
RETAIL NOTEBOOK

A taste of 'Bliss'

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The humble beginnings would be hard to match, but then so would the growth curve.

In the space of a year, Luna Marcus and Larry Kaplowitz have gone from serving their self-concocted, coconut milk-based, frozen desserts at tasting parties in their home to "commercial" production from a trailer in their driveway, and now to near-capacity at their first stand-alone facility a few blocks from home.

They've gone from a \$1.50 ice cream maker they found at a Goodwill thrift shop to a \$20,000 gelato freezer, with a \$4,000 ice cream machine somewhere in between.

And they're preparing to make the jump from homegrown, all-natural dessert upstarts to proprietors of a regional food production and distribution company.

Was there ever a reason to doubt the prospects for Luna & Larry's Coconut Bliss?

"I guess the response to the tastings was a clue," Kaplowitz says. "When 50 or 60 people started showing up at our house ...

"...and lining up out the door," Marcus says, finishing the thought.

The two of them work together like that. Both artists - him on canvas, her in the kitchen.

Both with an awareness of the social, environmental and nutritional implications of everyday choices - until shortly before the launch of their business, they lived together at the communal Lost Valley Educational Center, an "intentional community" near Dexter.

"I think we kind of met over our shared passion for food," says Marcus, who served as kitchen coordinator while at Lost Valley. "We made chocolates for awhile, but as we started making this (Coconut Bliss), it was really compelling."

The two intended at first to convert their love of food into a restaurant enterprise featuring organic, healthful dishes.

She has a degree in nutrition from a naturopathic institute in Seattle, and hoped to prepare her recipes for Eugene's large customer base of vegetarian and organic diners.

But Bliss intervened.

Marcus and Kaplowitz say they were well aware of the healthful benefits of coconut milk from its uses in Thai dishes, and so they gave it a try in their thrift shop ice-cream maker.

They wanted a nutritionally-justifiable sweetener, and settled on agave syrup - from the same Mexican plant from which tequila is produced.

"We started making it, and it was really good," Kaplowitz says. "So we started making it for our friends, and they loved it."

The pair come from backgrounds of non-profit work and education, and admit to what Kaplowitz describes as "a steep learning curve" in the ways of commerce. They signed up for a class on getting started in business, through the Lane Community College Business Development Center, and with the help of a lawyer friend set up a limited partnership to pull together a total of \$70,000 in startup investments and loans.

The first two outlets to carry their products were Red Barn Natural Grocery and The Sweet Life Patisserie, both nearby in Eugene's Whiteaker neighborhood.

The others have come quickly, and almost without effort: a total of 10 natural food stores in Eugene, including all four Market of Choice outlets; along with five groceries in Portland and one each in Ashland, Grants Pass and Corvallis. (The full list is available on the company's Web site, www.coconutbliss.com.)

Coconut Bliss goes for \$5.99 per pint at most stores, due largely to the expensive ingredients.

"We didn't have to do any selling," Marcus says. "We just walked in (to prospective stores), gave them a sample and they wanted it. It was great - that gave us the (energy) to get going."

There was a problem, however - the trailer in their driveway. It had been approved by health inspectors and seemed an easy way to get started, but its limited capacity fell behind the local demand for Coconut Bliss in less than a month.

"Last summer, we were (preparing their current facility) and doing about 12 hours of production a day, just to keep up with the stores in Eugene," Kaplowitz says.

They moved last August into their small but more-efficient facility behind the Computer Reuse and Recycling Center at Second Avenue and Polk Street.

With two employee/business partners, Marcus and Kaplowitz are now producing 900

to 1,000 pints per week, in 34-pint batches.

Through trial and error, they've settled for now on a menu of six "essential" flavors, nine "special edition" varieties and another five "seasonal" offerings.

And, even though they now do production work just three days a week and distribution another two days, they're close to outgrowing their space and are already looking for larger quarters - and a larger market.

"The Pacific Northwest looks doable to us right now," Marcus says. "That's our next step.

"We just really have to figure out how we can keep going, and keep our integrity."

Kaplowitz says he's lost some of the cynicism he had toward the business community, as he faces decisions that could affect the nature of his product - everything from skimping on ingredients to the prospects of selling out to a larger corporation.

"There are so many temptations to cut corners and make easier choices," he says. "That seems like a really slippery slope. We're really clear that we don't want to go that route."