

'CAUSE I'M A WOMAN: W - O - M - A - N





Left to right: Deborah Taylor, Carolyn Stevens, Ilene Bezahler (editor), Rosie DeQuattro (writer), Linda Guttman, Carol Coutrier, Judy Kales and Margaret Hammill

'CAUSE I'M A WOMAN: W-O-M-A-N

BY ROSIE DEQUATTRO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL PIAZZA

I can stretch a greenback dollar bill from here to kingdom come; I can play the numbers, pay my bills and still end up with some... Lay down at 5, jump up at 6 and start all over again.

—Leiber and Stoller, 1962

They cut deals with giants like Whole Foods and Stop & Shop. They negotiate contracts with national co-packers and food brokers; they work at 40-hour-a-week day jobs and then pound out 40 pounds of product at the end of the day and feel refreshed; they listen to finicky customers, soothe aggressive sales reps, calculate profit and loss, minister to aging parents and tame a mean hot-flash. They come from art school, secretarial school, business school and no school. And boy, can they cook!

Here we write about six of them—six local women who run successful food businesses that they began after turning 50.

Unlike most baby-boomers, none of these women is planning her retirement. All bring to their businesses a lifetime of accumulated skills and lessons learned from a variety of former careers, none of which was food-related. Here are their stories.

DEBORAH TAYLOR, *Deborah's Kitchen*

Pear and lime sauce on asparagus? Figs and ginger on fish? Hot peach on chicken? Deborah Taylor, owner of Deborah's Kitchen, producer of Deborah's Spreadable Fruit, all-natural, low-sugar fruit spreads, is a self-proclaimed risk-taker when it comes to food. She is happiest in her kitchen mixing fruits and experimenting with combinations of the unexpected. Her slogan is "Think Outside the Bread Box," which means don't confine yourself to serving her rich fruit spreads just on toast.

Taylor, 58, is tall, sandy-haired, and has a quiet authority about her. We sat down to talk in her Littleton, MA, warehouse amidst cases and cases of her jewel-colored fruit spreads. She served me a variety of her spreads, like Forest Berries and Massachusetts Rubies, on bread with goat cheese. And told me her story.

Taylor grew up in the 1950s, in New York farm country. "We used to make jam in our house. I did it with my mother and she did it with her mother. We cooked practically every day—we made tons of cakes, pies and jam," Taylor recalls.

After graduating from Syracuse University with a BFA, Taylor went to work in advertising, doing design and illustration. At one point, she had her own advertising business and did free-lance work all over Boston. She even worked for a company that designed software for the transportation industry.

In between jobs, Taylor took time off to cook. And after 35 years, she took time off to cook more seriously.

"I started going to Haymarket. I'd bring home five flats of figs, for example," she says. She mixed various fruits and produced cases of jam as Christmas gifts for family and friends.

With lots of encouragement from friends, she secured a commercial kitchen in Jamaica Plain, where she was living at the time. She did some research and wrote a business plan that corroborated her initial thinking that the market for jam was indeed saturated. But not when it came to low-sugar fruit spreads—that market was expanding.

Taylor saw this as an opportunity: "I changed all my recipes to be low sugar."

With a small loan, in 2002 she launched her product, Deborah's Spreadable Fruit. Her redesigned product would be promoted as low-sugar, high-fruit spreads (66 percent fruit content). She began a campaign to educate the public about the benefits of a low-sugar diet, and about the many creative uses for her fruit spreads.

She sold it at farmers' markets, and made enough to pay off the loan. The farmers' markets were good venues to conduct ongoing market research and Taylor treated them like focus groups. "I love meeting my customers," she says, "and talking to them about what trends they're seeing," just like she did in her advertising days.

In 2006, Taylor sold her house in Jamaica Plain (it sold on the day of the open house) and moved to Littleton, where she rents a house and production space for packaging and filling orders.

Every year her business has grown. Last year she won an award at the New York Fancy Food Show for her Pear, Lime Limbo. She sells online, has wholesale customers, travels to trade shows, has brokers in Philadelphia and Georgia and uses a distributor. She has plans to expand production to accommodate food service-size accounts.

