Food

THE BOSTON GLOBE WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2008 | BOSTON.COM/FOOD

Her dip into a sideline led to a second career

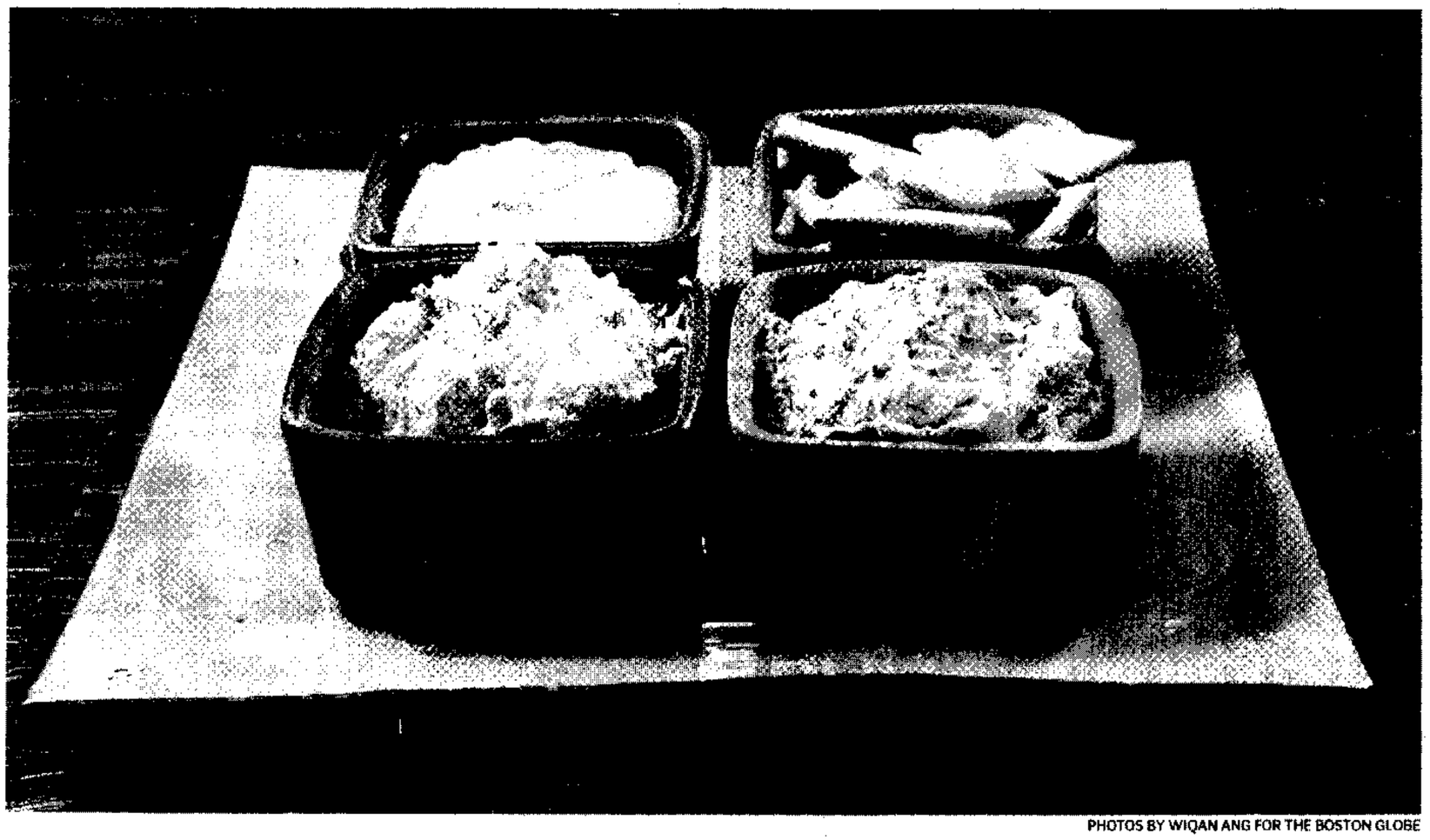
By Rachel Travers
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WEST CONCORD — Margaret Hammill has been making dips and spreads her whole life. "Our family always had cocktails and appetizers," she says, so the two items became favorites. "The earliest was a family recipe for a deviled ham dip." Her taste has evolved since then.

To Die For is Hammill's small company, begun as a sideline to her work at an aviation consulting firm. Many of her co-workers haven't a clue about her other life. The 65-year-old entrepreneur has spent nights and weekends making small batches of an array of products that now add up to 28 varieties.

It all started at Vintages in West Concord, a boutique wine shop she frequented, whose previous owners became her friends. They said, "If you'd like to try to make some dips you can bring them in and I'll sell them." That was all Hammill needed to hear. The original dips sold out immediately. When the owners asked Hammill to make a cheddar and blue cheese dip, she developed one, and it has been one of her biggest sellers.

But Hammill was working out of her home. She knew the board of health needed to license her and or she would have to find a catering kitchen. Steve Verrill of Verrill Farm had an old commercial kitchen on his farm that no one was using. A previous tenant didn't keep the place very clean, so Verrill was hesitant. Hammill convinced him, and in December 1999 "To Die For" became incorporated. Verrill became an enthusiastic customer.



PHOTOS BY WIQAN ANG FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Margaret Hammill (above right) turned her favorite family recipes into To Die For homemade dips.

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Rick Gordon, owner of Gordon's Fine Wines & Liquors' three stores, also bought the line. "I tasted the cheddar cheese and horseradish dip, and I was hooked," says Gordon. "Once people try them, that's all it takes." The merchant says customers know the delivery schedule and wait in the parking lot for Hammill to arrive.

At the West Concord Liquor Store, Cajun crab used to be a bestseller; so was cheddar and blue cheese, says co-owner Mary Ann Saia. "But now it seems to be the artichoke and Parmesan." Rich Smith, who works for Saia, piped up, "These spreads and dips should carry a label saying 'highly addictive.'"

The pricey products sell from $6.99 to $7.99 for an eight-ounce container. That doesn't seem to deter fans.

Last spring, Jennifer Verrill-Faddoul of Verrill Farm offered to show Hammill how to use a 15-quart mixer so she could start producing larger quantities instead of the five-quart batches she was making. In the summer, Hammill leased her own commercial kitchen in West Concord. More recently, she added a refrigerated truck to her business. She cut her day job to three days so she can concentrate on expanding into more markets.

She knows it won't be a one-woman operation for much longer and she's holding onto doing the Saturday deliveries herself for a while. "This is what's made it so worthwhile," she says. She meets her customers in the parking lot and they're already deciding what to buy.

To Die For spreads are available at Gordon's Fine Wines & Liquors, 894 Main St., Waltham, 781-893-1900; 599 Moody St., Waltham, 781-894-2771; and 51 Watertown St., Watertown, 617-926-1119; Verrill Farm, 11 Wheeler Road, Concord, 978-369-4494; West Concord Liquor Store, 1216 Main St., West Concord, 978-369-3872, or call 978-369-1811.