

Sunday, November 9, 2008

Gourmet cookies' sweet profits began in kitchen

For seven years, Donna Phelps has baked cookies in her Anderson Township kitchen or the kitchen of her church, hauling them to Findlay Market and selling out most days before 1 p.m. Her success and 2007 revenues of \$75,000 have led her to open a bakery with daughter Leah.

Donna's Gourmet Cookies, 10774 Montgomery Road., Sycamore Township, has big goals - \$500,000 in annual revenues in five years. Landing more retail outlets will be critical. A grand opening is Monday.

WHEN DID YOU know that your cookies were something special?

I got the feeling right from the beginning. Even before I started selling them, I'd take them everywhere and everybody loved them. But people always love things that are free. The first time I went to Findlay Market, I sold 180 cookies in an hour and a half. I thought, "OK, people like them. We can keep doing this."

AT \$1.25 EACH, these are not cheap cookies.

No, but we do offer six for \$6.50. And we have 18 varieties. We don't want to price them out of the ballpark, but people expect to pay a good price because they want a cookie that is good. Consumers have high standards. A lot of bakeries are not using butter, which we use. We also have brownies, cupcakes and Belgian waffles made with the recipe of Taste from Belgium of Findlay Market.

Even though we have a storefront (at Findlay Market), we took over an existing bakery to have a bigger kitchen. What's going out the back door is more than what's going out the front door. Corporate (sales) have become huge for us.

We deliver for company meetings - a lot of hospitals buy for their meetings. We'd like to get into bigg's and Jungle Jim's. Keller's IGA in Clifton is a great spot for us. They're doing 30 dozen a week. It's a tiny grocery store, and they're doing all right.

STARTING A BUSINESS in these times is pretty impressive. Any advice for others?

Talk to somebody in your business. I didn't know anybody who made cookies, so I talked to a friend who owned a pizzeria; I talked to a friend who owned a chicken restaurant. I just didn't know anybody who baked cookies.

And another thing - save your money before you open. Take the money you're making and sock it away because loans are going to be really hard to get. It took us a while. We've been plying our banker with cookies for two years now.

But I knew I had to do this. My husband retired in September and my last daughter went off to school, so nobody was at home. This place became available. Everything looked like this should happen, and I knew I couldn't live the rest of my life thinking: "I should have done this."

John Eckberg