And she plans to address the demand for no-sugar fruit spreads. She won't reveal those plans yet, but with her courageous and scientific approach to recipe development (for accuracy, she uses a brixometer to measure sugar content) she's close to a breakthrough.

Taylor is realistic about her success: "When an open door presented itself, I stepped through. I've done my best to find out what people like. But ultimately it still comes down to 'Am I pleasing the customer?' That's keeping my eye on the prize."

CAROLYN STEVENS, *Aunt Ida's Baked Good*

Every item that comes out of Carolyn Stevens' beautiful, commercial home kitchen in Littleton honors her role models: her great Aunt Ida, "a wonderful cook," after whom she named the company, and her grandmother, whose image is on every label.

"My grandmother taught me to cook when I was 4 years old. She never followed a recipe and never wrote anything down," Stevens says.

Sitting in her comfortable kitchen, nibbling on delicate, buttery pecan cookies, we discuss her grandmother and the profound influence she had on Stevens' life. She proudly tells the story of her grandmother who, in 1918, at the age of 13, traveled to New York City and became a model, eventually designing her own clothes, which she sold at her own millinery shop there.

By the time Stevens was 3, and her parents had separated, grandmother moved in and cared for the family while Mom went to work. "I watched two women, my grandmother and my mother, put a darn good life together for my brother and myself," she says. The influences of these strong, independent women informed how Stevens developed her successful baking career.

So, here she was: biology major, married right out of college, two kids, and not one to do the neighborhood playgroup thing. She got a job servicing national payroll accounts at ADP (Automatic Data Processing) and loved it. She stayed with the company for 15 years. But when the opportunity came along within the company to switch to

HR and have a more family-friendly schedule, she took it—and soon discovered it was a bad move. So she left the company. She was 48, out of work, and faced with that difficult question: what to do with the rest of my life. But not for long.

Stevens' two passions were, and still are, cooking and working with flowers. Taking advantage of the hiatus, she decided to learn both, professionally. By day, she studied at the Cass School of Floral Design in Watertown and worked in a florist shop, and on the weekends she rolled-up her sleeves in the pastry program at Newbury College in Brookline.

Which field won out? "There was no question in my mind which I wanted to do. I fell in love [with pastry work] and was over-the-top thrilled every time."

The school didn't teach Stevens *how* to bake; they taught her how to make, for example, filo dough from scratch, or how to do production work so that every single cookie comes out looking the same in every size. She worked as a restaurant pastry chef for a while and then decided to start her business producing high-end wedding cakes from her home.

What followed was an extreme kitchen makeover that had her in tears. But the result was that for the past 10 years, she has been doing what she loves: producing everyday baked goods, using high-end ingredients you'd find in fine European pastries. And her 38 year marriage has survived.

These days, with her kitchen reaching production capacity, Stevens, 60, is planning her expansion strategy. She's developing a line of gluten-free cakes, like her moist and delicious Clementine Cake, and Whole Foods is on her radar.

In the spirit of the independent women of generations before her, Stevens comments, "It's been a wonderful ride. It's a lot of fun, and when it doesn't become fun anymore, then it's time to move on."

JUDY KALES, *Bountiful Pantry*

Judy Kales is a different story. Growing up in the 1950s in New York and New Jersey, Kales says that cooking wasn't anything that was very important: "My mother was not a good cook. I grew up with a lot of gray food."

She is now president of Bountiful Pantry, a Brookline- and Nantucket-based wholesale company that creates an extensive menu of packaged mixes including soups and chowders, side dishes, entrees, coffees, teas and other items.

So how did a culinary deprived girl like that get mixed up with food?

Roughly from age 20 to 50, Kales was in the business of helping companies start up other companies. She did this working in the corporate sector in various positions including director of marketing and as product manager. From 1971 to 1988, she started and owned a contemporary American crafts gallery in Harvard Square. In time, she fell out of love with retail.

Then in her late 40s, she confronted that inevitable, embarrassing midlife question: “What do I really want to be when I grow up?”

At the time, she was living on Nantucket with her husband, a teacher. Together, they brainstormed careers for her and decided on wholesale, packaged-food.

“I’ve always been fascinated by food history, about everything done [throughout history] to get tasty foods into our lives, all the traveling they did to get tea, risking lives to bring spices here, and the whole age of exploration.” They decided it would be tea, since “tea tied in nicely with Nantucket history ... Nantucket shipping, etc.”

