



ORGANICALLY ORGANIC



Sample-Sized Blackwell's Organic Gelato & Sorbetto

Admit it: There was a time, maybe not so long ago, when someone would bring up the subject of organic food and you'd start looking around for the nearest exit. Not because you think there's anything wrong with getting pesticides and other horrors out of our food stream, but because of the mix of moral superiority and harmony-of-the-spheres loopiness that often serves as the verbal packing for such good-sense ideas.

It's hard enough being reminded of your bad dietary choices, especially when the person doing the reminding is a weird-beard or earth mother who tells you that his or her VW bus runs on your French-fry grease. But when the purported benefits of free-range

chicken or meatless diets start ranging out beyond the travel limits of the Space Shuttle to the distant galaxies of the universe, you may be tempted to speed-dial Cluck U for a bucket of wings as you as you tear home in your SUV.

Given the millions of Americans who have begun to rethink what goes onto their foods and into the earth, the stereotype of the vegan proselytizer is probably no longer operative. Still, the organic-Prius-herbal-holistic crowd might benefit from a wholesale image makeover, one that replaces some lingering out-there-isms with simple pragmatism.

In that sense, Marcia Blackwell is a compelling ambassador of sorts for the organics movement.

Blackwell's a businesswoman who is committed to living her life within a sensible framework in as many ways as she can. The house she owns with her husband, Tom, in Long Branch, is outfitted with a rooftop solar system that has driven their electricity costs down to zero over the past year. In fact, it's less than zero, because the power company wound up sending them a check for \$25 for the surplus juice they put into the power grid. She's a master gardener who uses no pesticides or herbicides on her flowers and plants. Trained as a scientist, she serves on the zoning board in her home town because the mayor, Adam Schneider, told her to put her money where her mouth was after she registered some complaints.

What brings Marcia to our attention is the company she started here in Red Bank just over a year ago. It's called Blackwell's Organic, and it produces dairy-free gelato, using soy instead of milk, and sorbetto made with organic fruit and juices. The products are already in 30 stores from New York to Maryland, including Dean's Natural Food

Market in Shrewsbury, Dearborn Farms and Harmony Natural Foods in Middletown, and HealthFair and Sickles Market in Little Silver. They're also available this time of year at the Red Bank Farmers' Market.

Yes, the promotional material for the company claims the products are "Better for your body, your soul and the planet." But that's as close to extra-terrestrial as it gets, because its founder is someone who seems truly grounded.

Blackwell, who is 43 years old, studied anthropology and archaeology in college, interned at a museum in Baltimore, and after graduation was hired as its head of public relations. "I understood the vocabulary," she says. Later, she became the 13th employee hired for a Texas-based



Marcia Blackwell

telecommunications start-up. She managed the New Jersey office, a job that involved dealing with engineers to get them what they needed, whether that was anti-static flooring or high-tech gear. "They'd say, 'I need a laser, this frequency, yadda yadda yadda,' and I would order it," she says.

Blackwell loved her work, but the company went belly up in the winter of 2005, and she found herself jobless. "My husband said, 'It's going to be difficult to find an ideal situation, because you just left one,' " she recalls over lunch at No Joe's, before going to hand out samples of her product at a supermarket. But she and Tom had been encouraged by friends over the years to commercialize the soy-based gelatos he

made for himself (he's a lactose-intolerant foodie). And a month after Marcia got pink-slipped, she spotted a brochure for a program on starting one's own business at the unemployment office. The idea clicked, and Marcia was on her way.

"We said, 'When are we ever going to have this opportunity again?'"

Blackwell went through the program, which is run by the Small Business Development Center at Brookdale Community College, whose experts "really helped streamline the process" of setting up a new business, she says. She and Tom, who has a career in fire safety systems, took on the challenges of scaling up recipes, setting up manufacturing and packaging, clearing regulatory hurdles and selling to stores.

It's not as though Blackwell saw a completely open field ahead of her, of course. There are plenty of non-dairy frozen desserts on the market, some made by big companies, including Kraft Foods. "But there are also a lot of non-dairy frozen desserts that I don't want to put in my mouth," says Marcia. She and Tom "didn't want to make a product that would compromise our ideals," she says.

For example, there's a gummy seaweed extract called carageenan that's used to create smooth textures in food, including frozen desserts. But carageenan has been linked to colon cancer. Blackwell was determined to avoid it, and instead "we used food science to give our product the creaminess, and had to adjust our recipes," she says.

The resulting products are dairy-free, cholesterol-free, preservative-free and gluten-free. Blackwell's Organic also uses only chocolate and coffee that are fair-trade certified. And its sorbetti are potently fruity,

fully retaining the texture of such ingredients as strawberry and mango.



Oh, and the lids of its containers are recyclable.

Marcia says she's been aided greatly by food science experts at the Rutgers Food Innovation Center with packaging and FDA labeling issues, and by people like Dean Nelson of Dean's Natural Foods, who helped her find a northeast distributor. "He's helping a lot of entrepreneurs," she says.

The Catherine Street-based Blackwell's Organic, which has one employee, isn't yet profitable, but it is growing "at a steady, controlled pace," Blackwell says, and is able to donate one percent of sales to charity.

It hasn't been a year without stresses. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't ever freak out," says Marcia. "When somebody says 'no,' it's very hard not to take personally, because this business is so wrapped up in our lives. But I approach all of life's hurdles methodically. I gather all the data, analyze it and make a decision."

Her aim? "I want to prove—to myself and to the world—that you can have an environmentally sustainable business and still make money."

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