Make it your business
When the thought comes to you in the night, embrace it

Wednesday, June 11, 2008

BY SUZANNE ZIMMER LOWERY

FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Maybe it’s your incredible pie making skills that bring you kudos, or your Grandma’s prized recipe for tomato sauce, but just about every accomplished cook has been told at one time or another, "this is so good you should sell it."

When a love and talent for cooking collides with a career that is unsettled or cut short, it can be all the impetus needed to stir-up entrepreneurial dreams and get folks cooking for cash.

Although it sounds simple enough to package up a homemade product, "The state of New Jersey is actually very strict about this," says Kim LaBrunda, who together with husband Keith recently started "One Part Sugar," a baked goods business in Hopatcong.

But there are things to consider along the way when starting up a food business, especially from home.

Rich Ritota, of the state’s Food and Drug Safety Program, describes the state’s regulations succinctly: "Your household kitchen won't fly. In New Jersey, we take the concern of food borne illness very seriously," he says. "There is a retail food code that covers everything from handling and preparation to safety and sanitation."

In the case of the LaBrundas, the path to marketing a food product was long and arduous. Kim had spent years simultaneously raising children and commuting to Jersey City before she was laid off from her job.

And then one day, "I woke up one day and said, 'I want to open my own business.'"

With a passion for baking, she enrolled in Hudson County Community College’s pastry arts program and spent six months leaving for school at 4 a.m. After completing the course, she approached her local health department about starting a "virtual bakery" from her home that would specialize in phone and internet orders only, and was surprised to learn that it had never been done before.

"I had to stand up before the council and argue my case for a business on a residential street that is not zoned for commercial traffic," she says.

From start to finish, it was a full year of hard work before she was able to put on her apron in the cheerful, yellow kitchen attached to her home that is fully licensed and certified for commercial baking.
Despite not being allowed to hang out a sign, or have walk-in customers, the LaBrundas are very busy delivering or shipping pies, tarts, pastries, cakes and cookies from the list on their website, www.onepartsugar.net, or creating personalized recipes and designs for their customers.

When Marcia Blackwell found herself in a similar position -- a victim of downsizing where she lost "the perfect job in telecommunications" -- she thought, "I don't think I'd ever want to own my own business." Nevertheless, she enrolled in a self-employment assistance program hoping to find a new direction.

"My husband is a great cook who happens to be lactose intolerant. He always made delicious frozen desserts that people begged us to bring to special occasions," she says proudly.

All it took was a little research to discover that no one was making organic gelatos, and suddenly a niche was found. Now their healthful products are gluten, dairy and cholesterol free, as well as vegan, and made with a number of fair trade products.

"For six months, I worked full-time to gain organic certification and FDA approved labeling and packaging," says Blackwell.

Fortunately, they were able to rent space in a commercial kitchen in Red Bank from a caterer friend, and "Blackwell's Organic" was up and running with 11 flavors distributed in more than 35 stores in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. Numerous requests come into the website, www.blackwellorganic.com, for dry ice delivery anywhere in the U.S.

A true sign of their accomplishment came when their raspberry sorbetto was chosen as a 2008 "Outstanding USDA Approved Organic Product" by the National Association of the Specialty Food Trade.

Fortunately for people like the LaBrundas and the Blackwells, who have marketing ambitions for their edible ideas, New Jersey has its own "incubator" designed especially to assist entrepreneurs in developing their concepts.

Since 2001, the Food Innovation Center at Rutgers University, www.fire.rutgers.edu, has helped more than 800 companies grow from dream to reality. Now the program is poised to open its new state-of-the-art, 23,000 square foot facility in Bridgeton that will include laboratory kitchens where new and existing companies can work through all the phases of development.

"Clients can test their ideas, work on product design, packaging, labeling -- everything from concept to commercialization," says director Lou Cooperhouse.

Located in the middle of New Jersey's agricultural region, the new center predicts that "approximately 1,000 net new jobs and more than $200 million in cumulative new revenue will be created by our highest performing clients alone, by the year 2012."

"I can't say enough about what Lou's group does to help people bring their dreams to fruition," says Blackwell. "People call me all the time asking how to sell peanut brittle or their mom's apple pie. I send them to Lou so that 20 years from now they're not sitting on their front porch saying, 'I wonder if...,'"

That's one question these successful entrepreneurs will never have to ask themselves because they know the sweet taste of success.

© 2008 The Star Ledger

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.