They started the business out of their Nantucket home. “It was very ‘cottage industry,’” she says, laughing. The business took over two rooms of the house and, as business increased, Kales realized she couldn’t continue doing it this way—she needed to be out there selling the product. So, she contracted with a packing company that freed her to pursue customers.

But it hardly stopped at tea. “It’s soup weather year-round on Nantucket. It’s not that it’s so cold, but windy,” Kales says as she ladles Bountiful Pantry’s Farmhouse Chowder into my bowl. We’re sitting down to lunch in Kales’ Brookline dining room. Like a proscenium stage, the apartment’s dramatic picture window neatly frames the sky and we watch big puffy clouds exiting left, replaced by an achingly clear, blue October sky.

“One of the things I was trying to do when I started the soup business,” Kales explains, “was to have things my husband would eat. My goal was to come up with things that were tasty and could be made with minimal or no salt.”

The first soup they made was one the Pilgrims would have eaten, Peas Porridge. “I wanted to make soups that the Pilgrims might have had but with a contemporary flavor. They had peas.” Peas Porridge is still sold at the Plymouth Plantation. Bountiful Pantry now makes 18 soup mixes, which are sold at trade shows, through fund-raising catalogues (like the ones for school sports teams) and PTAs, at country stores, destination museums and to private labelers.

Kales loves many aspects of her business. “Doing demos, I get to talk to consumers. Because we’re wholesale, I don’t get to communicate directly with consumers; some of that is a lot of fun.”

Her work with people with disabilities is also rewarding. She has trained employees of a local Sheltered Workshop to sort and package her recipes. And her business has helped her with control issues. “Ultimately, I think what you realize the longer you’re in business is ... I can’t control everything. This is my lesson for the year: I’m trying to learn what I can control and not to make myself crazy about what I can’t.”

Now at age 60, she offers this advice to younger entrepreneurs: “Don’t look at what can’t be; look at what you can do, and figure out how to do it. Anything is possible, but let’s talk about what that means and how much it’ll cost.”

MARGARET HAMMILL, To Die For

Margaret Hammill dreams about retiring, but it’s not what you think. The 65-year-old Concord, MA, entrepreneur would like to eventually leave her 40-hour-per-week day job with an aviation consulting firm and spend more time running her business: To Die For dips and spreads.

“I never expected that I would like it so much or that it would be so popular,” admits the soft-spoken, youthful Hammill. Indeed, the closest she had ever come to working in the food business was once in the late 1960s, when she worked in the Jell-O division of General Foods.

In Hammill’s childhood household during the 1940s and ’50s, 4 p.m. was cocktail hour. Her parents drank whiskey sours and “always had something to eat with them—never just drinking.” She describes her mother, now 97, who lives near Hammill, as a “great cook and hostess. Sunday dinners were fantastic,” and at all the parties, families and guests were served crackers and homemade dips and spreads.

In 1982, when Hammill moved to Concord to live near family, she continued her passion for cooking and eating well.

The idea for the business developed about 10 years ago when Hammill was visiting a local wine shop and chatting with the owners. When the conversation turned to food, Hammill mentioned that she loved the kinds of foods that frequently accompany wine and that she loved to make them. The wine-shop owners suggested that she bring in some of her dips and spreads and they would try to sell them.

“So I went home and made some, and brought them in, and they sold right away. It just took off. It’s been successful ever since—it’s been amazing.”

With her product in demand, she graduated from her home kitchen to a licensed commercial kitchen, and began creating recipes for several accounts. Later, she moved to yet another kitchen, this one behind the post office in West Concord and within walking-distance of her home. This is where she mixes fresh ingredients and packs them into tubs ready to spread on crackers or chips, to munch with wine—perhaps whiskey sours?

She makes more than 25 flavors including Cajun Crab, Smoked Salmon & Dill, and Fiery Chipotle. She loves this kitchen: “It’s all mine; it rejuvenates me, takes my mind off everything else. I could have a day where I’m dragging myself thru the day because I’m tired, and I get here, I start making my dips and I’m wide awake.”

