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COOL sensations



Long Branch couple's dessert company guided by lifestyle

STAND OUTSIDE THE FRONT OF MARCIA AND TOM BLACKWELLS HOME IN LONG Branch and you can't miss a statement showcasing the couple's feelings about the environment.

The solar panels. While many homeowners try to hide their home's solar panels from the street, the Blackwells put them out front for all to see.

"I really think that part of my mission is to lead by example," says Marcia Blackwell, 45. "I am proud the panels are on the front of my house. School kids come here and all sorts of different people come to learn about solar or ask questions. Our door is always open."

Their spirit for healthy living extends into their personal and professional lives.

The Blackwells, with Marcia at the helm, started Blackwell's Organic LLC in 2005. The company makes a line of soy gelato and fruit sorbetto, using Tom Blackwell's recipes. The icy desserts, which are organic, vegan, dairy-free and gluten-free, are sold at organic and specialty food stores and some supermarkets.

"We truly believe that your personal views should carry over to your business and your business values should carry over to your personal life," Blackwell says. "So why would we act any different in business than we would at home?"

"You can't get away with saying, 'Oh, that's just business.'"

STORY BY **DAVID P. WILLIS** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MIKE SYPNIEWSKI**

It's not," echoes husband Tom, 40. "It's your life. It's who you are as much as anything."

When it comes to being a friend to the environment, the Blackwells go all in. The solar panels generate more electricity than they use. The rest goes back on the grid and is sold to the power company.

They compost household organic waste, everything from eggs to the ends of carrots, and turn it into mulch.

The couple is serious about recycling. Everything possible, from glass and paper to cardboard, batteries and electronics goes into the bin.

"The neighbors use Marcia as the recycling center," says Tom. "They know just to bring stuff over, cardboard and the like, and throw it in the back of our pickup truck."

ALL THINGS ORGANIC

The Blackwells tend an organic garden. No fertilizers or pesticides are used on the indoor or outdoor plants. And they don't worry about the lawn.

And the food the couple eat at home is organic. Even their two dogs eat organic.

"It just makes plain sense," says Tom. "You save money and you help out the environment or you help out other people and you help out yourself. Why not do it?"

"We were brought up with values to care for each other and our families and where we live," Marcia says. "We just have gone the extra step."

That step has guided the Blackwells and their company.

Tom, who works as a sprinkler fitter, has been making dairy-free gelato since 2004. Lactose intolerant, he hasn't been able to eat ice cream since he was a kid.

But he never liked the non-dairy versions he tasted over the years.

"I love to cook," Tom says. "If I don't like something, I will go out and figure a way to make it better myself so I decided I am going to start making my own."

He bought an ice cream maker and started experimenting with different flavors and ingredients at home.

The results: "Some were pretty flavorless. Some were just plain old nasty and some were really good. I started to understand that there was a common thread on the good ones and I started

Charles Blackwell Jr., a chief gelato maker, scoops some sorbetto into a pint at the company's kitchen in Red Bank.



PHOTO: BRADLEY J. PENNER

MARCIA ON QUALITY: "THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO DON'T COMPROMISE ON FOOD. SO, FOR US, IF IT DOESN'T TASTE GOOD, WHY EAT IT?"



connecting the dots."

He packs fresh fruits, such as lemon and strawberry, into his sorbetto. "I don't believe in subtle flavors. If you have to guess the flavor, I am doing something wrong."

Sorbetto is the Italian word for sorbet and contains frozen fruit, water and sugar. Gelato is the Italian word for ice cream and is made with milk.

The desserts had to be dairy-free. That it contained organic ingredients also was a given.

"I would never use a flavoring, an extract, an artificial flavoring," he says. "I am not feeding it to myself. I am not feeding it to somebody else."

The coffee, chocolate and evaporated cane juice ingredients also are Fair Trade-certified. It means they were raised on land in which the workers received a fair wage for picking or growing the product.

"We want to eat it," Marcia says. "We also take great care in making all these important decisions about the ingredients and our suppliers so that our customers can be confident when they buy the product."

PRAISE FROM FRIENDS

The proof was when he started to hear from friends.

"The neighbors started saying, "If

you are coming over for dinner, what can you bring? Bring some of your ice cream, bring some of your dessert," Tom says.

Marcia started the company after she was laid off from a job as an office manager at a telecommunications company. She signed up for a self-employment assistance program at Brookdale Community College.

The couple took out a home equity line of credit to help fund the business, initially about \$50,000, to buy equipment such as freezers and a mixer. Marcia works out of a commercial kitchen she shares in Red Bank to make the soy gelato and fruit sorbetto with three part-time employees each week.

Blackwell's Organic comes in six fruit sorbetto flavors — lemon, orange, pineapple, mango, raspberry and strawberry — and five soy gelato flavors — chocolate, coffee, peanut butter, peanut butter chocolate swirl and vanilla.

It's now available in about 40 organic and gourmet stores in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. It's expensive. Given the cost of its natural ingredients, a pint can run you \$8 to \$10.

"There are people who don't compromise on food. So, for us, if it doesn't taste good, why eat it?" Marcia says. "There are some people that'll always buy the cereal that's on sale even if it

tastes like cardboard.

"I would rather spend more money on good food and maybe not buy that dress or go to the movies."

TASTY RESULTS

Blackwell's Organic has a following.

"What's most important to us is that it's good, that it tastes good," says Bob Sickles, owner of Sickles Market in Little Silver, one of Blackwell's first customers.

"Marcia is local so we always look to support local people as long as the product is a good product," Sickles says. "She is extremely supportive of us as a store."

Delicious Orchards in Colts Neck also was one of the first stores to sell Blackwell's Organic.

"It is something that's New Jersey and we like to foster New Jersey products," says Cynthia Nappa, manager of speciality foods at the store. "It was just the pristine kind of product ... that would have a nice fit here."

Marcia Blackwell does in-store demonstrations of her sorbetto and gelato at both stores.

"It is not like just having someone demonstrate something," Nappa says. "These are people with a passion and it makes a huge difference when they are actually presenting their product.

"She has done a great job with it." ✦

Marcia and Tom playfully enjoy sampling their product which can be found locally in fine gourmet specialty stores.