

Saucy company smells success

Christine Morente, STAFF WRITER

SAN CARLOS -- The secret ingredient to a great sauce is more than just a matter of taste -- it's teamwork and patience.

Melanie Yunk believes that. In fact, she and her team of chefs and food scientists have taken the delicate process of creating sauces and rubs for Big Acres Gourmet Sauces and made them Home Shopping Network-worthy.

It's not the kind of business you'd expect from a former engineer. But it's where Yunk and Kent, her husband and business partner, landed when the dot-com bubble burst.

They walked into a competitive food industry where the majority of new specialty-food businesses die, and very few thrive. Yunk realized this after seeing such businesses come and go while attending fancy food shows each year.

But that didn't matter to the Yunks. They believed in the Big Acres brand and liked the fact that their barbecue and teriyaki sauces were made of natural ingredients and lacked preservatives, MSG, and corn syrup. Melanie's Fine Foods carries the Big Acres line of sauces, along with smoker bags developed by a company in Finland.

"I've worked really hard to continue the integrity of the line," she said. "We're very clean. We're producing products that people can feel good about serving to families and friends."

The former engineer enjoys the science that comes with inventing new mixture.

"I have fun with it," she said.

Yunk keeps the sauces light and healthy, just as Bill and Barbara Dunlap of San Carlos did before the Yunks bought their company in April 2002.

Since then, the Yunks introduced the Mango Peach Chili, Milagro Mole, and Chipotle Peanut sauces, rubs and spice mixtures.

Yunk relied on chefs and a food scientist -- who uses chemistry, physics, engineering, and other sciences -- to develop and preserve recipes.

Her friend Patricia Bainter is a chef who now lives in Denver. Bainter studied at Le Cordon Bleu in London and has a culinary degree in French cuisine.

"When you're creating a meal for people, not only are you interested in how something looks and tastes, but you're also interested in how it feels," Bainter said. "It's about the sensation once it hits the mouth. The sauce has to have heartiness. Substance."

And if something is wrong with a sauce's flavor or consistency, the team starts over.

"It takes several months (to develop)," Bainter said. "There's always some sort of hiccup."

And capturing the perfect flavor is tricky. It requires a stable pH, or acidity level.

"(The sauce) has to leave a nice after-taste," Yunk said.

Meanwhile, there is fierce competition among the different sauce manufacturers in the condiments aisle in grocery stores. There are at least 30 other businesses vying for the "eye-level" shelf, an ideal way to catch shopper's attention. Draeger's, Mollie Stone's, Lundardi's and Whole Foods sell Yunk's sauces.

"Some stores want you to pay them," she said. "It's always a negotiation. There's so many sauces. It's brutal."

Her next new sauce is still an unknown.

"I know what I like, I know what I don't like," Yunk said. I have lots of ideas. I'm not sure which will come to the forefront."

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