To Die For is a one-person business, with Hammill doing all the creating, packaging, distributing and selling. She wants to grow the business and realizes she needs to hire some help to do that. She has mixed feelings about this.

“I like being by myself and doing it all. I’m so concerned about someone else making my dips. I want them to taste the way I make them. It has to be someone who cares.” By summer, she hopes to be “retired”—and in the kitchen full-time.

LINDA GUTTMAN, *Best Friends Cocoa*

Best Friends Cocoa is owned by a woman whose reedy laugh is contagious.

“After all, it’s cocoa—what’s not to laugh about?” says owner Linda Guttman. “My whole life I never knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. After high school, my parents insisted I go to junior college, otherwise how else would I ever find a husband!”

This elicits another explosive laugh. Guttman worked as a secretary after junior college, in industries as disparate as film and TV, chiropractic offices and Polaroid. “I had a few bosses that were real jerks and I realized I couldn’t do secretarial work anymore.”

So after 25 years of that she consulted a career counselor, who encouraged her to invoke her entrepreneurial spirit, go to massage school and start her own massage therapy business.

Twenty-one years later, Guttman finally retired from massage therapy. But during those years, she had joined New England Women Business Owners (NEWBO) as a way to network and help build her massage practice. Every year she attended the organization’s annual fair where she and other NEWBO members would set up booths so vis-

Local, organic
and farmer-owned.
As good as it gets.

The Beidlers are one of 146
farm families here in New England
who co-own our cooperative.

ORGANIC VALLEY
Family of Farms
NEW ENGLAND PASTURES®
USDA ORGANIC

www.organicvalley.coop

© 2007 Organic Valley Family of Farms

itors could sample their products. As fate would have it, one year she decided to circulate throughout the fair and visit other booths.

“I discovered this booth where this woman had this great cocoa [Best Friends Cocoa, which was started by two best friends]. I tasted it and immediately fell in love with this product. And then she tells me it’s fat-free and I thought rather than have herb tea in my waiting room, I should have cocoa.”

Guttman became a regular customer. One day, about four years ago, she called the company to place her usual order and was told by the woman that she wasn’t going to do the cocoa business anymore and that there was no one interested in buying the business. Guttman was intrigued. She was at a point with massage where she realized she couldn’t continue it forever because of the physical and emotional toll it extracted. At the same time she was working with a business coach who was helping her plan what to do next. “I thought about it and bought Best Friends Cocoa.”

The Arlington company is located in a charming brick building that belies its former industrial uses. There’s congeniality to the work site that’s in keeping with its warm and fuzzy name. The employees are six compatible, friendly women who bike or walk to work. Guttman herself lives less than a mile away. At the facility, orders are processed, the cocoa is mixed and measured and packaged in beautiful foil-wrapped bags, tins and gift baskets. The cocoa comes in four flavors.

Guttman says her business is totally seasonal. Their season is August through January. She wants to start selling to places in the country that stay colder for longer, “where they may still be drinking cocoa in the spring. Down the road we will have to come up with another product that we can market in the off season.”

Her husband of 14 years, whom she describes as her “MIT geek,” is now her official partner. Together they negotiate deals big and small.

“Last year we got into Whole Foods, which was amazing,” she says.

Guttman admits that running Best Friends Cocoa is the hardest job she’s ever had. “For one thing, when I was a secretary, everything I managed was on my desk—not on my *desk top*, but physically *on the desk!* I’ve never had a job where there’s so much going on at the same time.”

And yet she adds that she’s learned more about business running Best Friends Cocoa than she did in any other job. The 61-year-old works seven-hour days in the office and then travels to tastings on the weekends. “And then when I have aggravation on the phone, I’m up all night!”

Laughing, she adds, “But I drink cocoa, and it keeps me pretty happy.”

CAROL COUTRIER, *The Launching Pad*

By the time she was 8 years old, Carol Coutrier was helping out in her father’s plant in Louisiana. Her father had started the Red Bird Ice Cream Company and Coutrier was his popsicle bagger. It was 1953.

Coutrier remembers how creative her father was. “He would come out with a new flavor and bring it home for my sister and me to try. I remember when he got his new fruit feeder; then we were tasting wonderful fresh banana and blackberry.” Her father was very encouraging and supportive of anything she wanted to pursue.

