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T.O. entrepreneurs take a bite out of success

Sharon Laidlaw
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Are you craving decadent chocolate that melts in your mouth? Or is the texture of honey-roasted almonds more to your liking? Perhaps it's the two blended together that makes for mouth-watering delight.

Let your tastebuds steer you to Mary's Gourmet, maker of glossy, chunky treats called Florentynes, a candy that combines two irresistible tastes and textures: smooth Belgian chocolate and the crunch of honey-toffee almonds.

This is not your average chocolate, rather, it's a uniquely delicious, handmade confectionery product that can be found in a number of upscale gourmet food shops in Toronto.

For owner Mary Bewick Clowater, the idea to create her own company stemmed from a need to finance her university education. A friend suggested they start a catering business, which is when Clowater rediscovered her love of food, a love that was rooted early in her life by her mother.

"Making the product was the easy part, the beginning of a journey that started in my mother's kitchen and grew into a viable business only after a lot of effort and learning."

Clowater's love of cooking prompted her to earn a degree in home economics from the University of New Brunswick and then pursue training at the exclusive Cordon Bleu Cookery School in London, England.

Clowater started her business catering parties held during the summer by her mother's friends. It was during one of these parties she was asked to make Florentyne candies as one of the desserts.

"It was such a hit at these summer parties, clients began requesting bags of these Florentynes to give as gifts for special occasions," Clowater said. It was one thing to create a winning product, but to market and sell the Florentynes for mass consumer markets would prove more difficult.

Fortunately, with Clowater's background in packaged goods marketing for some of Canada's leading brands, she knew what had to be done to fulfill the five Ps of marketing: positioning, product, price, place and promotion.

First, Mary's Gourmet Florentynes needed, at a minimum, to be shelf stable and survive shipping to be a success in the marketplace. As with most new businesses, Clowater had initially depended on available packaging and self-styled marketing efforts.

"We used what was affordable and capable of moving us from a homemade treat to a packaged goods product," said Roger Clowater, her husband and business partner.

"But in order to move the brand from a local marketing approach to the mainstream stage, Mary and I had to turn to experts."

Confident she had a marketable product, the pair then put together a business plan with the help of the Toronto Business Development Center. They fine-tuned their business through presentations to peers, business experts and accountants.

"They really challenged us to verify and validate the info we put in our business plan, which was a crucial step because your business plan is what guides your business," Clowater said.

Following research on key areas of their business plan, they hired a communications team with a proven background in packaged goods and package design, aware that design alone would not be enough.

"Big picture communications thinking was vital at this stage. First, a unique and sustainable positioning had to be established. Then packaging concepts were developed and tested to reflect the positioning, the needs of the market, as well as the aesthetic and perceptual desires of upscale consumers," Roger said.

Promotion, launching the product at the Canadian Fine Food Show, for which they were a finalist in the "best of confection" category, face-to-face presentations, Web site marketing, targeted advertising, direct mail and word of mouth have all contributed to the success of the company.

"None of it has been easy. None of it achieved without personal and financial commitment, but it's all been worth the wait," Clowater said.

There are about 30 upscale shops that carry Mary's Gourmet products in the Greater Toronto Area. They will also be available in Holt Renfrew stores across Canada this Christmas. The florentynes retail between \$4 to \$15 a package and are available in three sizes. For details visit www.marysgourmet.com or call 1-866-847-4445.