

Building A Business That's Good For The Planet

Blackwell's Organic makes desserts with organic, fair-trade ingredients

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Marcia Blackwell works in the kitchen of Blackwell's Organic, her just-launched company that produces organic gelato and sorbetto.

Lots of small businesses start out with ambitious plans generally focused on profitability and market share.

But Marcia and Tom Blackwell have loftier goals for their start-up company, Blackwell's Organic. Their commitment is to create products that are "Better for the body, the soul and the planet."

The Long Branch couple is launching a line of soy gelato and fruit sorbetto made in the Italian tradition with a healthy twist — all 12 flavors are organic, vegan, dairy-free, cholesterol-free, extract-free and preservative-free.

Handcrafted in small batches, Blackwell's Organic gelati and sorbetti are made exclusively with high-quality organic ingredients, and

Certified Fair Trade cocoa and coffee.

Organic ingredients promote goals the Blackwells are committed to, such as fewer pesticides in the soil and our bodies, better conditions for farm workers, cleaner water for drinking and for fish to swim in, supporting sustainable agriculture and the small family farm.

By insisting on fair-trade ingredients, they've chosen to deal only with farms that pay workers a fair wage and provide safe working conditions.

"We're setting an example that hopefully will carry to the next person and set an example for all companies," said Marcia Blackwell. "I'd really like to prove that we can do what we are doing and still make money. I expect we'll succeed; wait 'til you taste it."

The fledgling company's credo is spelled out in a mission statement that reads:

"We believe it is not enough to do no harm. Each of us, individually and as a company, must strive to make the world a better place and inspire others to do the same. We believe we can make a difference and affect social and environmental change by how we live our lives and how we run our business."

Translating a focus on sustainability into a business model happens to be in keeping with the couple's lifestyle. They have a solar house, the first in Long Branch, and walk the walk.





PHOTOS BY JEFF GRANIT
staff photographer

“We eat about 100 percent organic, we have an organic garden at home, a solar house, we do composting, recycling, and we try and consume less,” Marcia said. “We only purchase what we need and make sure what we purchase is sustainable.”

“I truly believe that through this business we can set an example. There are many companies that are trying to do this, and a lot of business groups starting to pay attention to sustainability. If I can do one more thing, I’ll feel that I’ve succeeded.”

Gelato and sorbetto are now manufactured on Catherine Street in Red Bank where the company shares kitchen space to keep start-up expenses down, but Blackwell’s Organic began on the stove of the couple’s kitchen.

“Tom is lactose-intolerant,” Marcia explained, “and was always looking for interesting recipes. The nondairy frozen desserts available weren’t exceptional. He said, ‘Let’s try to make our own.’ This is a passion for him, a hobby.”

“The first batch was not so good,” Marcia recalled.

But Tom persisted.

“Do you know how many pints I ate?” she quipped. “You have to make a lot to get it right.”

After experimenting with different recipes, Tom came up with a soy-based strawberry gelato that not only passed muster, but won raves from friends and family.

“My friends tried it, the dog tried it,” she said. “Friends would ask if we could make it for birthday parties. When we were invited to people’s homes, they would ask us to bring gelato.”

The gelato remained a cottage industry for several years until Marcia lost her job with a telecom company early in 2005. At the unemployment office, she learned of a self-employment assistance program that offered job-seekers help in starting their own business.

At that point Marcia got the idea of starting a gelato business based on her husband’s home recipes and enrolled in the 60-hour program which entailed eight weeks of general business classes in which she learned how to market a business, insure it, set up a Web site.

By April 2005, Blackwell’s Organic had been incorporated and the couple was shopping for gelato-making equipment.

“I found a company that was holding a seminar on how to make gelato with an Italian gelato master,” said Marcia.

Within a couple of weeks they had machinery, like a batch freezer and hot mixer, on order that cost \$20,000 to \$40,000.

“It was a pretty big leap,” Marcia said.

Meanwhile, Tom continued to perfect and test recipes, and Marcia did the legwork involved in getting the

company up and running.

“Tom’s the recipe guru,” she said. “I do everything else.

“Making gelato on a stove is really different than doing it in bigger batches. Tom changed the recipes for bigger batches,” said Marcia, explaining that wasn’t the only obstacle to overcome.

“I had to source all of our ingredients because we needed large quantities and had to deal with different suppliers,” she said. “That was a challenge because we wanted to keep it organic and fair trade. Also, because we’re a small company, suppliers want you to buy tractor-trailer loads. I needed to find a supplier willing to ship smaller quantities.

“There were a lot of barriers,” she said “We had to get organic certification from the USDA and the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA).

From ingredients to bar codes, Marcia researched, reached out and networked.

It was a lot of leg work,” she acknowledged.

With the kitchen set up and producing a small quantity of product for local outlets like Dean’s Natural Market in Ocean Township and Shrewsbury, and Jesse’s Cafe in West End, Marcia has turned her attention to marketing and getting the word out to health-conscious consumers.

Tastings are scheduled for Jan. 22 and 23, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. at Dean’s Shrewsbury market.

Reaction, she said, is always positive at tastings of the intense fruit sorbetto flavors that are available in blueberry, lemon, mango, orange, pineapple and raspberry; and the creamy textured soy gelato in chocolate, coffee, peanut butter, peanut butter chocolate swirl, vanilla and holiday nog.

“Each flavor is true to its name,” Marcia said. “When you sample a spoonful of chocolate soy gelato, it’s like biting into a cool bar of chocolate, and strawberry sorbetto has the fresh-picked taste of strawberries.”

At \$8-\$9 a pint, Blackwell’s Organic soy gelato and fruit sorbetto is pricey, but Marcia is hoping shoppers will recognize the value they are getting.

While distribution is limited, the kitchen has the capacity to manufacture 1,000 pints of gelato and sorbetto per week.

“We’re averaging a nominal amount right now,” Marcia said, “but we hope in the next few months to manufacture 1,000 pints a month, then over the summer, to go to 1,000 pints per week. Then we’ll be looking to have our own building.”

But, Marcia is quick to point out, projections aren’t only about profitability.

“It’s not all about making money. It’s about how we do it and our conscience. I just think that I want to run our business the way we run our lives. They’re synonymous. My name is on this product.”