After college, a teaching career and a divorce, Coutrier was living in Sudbury and working at the library there. It was the beginning of her entrepreneurial climb. It started in 1975 with Kids First, a nonprofit after-school enrichment program that she and a partner started. It was the first of its kind.

Then in 1981, a friend introduced her to his homemade hommus, the paste of ground-up chickpeas also known as *hummus*. “I had never heard of hommus,” Coutrier recalls. But all her friends loved the stuff and so she and the friend partnered and went into the hommus business, “just for fun.”

She made up a batch in her kitchen and took it to the Star Market in Sudbury. As luck would have it, the deli manager, who was Armenian, knew what hommus was and recommended her to the head buyer, who ordered 50 pounds for the following week. Thus, the company, The Hommus Factory, was born. In three months they were in seven Star Markets, and at the end of the year, 45. Stop & Shop picked it up for 103 of their stores within a year.

In 1990, Coutrier bought out her partner. By then, hommus had become wildly popular and the competition had stiffened. Coutrier was feeling burned out and realized she had either to ramp up her product marketing or sell out. She decided to keep running the company as best she could. In a no-holds-barred marketing effort at the Boston Dairy and Deli Show in 1996, The Hommus Factory caught the attention of a buyer. Within a few months, Coutrier was out of the hommus business.

About a year before selling the business, people started calling Coutrier for advice in starting businesses. That’s how her current business, The Launching Pad, a consulting business, got started. Ten years later Coutrier couldn’t be happier. “I love it,” she says. “It’s so much fun. It’s my calling

in life. It's what I was meant to be doing."

Coutrier says that it's typical of many start-ups to initially have a good idea, a good product, some good press. But in order to maintain the momentum they often need encouragement, support and a positive attitude—just what Coutrier is expert at lending.

On a fee-for-service basis, Coutrier goes in and listens a lot and then tries to help the client move in the direction "that I hear them saying they want to go in." She knows a lot of people and has a lot of contacts in the food industry. After an initial meeting in which Coutrier decides whether or not to take on the client based on how she feels about the product, the client then has open access to Coutrier. "I'm all yours for 12 weeks," she explains.

Coutrier's job satisfaction running The Launching Pad is evident. "In The Hommus Factory," she says, "I became a workaholic. In this new business I want to help people avoid my mistakes. I want to help people fulfill their dreams." It's work she says she can do forever. "As long as I'm able to do this, I don't plan to ever retire. There's not much security but I prefer this to hommus."

Coutrier is also president of Massachusetts Specialty Foods Association, a statewide nonprofit that advocates for the state's specialty foods business sector. Many of the businesses profiled here are members of MSFA and benefit from the association's education, networking and peer support, sales and marketing opportunities, publicity and technical assistance. ❖

To try the fruits of their labors:

Deborah's Kitchen: www.deborahskitchen.com

Aunt Ida's Baked Goods: www.auntidasbakedgoods.com

Bountiful Pantry: www.bountifulpantry.com

To Die For: trytdf@aol.com

Best Friends Cocoa: www.bestfriendscocoa.com

The Launching Pad: ccoutrier@aol.com

Massachusetts Specialty Food Association: www.msfa.net

Free-lance food writer and a member of SlowFood, Rosie DeQuattro lives in Acton, MA with her furniture-maker/physician husband, Jerry Berke, and their dog, Rita. Rosie can be reached at rosiedequat@hotmail.com.

*Michael Piazza (www.michaelpiazzaphotography.com) was born and raised and schooled in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2000 his photography career moved him to New York City. While working for such clients as *Saveur*, *Food Arts*, and *The Australian Financial Review*, Michael also contributed work to *Slow Food USA* and Alice Waters' *Edible Schoolyard*. He has recently completed 2 cookbooks - *Simple Italian Sandwiches* and *A Ligurian Kitchen*. He currently lives in Watertown with his wife and two tail-less cats.*



With so many
colors, shapes, sizes,
and flavors,
there's always a perfect fit.

When you're looking for inspiration, flavor, and versatility, you're looking for USA Pears. Grilled, poached, sautéed—the possibilities are endless. *And delicious.*

Find recipes and more at
www.usapears.org/alwaysperfect

