

FACE TO FACE

Looking for the next big food brand?
Meet the entrepreneurs at your local farmers' market.

BY JENNIFER L. NELSON



Margaret Asselin (center) of Lickt Gelato with daughter Mackenna (left) and friend.

“I was able to test everything—from the messaging to the branding to the product itself. And the most important part was hearing what every single consumer had to say—the good and the bad.”

As a former corporate executive for one of the world's leading food and confectionery manufacturers, Maplewood resident and Mars/M&M alumna Margaret Asselin knew a thing or two about what it takes to market food products when she made the decision to launch her own business, Lickt Gelato, an artisan gelato and sorbet company.

That's how she ended up selling seasonal and year-round gelato flavors like salted caramel, blueberry lemonade sorbet, and Saigon cinnamon at New Jersey farmers' markets in Maplewood, South Orange and Mendham in 2011. She's returning this summer. “After working in the corporate world for 23 years, I wanted to go out on my own and rid my life of some of the chaos,” she says, noting that she wanted the flexibility to spend more time with her teenage daughter. “I had an idea for a product and thought the farmers' market was a great way to incubate the business.”

At the Tables

Indeed, along with connecting farmers with consumers, New Jersey's farmers' markets are serving an important role in the development of food-related start-up businesses across the state. Nearly 160 markets spread throughout New Jersey (the number of farmers' markets has doubled since 2007) provide a unique business opportunity for entrepreneurs who want to bring their product directly to consumers—and, unlike selling in a traditional retail environment, receive immediate feedback.

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“The farmers’ markets are more consumer-centric than retail stores; you see consumers front and center every day, and you’re standing right there to hear their comments, opinions and suggestions,” Asselin says. “I was able to test everything—from the messaging to the branding to the product itself. And the most important part was hearing what every single consumer had to say—the good and the bad.”

Another self-proclaimed alumna of corporate America, Belle Mead resident Kim Osterhoudt left a career in the financial services industry in 2009 to seek opportunities that proved more fulfilling, and ended up launching **Jams by Kim**. She quickly discovered that selling her all-natural artisanal jams at farmers’ markets provided access to customers that she never thought possible. “In the corporate world, your boss evaluates your job performance. I learned that every time a customer approaches my table at the farmers’ market to taste my product, it was like having an opportunity to evaluate myself,” she says. “I don’t have to push my product or deliver a sales pitch. People taste the jam and they want to take it home.”

For Osterhoudt, the idea to launch a jam business was inspired by a lifelong passion for cooking and by growing up in a family that used fruits and vegetables straight from the garden. She recalls that her grandfather presented her with grapes to make her own jelly when she was just 12 years old.

She has been selling her line of jams in savory flavors ranging from carrot and ginger jam to fruit flavors like Bartlett pear jam at farmers’ markets, including ones in Summit, Princeton and Bordentown City, for the past three years.

West Windsor resident Jim Barbour, president and CEO of **FunniBonz**, a family-owned company that produces all-natural barbecue sauces in flavors including original, spicy, fiery chipotle and tangy mustard, also stresses the value of meeting consumers face-to-face. “Being able to establish a direct relationship with the people who are purchasing your product is one of the biggest ways the farmers’ market boosted our business,” he says. “A consumer will see a product on the shelves of a supermarket and walk right by, but at a farmers’ market, you can invite them to sample your product. Being able to get your product into people’s hands—and, in our case, into their mouths—is a fantastic vehicle to build one-on-one relationships with customers.”

For Barbour, selling at farmers’ markets like the ones in Trenton, West Windsor and at Rutgers also means he’s on hand to answer questions about his product. It’s one of the many reasons he continues to sell at farmers’ markets even though his sauces are now on shelves in more than 2,000 stores nationwide, including Whole Foods, Bed Bath & Beyond and local stores like McCaffrey’s.

“Our business is growing, but we’re still strong advocates of farmers’ markets. They’re the hub of the community,” he says. “It’s the ideal place to educate the public and get the message out and build your brand and tell people all about the features and benefits of what you have to offer.”



