

FAPC basic training graduate catches dream

Running a gourmet salsa company is a dream come true for Dee Sporn of Edmond. Consequently, the name of her company is DreamCatcher Farm Gourmet Salsa LLC.

Sporn's inspiration for making a refrigerated salsa came to fruition during her years spent at the lake. She wanted to snack on fresh vegetables when it was hot outside; however, she thought the refrigerated salsas were too watery and bland, so she decided to make her own salsa.

"This is a dream come true for me because this will give me the opportunity to spend my retirement doing something I really enjoy ... spending time with my husband and making and selling fresh salsa together," Sporn said. "So far, everyone who tries it likes it. Every day, it is such a joy to receive compliments and positive reactions from our customers.

Sporn has experimented with various recipes during the years and with the help of her family, has captured just the right combination of ingredients to create award-winning gourmet salsas.

Sporn and her family have competed in many competitions since 1999 and have taken first place in at least one category every time. Her latest achievement was the first place winner of the 2008 International Scovie Award (Fresh Habanero Category), the most prestigious award given at the Annual Fiery Foods Show in Albuquerque, N.M.

Soon after winning the award, Sporn and her husband, Jerrie, enrolled in Basic Training

for Food Business Entrepreneurs, a one day class offered by the Robert M. Kerr Food & Agricultural Products Center at Oklahoma State University.

"A client and friend of mine who owns hotels in Edmond and Guthrie attended an Oklahoma Restaurant Association meeting and inquired about how I should go about selling my salsa to consumers on a much larger scale," Sporn said. "He was referred to Chuck Willoughby at the FAPC, and word in the local food industry was that if we wanted to get our product on the shelves, Chuck was the man to talk to."

At Basic Training, the Sporn's learned about business planning, marketing, good manufacturing practices and many other topics. The first step after Basic Training for Sporn was to work on the business plan.

Chuck Willoughby, business and marketing relations manager, reviewed her plan and provided feedback.

"Dee's plan was very well written and organized," Willoughby said. "One thing she emphasized in the plan was that her salsa not only was award winning but also was not cooked. Fresh refrigerated salsas have not saturated the market like shelf stable ones – this gives her a little stronger point of differentiation; consumers perceive the fresh salsas as higher quality than those on the shelf."

After reviewing the plan, Willoughby and a team of FAPC specialists helped her with market research and market strategy, nutrition analysis, label review and co-packer identification.

"Prior to the workshop, we made inquiries to other non-profit consulting business organizations – none of which gave us guidance on

preparing a business plan, nor did they ever tell us of the possibility and benefits of partnering with a co-packer... the most valuable information we've obtained to date," Sporn said. "We have a wonderful co-packer right here in Oklahoma City who does an excellent job of preparing the recipe and helped finalize the ingredient information for the labels, which FAPC was very kind to prepare the nutrition analysis needed to make this possible."

Soon after finding the right co-packer, Sporn and her family began marketing her salsa at Farmers' Markets and consumer shows. They are currently participating in the Edmond Farmers' Market and are applying to participant in local craft shows in the fall.

"Our current schedules allow us to be flexible enough to have a hands-on approach to protect and learn about our product in the consumer market, so we'd like to establish a presence and a consumer base in farmers' markets, festivals and eventually a trade interest at food shows," Sporn said.

To transport the products to the farmers' markets and as part of Sporn's product display, she converted an ice unit to a refrigerated unit. The "rolling refrigerator" is complete with colorful peppers and vegetables to match the products. Sporn said the booth accessories help to spark the curiosity of any spicy food lover.

It is important for entrepreneurs to take advantage of the many resources when starting a new business, such as the FAPC, co-packers, supply companies and funding sources.

"We're very thankful to the Citizen Pottawatomie Development Corp. in Shawnee, Okla., who came to the rescue to help with a portion of our 'start-up' capital because it has definitely been more financially demanding than we could have ever anticipated," Sporn said.

Like many of the entrepreneurs FAPC works with, Sporn and her family have that persistence, never give-up attitude, Willoughby said.

"Dee's creativity and savvy business sense are commendable and her enthusiasm is contagious," he said. "Working with Dee and folks like her inspire us to live out our mission – to add value to Oklahoma!"



Dee Sporn is pictured with her marketing display for her gourmet salsa at an Oklahoma farmers' market.