

# LOCAL HERO AWARD: FOOD ARTISAN

## BLACKWELL'S ORGANIC, RED BANK

*Pure flavor and good intentions.*

BY JENNIFER PAPALE RIGNANI

**M**arcia Blackwell meets me at the Red Bank kitchen where she and family members whip up 700 pints of dairy-free gelato and fruit sorbetto each Tuesday and Wednesday. Dressed in the comfy clothes of a person unafraid to get messy, Blackwell's cheerful, unassuming attitude is kind of like her products. "We just keep things simple here. No more than five or six ingredients in each kind and never any artificial flavorings," she explains as she opens a shipment of vanilla beans. Holding up a bunch of the pungent sticks, she invites me to smell them. The sweet, familiar scent drapes the small working kitchen.

We talk about food and fair trade and farming as she putters about the space she co-leases with three other area food businesses. She is

genuine in her commitment to the Earth and to farming. "It just doesn't take all that much to be conscious of what we put into our bodies, where we grow it, where we buy it and how we make it. For us, it's not just about making a good product but about doing good." The couple succeeds in their aim of running a business that has minimal impact on the environment and uses no preservatives.

Blackwell's Organic was born in 2005 when, after Marcia found herself out of work after her long-term telecom employer closed its doors, the couple decided to turn their passion into a business. Working directly with local and area suppliers and distributors, and with help from Rutgers Food Innovation Center, their goals have been met and by the end of 2008 a profit is expected. Though Blackwell points out that they aren't making organic gelato to make a killing, "just a living."

She hopes that people will realize after tasting their gelato that vegans and dessert aficionados alike are her customers. I'll admit, the idea of organic, dairy-, cholesterol- and gluten-free gelato made this Italian dessert addict nervous. Visions of cold tofu swirled in my head as I entered the building. But my fears were unfounded. Blackwell's Organic really, truly transcends categorization other than that of a great dessert.

In addition to Blackwell's popular mango, coffee, chocolate, peanut butter and strawberry flavors, which I devour guiltily, today the first-ever batch of blackberry is on the table in all its purple-pink glistening glory. A taste of this sour-sweet stuff transports me straight from January to July—and it's good.

The Blackwells' gelato is utterly pure, made from original recipes that use strict certified-organic processes and ingredients. This thoroughly modern business is explained by that centuries-old adage that necessity is the mother of invention. Necessity in this case came in the form of Tom Blackwell's lactose intolerance

combined with his love of gelato. Dissatisfied with available nondairy desserts, in 2004 he bought an ice cream maker and began tinkering with recipes. To mimic the milk in gelato, he experimented with rice milk, almond milk and water, finally choosing soy milk because it can thicken to a creamy texture when heated. Already an advocate of locally grown organic produce, he began adding strawberries to some batches and Jersey blueberries to others. Popular flavors like coffee are also custom made using triple-certified (fair trade, organic and bird-friendly) coffee or pure organic FairTrade cocoa. Blackwell's never uses fillers or extracts, preferring to see just how much real fruit or chocolate they can pack into a pint and still make it scoopable.

The Blackwells' commitment to making the world around them a better place doesn't end with licking the spoon. They live in a 100-percent solar-powered house and their company is a fixture at charity functions, where they regularly donate time, product and money. Their efforts seem infectious. As we chat over our gelato, a neighboring woodsmith pops his head in the back door to ask, how's it goin'? A lively discussion ensues about the benefits of wood mulch and composting. With the fragrance of vanilla and goodwill in the air, here on this chilly day in the middle of a busy world, this simple food and its creator seem to honor life as it should be.

Blackwell's Organic Gelato is now on the shelves of over 40 stores statewide and available in a growing number of restaurants. The company also ships throughout the continental USA through its online store.

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Tom and Marcia Blackwell