



# Sweeping The Board

**Sophisticated flavors, cutting-edge manufacturing and impeccable ethics have proved to be a winning formula for Five Pawns.**

BY STEPHANIE BANFIELD

Visit any major metropolitan area and you'll likely encounter a variety of e-liquid manufacturers creating an assortment of products for an industry that has experienced massive growth over the past several years. Although thousands of businesses have rapidly sprung up across the United States, one company—Irvine, California, USA-based Five Pawns—has been mastering the art of proper e-liquid manufacturing since it was founded four years ago. Armed with a unique name and a distinctly different business model and mindset, Five Pawns stands in a league of its own.

"I think we are definitely a pioneer in the industry, and we've definitely chosen to follow a slightly different path than many have," says the company's CEO and executive mixologist, Rodney Jerabek. "I don't at all like the direction that the industry has been going in recent months, but we are continuing to go down our own path and do things our way. That's been our way since the beginning: to kind of put the blinders on and not pay attention to the noise that's going on around us and to continue just to do our own thing."

Five Pawns' beginnings date back to early 2012, when Jerabek met with a Chinese businessman in search of a designer he could collaborate with to successfully brand and package a product he had created.

"In 2012, I started developing the first five flavors that Five Pawns was based on, and I was just doing that at the time for friends and family that I was kind of turning onto this technology," Jerabek says. "My background was in branding and marketing, and I had a gentleman call me from China

who had a disposable electronic cigarette that he was looking to bring to market in the United States."

Although Jerabek was not a traditional cigarette smoker himself, he recognized the potential of the products his client presented and dived headfirst into an endeavor that would ultimately impact the lives of millions. Today, Jerabek is a vaper, and cigars—as well as the occasionally bummed late-night cigarette—are things in his past.

"When this guy brought over these disposable devices, the light kind of went on in my head that this product has the ability to change people's lives," he says. "But I didn't like not knowing where the liquid was being manufactured and what it consisted of."

Impressed by the product's potential but less than thrilled with the flavor profiles available at the time, Jerabek set out to raise the bar on e-liquids and develop a line unlike any the vapor industry had seen before.

"Back then, all of the flavors were very one-dimensional,



Rodney Jerabek

at best,” he says. “You had your green apple, your cherry, your vanilla. I’m a foodie and a single malt scotch and wine collector, and from traveling around the world in my previous life, I’ve got a pretty sophisticated palate. So I started to question why this product needed to be one-dimensional. Why couldn’t it be more like wine or cuisine? Why couldn’t you taste one thing on the inhale and another thing on the exhale, and then have another flavor linger on your tongue like you would get when drinking wines or fine spirits? So that’s when the quest started to create multidimensional and complex flavor offerings—and that’s how Five Pawns was born.”

Tapping into his knowledge of and appreciation for sophisticated flavors, Jerabek sought out ingredients that could be combined carefully to create e-liquids that played to the five tastes recognized by a person’s palate—a move that would also provide the vapor entrepreneur with the perfect name for his brand-new company.

“You’ve got sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami, which is savory, and each of the first five flavors that I introduced to the market played on one of those five tastes known to the human palate,” he says. “A pawn, by dictionary definition, is something that can be used or sacrificed to further one’s purpose. And I looked at the liquid that we were making and looked at that as being the pawn, and looked at the complexity and the sophistication of the game of chess. It’s a very sophisticated game, and these were very sophisticated and complex flavor offerings or blends that we were putting together. So tying chess imagery with five tastes and the pawn, the name just came together.”

With a name for the company determined and a one-of-a-kind line of e-liquids being manufactured, it was time for Jerabek and his team at Five Pawns to begin marketing their products to the masses.

“Social media obviously was a huge launch pad for us,” he says. “And products that I was making at the time for friends and family started to go viral, and people were sending them to their friends around the world. Then, later in 2012, we started shipping to our first authorized retail partners.”

As Five Pawns’ products gained popularity among vapers, the e-liquid manufacturer’s presence in the market also

progressed as the company worked tirelessly to supply the increasing demands of the burgeoning industry.

“Back then, there were 13 vapor-specific retailers in Los Angeles and Orange County combined, and today there are thousands,” says Jerabek. “I think our timing was impeccable. With only 13 stores being in existence back then, stores started opening up at a very rapid rate, and people wanted to carry the product. Then we started developing international markets in 2013, and we find ourselves today in 60–70 countries and thousands of stores around the globe. It’s just been a great, exciting, wild ride, and I feel like a lot of it was just impeccable timing on our behalf.”

### TAKING THINGS SERIOUSLY

Five Pawns may be one of thousands of e-liquid manufacturers operating today, but according to Jerabek, the firm’s production methods and standard operating procedures couldn’t be more different from those found within the company’s competition.

“Many of the people servicing this market—and specifically within the last six months—are really not doing things ethically to give the industry a good name,” he says. “We’re seeing a lot of things like copyright infringement, unsustainable pricing, inappropriate marketing, which oftentimes utilize immature or cartoon-like graphics and novelty flavor profiles—things like cotton candy and Sour Patch Kids and gummy bears. Those aren’t flavor profiles that, in my opinion, look good to the FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration], convert or person looking to switch.”

In addition to producing flavors that appear to be aimed at immature audiences, some e-liquid manufacturers simply don’t consider the effect their flavor profiles and marketing tactics have on an industry whose purpose is to attract traditional tobacco smokers to alternative products.

