, that would be nice.

**A lot of restaurants will fail before they even open. Right. Um, but also. Starting a restaurant is expensive**

but also. Yeah, I mean, that kind of support would be awesome. But also starting a restaurant, I don't know if a lot of people even realize like, it's obscenely expensive.

Kwasi: Right.

Shaun: Which is scary.

Kwasi: Exactly.

Shaun: And a lot of restaurants will fail before they even open. Sometimes, you know, very often you got a budget of X amount of dollars and it's like, we have to open by like May of such and such. And then you go to open on May and such and such and like inspectors come out and they're like, this isn't up to code. And this isn't up to code and you get bumped back another month. And then, you know, it's like, what do you do? So that stuff's always scary.

Sam: A year ago I would have said, hell no, I'd never want to do this again. After spending all this time since closing in all these different jobs, trying to find where I fit in when I'm not in Sergeant Pep. Since I spent most of my work life in Sergeant Peps, I'm finding that we really had something special and unique that I probably won't ever experience again. And it's like rose colored sunglasses in a way. Now looking back, I definitely wish I had more of an in the moment appreciation for what we had. so it's not a hell no, right? It is no longer a hell no, maybe. Well, you didn't experience what Sergeant Peps was, so I'll give you a pass for that. But the majority of the stories you're going to get from Sergeant PEPs are probably good, but they're the ones people may not remember.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: You're going to know about because you have pictures of it in your phone.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: From nights where you drank too much and then went and got your slices from

Sergeant Pepsi and sat in a line for an hour to get those slices. And no complaints, because it was amazing. my most positive experience, there was not really one experience, but toward the end, we had given our employees a lot of notice, and they knew ahead of time that we were going to close down for good.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: And I didn't want to leave them, and neither did Sean. We both did not want them to be in a position where it happened fast and they were going to struggle financially because of it.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: We told them, knowing full well that there was a good chance they were going to bail before we were closed. And we made peace with that.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: Because we valued people over money maybe a little too much sometimes.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: But most of our employees stayed until the very last day. We had some employees stay longer than I personally did because I had to move on before it was gone because I couldn't handle it emotionally. And you only get that

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Sam: from building a bond with these people that goes, I'm gonna get emotional now, and we're gonna pretend it's not gonna happen. But we did have something important, and it meant something to a lot of people.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: We, were a safe place for a lot of people that normally felt like outcasts on this campus, and that sort of became our thing over the years. Like, we were the place where, if you worked there, you spent half your time off the clock there anyway, hanging out with everyone because they were your best friends.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: And it was where you felt the most comfortable. Those were the best moments for me, even though they're not maybe significant, like a car plowing through a wall or big fights or fires in the front because of us winning a championship game.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: It's still what sticks out the most to me because I still talk to all these kids almost every day. Half our staff, they're still. We're in a group chat together still. Even over a year after closing, we are still talking to each other. So.

**Quasi: You don't know what you have until it's gone**

Kwasi: So then just to follow up on that, though, it's like, how you're feeling right now,

right? Is that just mostly because, like, after you. This has ended now, the places that you've gone on to, like, like, further on, like, you just haven't had that, like, same feeling since then?

Sam: Not even close.

Kwasi: Right.

Sam: But it's hard to. Well, you said it earlier. You don't know what you have until it's gone.

Kwasi: Yeah.

Sam: And that's so true even though it is a huge cliché right. I had no way of knowing what we were giving up because it just felt like such a burden after being there for so long. It was a burden. I mean it's not easy running or owning a restaurant especially on Yukon campus but it was more good than bad right?

Kwasi: I just want to say if you guys want to reach out to Sam and Sean at any point. I know Sean works at HOPS44 Sam works at Haven Hot Chicken. If you guys see them around stores at all just like shout out sergeant Peps give them words of encouragement and I'm sure that they will love to hear if you guys have any stories on your own part from sergeant Peps at all maybe bring back some good memories. So this was Moto on the mic. This is Quasi on the mic. I hope you guys have a good rest of your day. Have a good night people.

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