Kim Osterhoudt of Jams By Kim



Taste by Taste

Like Osterhoudt, Gary Minkoff of Highland Park was inspired by family legacy to deliver his line of **Grandma Clara’s Original Cheesecake**—based on the recipe belonging to the grandmother of business partners Minkoff and his cousin Fred—directly to consumers at farmers’ markets. The cousins adapted the recipe Clara Rothschild had brought with her from her home country of Prussia in 1914, and created one-of-a-kind cheesecake singles with a curd-style cheese not traditionally found in cheesecake. The company went as far as to earn a special certification from the New Jersey Division of Agriculture that allowed them to stamp the “Made with Jersey Fresh Milk” logo on their cheesecakes. Although the brand is now in the process of re-launching, it initially found success at mar-

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“Many of these entrepreneurs were once employed in completely different industries. Now they’re trying to find their way in building a new life, and we love doing what we can to help promote their business.”

kets such as Minkoff’s neighborhood Highland Park Farmers’ Market. The overall mission of the farmers’ market—giving consumers the option to purchase fresh, locally grown produce and other products—stayed true to Minkoff’s vision of developing a product with ingredients that were sourced locally.

“Retail is a traditional model, and for those of us who are looking for consumers who want quality, fresh, handcrafted products, you find them at farmers’ markets,” Asselin agrees.

Like many food entrepreneurs, Asselin and Osterhoudt rent commercial kitchens where they produce and package their food items for sale at farmers’ markets. “It really is like having your own brick-and-mortar retail store; it just happens to be portable,” Osterhoudt says.

Testing the Waters—and a Company’s Future

In addition to having the opportunity to meet face-to-face with their target demographic, food entrepreneurs also derive the added bonus of using the farmers’ market to test run their products without the need to invest a large sum of money in marketing and distribution. Though farmers’ markets often charge vendor fees, they are modest in comparison to what it could cost to open a retail store or to distribute products in supermarkets.

“In many ways, farmers’ markets are a logical place to start. If you’re a small business, it could end up costing anywhere from \$5,000 to \$30,000 or more in capital just to get your product on the shelves,” Minkoff says. “But if you’re bootstrapping or on a limited budget—as many entrepreneurs are—farmers’ markets are a good place to go for little money to see if there’s any interest in what you have to offer.”

However, even though food entrepreneurs are almost always guaranteed to connect with consumers who value locally sourced items, Minkoff warns that it’s still crucial to visit several markets to determine the best locations for an individual entrepreneur’s success. “You really have to do your due diligence to figure out the best fit for your business,” he advises. “There’s no way for you to know how many people might come to a particular farmers’ market on any given day other than to go find out for yourself.”

Nancy Boone, founder and manager of the Ramsey Farmers’ Market, agrees. She always encourages potential vendors to shop around when choosing the markets where they may want to sell their product. “You want to be sure you end up at the right market. You have to learn the tastes of a community; what sells in Bergen County may not work in Sussex,” she says.

Boone often invites prospective vendors to test out the Ramsey Farmers’ Market for one day before signing on for a longer commit-

ment. One of those vendors was Teaneck resident Angela Logan, the creator of *Angela’s Apple Mortgage Cakes*. Named for a period in her life when she lost her job and was inspired to turn her baking skills into a way to pay the mortgage, Logan participated in a one-time feature at the market because limited space prevented Boone from offering her an ongoing slot. “Since then, her business has blown up,” Boone says, alluding to Logan’s coverage on major news networks and in newspapers. “These are difficult times, and many of these entrepreneurs were once employed in completely different industries. Now they’re trying to find their way in building a new life, and we love doing what we can to help promote their business.”

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Brad Finkel of Hoboken Farms



Photographs: Debra Trisler



Boone adds that factors such as the day upon which the market is held and the size of the market must also be considered. “Before you even get a chance to network with more established vendors to learn about which markets brought them the most success, a new entrepreneur will need to see some profit,” she adds. “They may not have the patience, or the money, to continue selling at a market that doesn’t produce a good crowd on the first time out.”

