

COMPANY POSTS HEALTHY GAINS



Red Bank business sells soy gelato, fruit sorbetto

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AT A GLANCE

NAME: Blackwell's Organic LLC.

LOCATION: Red Bank.

FOUNDED: 2005.

DESCRIPTION: Makes organic, dairy-free and vegan fruit sorbetto and soy gelato in 12 flavors, including blueberry, lemon, orange, strawberry, raspberry and chocolate. The product is sold in specialty and organic food stores.

STAFF PHOTO: PETER ACKERMAN, CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER)
Marcia Blackwell, owner of Blackwell's Organic LLC, takes gelato from a machine with a scoop to hand pack it into containers.

Living an environmentally friendly and healthy lifestyle is nothing new to Marcia Blackwell and her husband, Tom.

Their Long Branch home is powered by solar electricity from the panels on their roof. Marcia Blackwell also has an organic garden.

So it makes sense that her business, Blackwell's Organic LLC, has a similar feel. Based in Red Bank, the company makes soy gelato and fruit sorbetto, which are organic, vegan, dairy-free and gluten-free desserts. The products are sold at organic and specialty food stores.

"We walk the walk," said Marcia Blackwell, 43. "We are not a multimillion-dollar company that saw organic as a trend and decided we are going to make organic Oreos," she said. "We live the lifestyle, and we want to impart that on our business."

She started the company last year after she was laid off from a job as an office manager at a telecommunications company.

She took her first step by signing up for a self-employment assistance program at Brookdale Community College, a entrepreneurial training program funded by the state Department of Labor.

Blackwell, who is a member of the Long Branch Zoning Board of Adjustment, had never really wanted to start her own business before. She had a well-paying, challenging job and enjoyed her co-workers.

"My husband said it will be difficult to duplicate such a perfect situation unless you work for yourself," Blackwell said.

She knew she had a product. Her husband, who works as a sprinkler fitter, had been making dairy-free gelato since 2003.

"There are a lot of dairy-free alternatives out there," she said. "We just weren't happy with the ingredient list and the flavor."

He developed his own recipe through trial and error. "When we decided to start the business, we had a lot of people sitting around this dining room table, saying, "Taste this chocolate, taste that chocolate, taste that strawberry, taste this strawberry, tell me which one you like better," she said.

Gelato is the Italian word for ice cream, which is traditionally made with milk. Blackwell uses organic soy instead of milk. Sorbetto, which is frozen fruit, water and sugar, is the Italian word for sorbet.

"We decided to create a product that would be as clean as possible," Blackwell said. "Everything on our label, you recognize, you know what it is. Chances are you have it in your refrigerator or your freezer. If you don't, you can certainly get it."

The couple took out a home equity line of credit to help fund the business, initially using about \$50,000 to buy equipment such as a batch freezer, a mixer and a blast freezer. She shares a commercial kitchen at Broad Street Exchange Catering in Red Bank to make the gelato and fruit sorbetto each week. Her husband and nephew help in the production process.

Blackwell got some guidance from Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton. Officials there helped her with the products' nutrition labels and packaging, the rules for food manufacturing and to work her way through U.S. Food and Drug Administration requirements.

"They were able to put me in touch with the right people, because they knew the right people," she said.

By last fall, she started to test market, putting pints of her frozen dessert in Dean's Natural Food Market, which has stores in Shrewsbury and Ocean, and at Merrick Farm in Howell.

"Her product really, really encompassed everything that we are about," said market owner Dean Nelson. "She is local. It's organic. It's vegan."

She hit the market in January. "I just started knocking on doors (of stores) and saying "Hi, I am Marcia. I live in the neighborhood.' It just kind of grew from there."

She later found a company to deliver her product. With the help of Nelson, she also signed up a distributor to sell her cold dessert throughout the Northeast.

Now her products are in about 50 stores, and sales are doing well, she said. Besides the specialty stores, she recently got some space in the freezer in the natural food section at Super Foodtown in Ocean Township.

Blackwell would not disclose sales figures, but she hopes her company will become profitable by next year.

"We are still a really small company," Blackwell said. "Sales are obviously a focus, but we also have the focus of creating a really great business that people can trust and believe in and learn from."

Now she is concentrating on getting into more stores and getting people to know the company's products. "It sells itself," she said. "Once people taste it, the majority of people buy it."

And she is getting some recognition. Next month, Blackwell's Organic will be presented with the Emerging Business Award from the National Association of Women Business Owners' Central New Jersey chapter.