



*Photo by Cathy Miller*

## **GardentPlate.com**    **natural instincts**

### **Sweet success**

BY AMY BRUMMER

You have to admire someone who takes a negative situation and turns it into dessert.

When Marcia Blackwell landed on the unemployment line after the telecom company she worked for went out of business, she focused on the possibilities that arose from the problem.

Blackwell enrolled in the State's Self Employment Assistance Program and built a business rooted in her husband's refusal to let lactose intolerance stand in the way of his gourmet sweet tooth. A devoted foodie dismayed by the lack of delicious non-dairy desserts on the market, Tom Blackwell decided that instead of settling for lemons, he would make organic lemon sorbetto.

"When Tom wants to learn how to make something he goes for it," Marcia Blackwell says. "He is looking for a high-quality product, so he made a lot of

gelato until he got it right. We have always shared it with our friends, and one of them suggested we turn it into a business.”

With a set of well-developed recipes, she invested in an Italian gelato machine and worked out an arrangement with a caterer in Red Bank to share kitchen space. In six months, she refined her product, secured her licenses and lined up her suppliers. In January 2006, she launched Blackwell’s Organic Soy Gelato and Fruit Sorbetto.

The hard part? Finding a distributor that could supply her with less than a truckload of fruit, as even a pallet of produce was more than she could use.

But her perseverance paid off, and she not only found a small-scale supplier of high-quality organic produce that could meet her needs, but developed relationships with local farmers and CSAs\* as well.

“I found a New Jersey blueberry farmer to supply me with a local ingredient, which makes the product fresher and more unique,” she says. The quality of the ingredients is the highest priority for Blackwell, since the true flavors of the fruit are the essence of the product. She is also dedicated to using “green” business practices, which informed her decision to go the organic route and use coffee and chocolate that are triple certified (fair trade, shade grown and friendly to migratory birds) by the Smithsonian Institute.

That was the easy part. As a faithful environmentalist, Blackwell says she strives to be a person who doesn’t just “talk the talk.” At the end of a hard day making frozen delights, she brings the kitchen scraps home to her backyard composter, then retreats to her solar-powered home, which has the distinction of being the first one in the town of Long Branch. And now that she sits on the town’s zoning board, she plans to encourage smart development that minimizes environmental impact to benefit her whole community.

This determination and devotion to her personal standards earned her the honor of “Emerging Business Woman of the Year” from the Central N.J. chapter of the National Organization of Women Business Owners in 2006, and landed her product in dozens of stores on the East Coast.

Yet, with all of this success she still manages to take pleasure in the little things that come as unexpected benefits.

“One of the best things about the whole experience, is that I’m never at a loss for what to bring to a party,” Blackwell says. “I never have to bake another casserole or cake again.”