Food vendors also have to be aware of application deadlines and space limitations for many of the more popular markets, which may fill up long before the season begins. Applications often request a bevy of other requirements, including insurance, health department certificates and other documentation, in order to earn approval to sell at the market. In fact, Linda Cashan, chairperson of the Hammonton Farmers’ Market, says that the increasing demand for food vendors to purchase insurance has kept some entrepreneurs out of the market. “If you’re going to look at the farmers’ market as a business incubator, then you have to be willing to take that extra step,” she advises.

Jill Wong, owner of **Sweet Creations**, took a chance at the Hammonton market last season, selling her specialty cupcakes, cookies and desserts from a large, vibrantly decorated trailer that she parked at the market site. She, too, abandoned a career as a baker in one of the Atlantic City casinos to launch her own business and now owns a bakery in Hammonton. “The farmers’ market is definitely what helped me get my name out there,” she says.

Weather...or Not

Another hindrance to the success of food entrepreneurs at a farmers’ market is, unfortunately, completely out of their control: the weather. Add to the mix that many markets are only open during the warmer months, selling there becomes a volatile business model. “It is an environmentally challenging business,” acknowledges Brad Finkel, owner of **Hoboken Farms**, a producer and purveyor of fresh

mozzarella, artisan breads, marinara sauce, homemade ravioli and other items, who sold at his first market in 1992. “Running a business is hard enough when you only have five months out of the year to sell, but then you have to take into consideration that an inclement weather pattern can completely shut you down.”

Finkel has been tracking those patterns for the two decades he has been selling at farmers’ markets and has had to adapt his business to accommodate the extreme weather shifts that have emerged in recent years. According to Finkel, the first 15 years of his business showed an average of approximately 18 percent inclement weather, but since 2009, it has risen to an average of closer to 40 percent. “Entrepreneurs see a farmers’ market with a long line of people on a beautiful, sunny day, and they assume it’s a gold mine,” he says, “What they don’t see is just how often it rains and nobody shows up, and how difficult that makes doing business.”

Finkel’s livelihood depends almost entirely on the weather, as his company’s business model revolves around farmers’ markets; he works several markets every week during the high season, and employs a staff that sells at a variety of markets each day. “Entrepreneurs have to be realistic about what the opportunity really is: it’s 20 weeks out of the year, and you can count on dealing with rain for at least a third of them,” he says.

Finding One’s Future

Though Finkel managed to open the doors of his first Hoboken Farms Sandwich Shop in Summit last year—with plans for several others—that doesn’t always prove to be the case for market vendors. “Farmers’ markets are a living, breathing entity, and they’re completely a means to an end. I’ve seen a lot of people come in and think their involvement in a farmers’ market is going to lead to catering or other opportunities, but it rarely does,” he asserts. “Our sandwich shop does sell some of the items from the farmers’ market, but if we had to rely solely on our market customers to sustain the business, we would have

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been out in three months.”

For some companies, farmers' markets remain the entire retail base of their business. Launched in 1978, Baker's Bounty of Linden now sells its line of artisanal breads, crafted with dairy products and produce from local farms, solely through farmers' markets in New Jersey and New York. For others, the path leads to different opportunities, both retail and wholesale. Asselin, of Lickt Gelato, created Guinness, Irish coffee and sangria gelato flavors for the menu at St. James's Gate Publick House in Maplewood. She was also asked by the owners of Fairchild's Market in Roseland to create packages and special flavors for their store after tasting her product.

Hometown Advantage

Most importantly, food entrepreneurs must pour their efforts into attracting customers to their booths at the market, often accomplished simply by taking advantage of one of the biggest distinguishing factors of the farmers' market: the community environment.

“The whole community is at a farmers' market. They want to reach out and support you, and they're proud to have a product that saw its beginnings right in their hometown,” Barbour concludes. “It really is all about helping members of the community put good food on the table that they can enjoy and share with their families, and being proud of where your business truly began.”

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