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Business

Sweet spot: West Haven woman's relish finds home on store shelves

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By Angela Carter, Register Staff
acarter@newhavenregister.com

WEST HAVEN — For decades, Phyllis Haynes has worked part-time jobs to be more available for her family.

Now, she relishes working for herself.

After trying her creative hands at quilting, making jewelry and baking cakes, Haynes finally broke her stride pleasing palates with an old family staple: southern chow chow.

For those who don't hail from down yonder, chow chow is a garnish made from vegetables and spices — in just about as many varieties as there are cooks in a kitchen. The star in her recipe is the green tomato.

The Charleston, Miss., native started out giving jars to family and friends at holidays and on special occasions in 2002. That spread to selling half-pint and pint containers for \$5 and \$8, respectively, and Mariah's Chow Chow Relish was born.

"I was trying to find my groove," Haynes said. "I still have a chest full of beads."

Her entrepreneurial instincts moved her to seek help in taking this hobby to a professional level. So Haynes enrolled in accounting classes and a series of small business and entrepreneurial workshops offered by the Service Core of Retired Executives (SCORE) and the Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce Small Business Academy, as well as training programs offered by The Women's Business Development Center based in Stamford.

"Anything related to business I would do. I graduated from that and I felt so good," she said. "I love this. I'm very creative and I like to organize things. So, I can do both sides of running a business."

She took a one-day course at Cornell University that focused on food-related businesses. That's where she learned about co-packers and distribution.

In December 2008, Haynes manufactured 50 cases of relish in two flavors and was wiped out by March 2009. Then she upped her game to 50 cases of each flavor and started networking at local stores and markets.

Haynes is now chief executive officer of Southern Relishes LLC and her all-natural gourmet relish can be found at small family-owned shops such as Romeo & Cesare on Orange Street in New Haven, Bon Appetite in Hamden, Shop-Rite supermarkets and the coveted shelves of Whole Foods Market in Milford, Darien, Greenwich, Westport and locations in New York and New Jersey.

"If you feel good about your product, you've got to go for it," she said.

Francesca Simeone, daughter of Romeo & Cesare owner Romeo Simeone, said they sell the relish by the jar and also keep in reach for diners who might want to dress up a sandwich or a dish.

"We always have it available," she said.

The three varieties are Sweet & Mild, Hot & Spicy and HotHotHot. Her husband likes it with beans and collard greens and her son enjoys it on chips.

There is one project Haynes still has not finished yet. Her next endeavour is to publish a family cookbook. The product name is inspired by family history. Several of her female ancestors had Mariah as first or middle names.

"Relish what you eat," she said.

Call Angela Carter at 203-789-5752.

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