“I have an 8-year-old daughter, and four years ago, when I would have a dinner party at my house and sit down with her friends’ parents, the conversation would come up about what I did for a living—and back then it was defending science,” says Jerabek. “Today, it’s defending the image that this industry has placed upon itself, where if you do a Google search on vaping and you look at the imagery, it isn’t exactly something a convert even wants to associate with or make the switch to become. And I think that’s a problem.”

Jerabek also believes that, unlike Five Pawns, many e-liquid manufacturers aren’t striving for long-term success at a time when it’s imperative for every company operating in the vapor industry to take their production processes seriously.

“I think that there are many companies today that have no intention of going through regulation and have no intention of doing things correctly in the eyes of the FDA,” he says. “And there are a lot of people out there that are just looking to make money in this kind of get-rich-quick gold rush and not really taking into account the things that are necessary to uphold the image of vaping.”

Five Pawns, in contrast, has been striving since day one to maintain the highest standards of quality possible and to offer their customers access to what they consider some of the best products on the market.

“Since the beginning, we have been building our standard operating procedures [SOP] and our manufacturing practices to appease the FDA,” says Jerabek. “Knowing that FDA regulation was inevitable, we have been building for that since day one. So we have a state-of-the-art ISO 8 cleanroom environment and full automation with all of our bottling and labeling. We pour in our cleanroom facility gravimetrically rather than volumetrically, and we can be accurate. We’re still a small-batch manufacturer, so when we’re mixing 5-gallon batch sizes we can be accurate to 1/1000 of a gram with every one of our ingredients that gets poured. So our tolerances are extremely tight, and all of our mixing processes are gyro-metric and orbital, so we can guarantee consistency with the blending and emulsification of all of our liquids.”

Five Pawns also prides itself on being able to provide traceability for every product that is created within its facility.

“There’s also a traceability element that comes from our gravimetric blend process, where all of our gravimetric scales are Bluetooth-enabled,” Jerabek says. “All those calculations are recorded onto a server in the event that if we ever had to have a product recalled we can go back to every single ingredient poured in every one of the liquids, and we can identify accountability and traceability of what might have happened or if somebody had made an error. We haven’t had that happen yet, but that’s something that is important from an SOP standpoint with the FDA. And in addition to that, all of our automation on our lines allows us to individually batch record, and we enter lot numbers, born-on dates, bottle numbers, etc., so we’re able to have complete accountability and traceability from that standpoint as well.”

### READY FOR REGULATION

Because it believes in producing only the best possible products, the Five Pawns team supports reasonable FDA regulation that would force e-liquids manufactured by companies from coast to coast to adhere to a certain set of standards.

“I think that the industry is definitely in a state of turmoil today,” says Jerabek. “The real passion for me behind this industry, the goal for us, is to get people to switch. And I think that in order to continue to provide that option for people, it’s going to involve some regulation. Five Pawns has always been a proponent of some type of reasonable regulation. And we still don’t know what that’s fully going to entail, but regulation is necessary in this industry based on some of



the things that I’ve seen happening over the past six months.”

To ensure its offerings are able to continue aiding those who are attempting to make the switch from tobacco to vapor products, Five Pawns is making every effort to comply with the regulations governing the vapor industry.

“We are all in on trying to go through the PMTA [pre-market tobacco product application] process, and we have contracted with many companies to kind of hand-hold us through that process and build our application and our files,” Jerabek says. “We are in the process of trying to secure our appointment with the FDA, where we can sit down and present to them exactly what we intend on providing with our application, making sure that we have the correct clinical trials, the correct emissions testing, toxicology data and everything that they need in hopes that they come back and tell us that what we’re looking to provide them is going to suffice.”

Despite an assortment of challenges the company may face throughout the PMTA process, Jerabek is confident that Five Pawns has what it takes to continue business as usual.

“We are pro-reasonable regulation; it needs to be a viable pathway that companies can get through so that applications will be approved,” he says. “Today, it’s very unclear. The FDA has been very ambiguous in terms of what they are going to require. But we are all in with our contracted FDA consultants, and we own all of our own intellectual property. Every one of our flavor blends and our products are developed from the molecule up, so we know every constituent that constitutes our e-liquid blends. That’s going to be of much importance when it comes to the FDA and being able to supply them with the data that they need.”

Although the complications of complying with the FDA’s regulations are constantly looming in the background, Jerabek has never lost sight of the reason he stepped into the vapor scene in the first place, and he remains passionate about the industry that has the potential to dramatically improve the lives of former smokers.

“One of my most gratifying memories was when a 65-year-old grandmother walked into our Five Pawns tasting bar and wrapped me up in this big bear hug and said, ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’ And I said, ‘For what?’ And she said, ‘I have a relationship with my grandchildren again. When I was a pack- or two-pack-a-day smoker, I always reeked like cigarettes; I had tar and nicotine and the yellow stuff on the ends of my fingers—and my own daughter didn’t want me handling my grandchildren.’ And she said, ‘I’ve been able to switch, and I don’t have those restrictions on me anymore, and I have a relationship with my grandchildren that I’ve never had before,’ and she had tears in her eyes. That kind of feedback is the best feedback. To hear that people have been able to switch to our product, that’s the most gratifying part of what we do. And we’ve just scratched the surface in terms of the amount of people that are using these products. I’m excited to further pursue that and to try to get more people to use these products, whether they are Five Pawns products or they are other vapor products. I just think that it’s such an amazing technology, and I’m just excited for more people to experience it.” V