



Say cheese

Retired orthodontist finds a new way to make people smile

BY LYNNE BRANDON

Dr. Cheryl Barnett developed her addiction at a young age. Her vice? Homemade pimento cheese. Growing up, Barnett spent a lot of time at her best friend Susan's house, where Susan's mother, Linda Emfinger — or Emmy — always had pimento cheese as a staple in the refrigerator. That was the beginning.

When Barnett went home on college breaks from the University of Alabama, she headed to see her friend and went straight for Emmy's fridge, where a big bowl of pimento cheese was always waiting.

"When I arrived, it became our routine to greet one another to have a quick catch up, and then came the words I loved to hear: It's in the fridge," Barnett recalls.

And so the feast would begin: pimento cheese and Wheat Thins for a snack, a pimento cheese and tomato sandwich for dinner, another pimento cheese snack before

bed, and upon waking, bacon and pimento cheese toast for breakfast. Since Emmy and her pimento cheese no longer were a few hours away, the woman whom Barnett claims as a second mom shared her recipe.

"I had to translate 'a little of this and a pinch of that,' but after a few tries I finally got it right," Barnett says.

Passing down a tradition

For years, Barnett made the cheese for friends and family, and as life got busier she often found herself in the kitchen late at night grating cheese. It was during one of these moments when she began thinking to herself how she wished she could just purchase Emmy's cheese in the grocery store. Then came Barnett's declaration that she would someday sell it herself "for all of those people with busy lives like mine," she says.

And so began Barnett's pimento cheese



PHOTOS: CHERYL BARNETT

"I had been talking about it for years, and I finally had the time. I told my husband about my 15-year pimento cheese dream and was ecstatic when instead of laughter, I heard encouragement. And just like that, MyThreeSons Gourmet Cheese was born."



Opposite page: Cheryl Barnett, a former orthodontist, reinvented her professional career in 2010 when she launched MyThreeSons Gourmet Cheese in Greensboro.

Above: The company makes three distinct flavors: Emmy's Original, Fire Roasted Jalapeno and Spicy White Cheddar.

factory fantasy. Her family joked about it over the years — including Barnett herself — but deep down she believed that her dream one day could become a reality.

An unexpected change

In the meantime, Barnett graduated from dental school in North Carolina and became an orthodontist. Her career was set in Greensboro, she had a family and life was good. Fourteen years quickly passed, and then the unexpected occurred: Barnett was forced into early retirement due to back health issues.

Retiring and starting a new life was challenging and unexpected for her. It seemed that everything in life had changed, but there was one obvious constant: the love

and support of her husband, Mark, and her sons, not to mention her friends and her mother — and of course, Emmy.

Barnett was used to a busy lifestyle with her practice and family. After a brief period of moping, as she calls it, the woman with the never-give-up attitude became busier. She started by doing things she had not had time for during her first career, like organizing her home and closets, picking up new hobbies like knitting and painting, reading more, and spending more time with her husband and boys.

One day when the family was gathered in the kitchen, Barnett's youngest son, Michael, reminded her that she had been telling him for years that they would have a pimento cheese business together. Sons

John and William chimed in, and she realized they were right.

"I had been talking about it for years, and I finally had the time," Barnett says. "I told Mark about my 15-year pimento cheese dream and was ecstatic when instead of laughter, I heard encouragement. And just like that, MyThreeSons Gourmet Cheese was born."

After being turned down for lack of space at the local farmers market, Barnett — who already had her kitchen inspected — instead debuted her gourmet cheese spread at The Fresh Market in Greensboro on Halloween weekend in 2010. Samples were handed out in the store, and the cheese sold out in three hours. After selling out several more times and staying up late at night to

grate cheese with Mark and the boys, she hired her first employee in January 2011. Her dream finally was starting to take shape.

A business background

Like orthodontics, the food business is a science that requires marketing skill. Fortunately, a business background and experience running a busy orthodontic practice helped Barnett with how to market her product, from what size container to use to how to order in bulk for the best discount and marketing.

For shipping, Barnett did her homework and met with the staff at Harris Teeter, where she learned at its local distribution center how to pack pallets correctly and what steps to take during the distribution process to meet the company's high-quality standards.

Her hard work paid off, and gradually MyThreeSons found its way onto the shelves at major grocery chains in North Carolina. Today, her cheese can be found at The Fresh Market in Greensboro, Harris Teeter (207 stores in eight states), and Whole Foods stores in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia. Lowes Foods was responsive to customers requesting Barnett's cheese spread as well, and soon MyThreeSons Gourmet Cheese was on its grocery shelves too.

A learning curve

The popularity of pimento cheese has widened the playing field over the past few years, but unlike some business owners Barnett does not see other pimento cheese companies as competitors but rather as colleagues. Still, it's a business, and she hosts demonstrations for her products every six to eight weeks to stay in front of consumers and to educate them about her unique cheese spread.

Barnett is careful to pre-chill all ingredients at 34 degrees prior to production and incorporates a quick-chill process once the cheese is prepared, allowing the product to be shipped within 24 to 48 hours of production. But she still remembers the time when a shipment was ruined due to a freight truck refrigeration malfunction.

"I am a perfectionist and I don't want to make mistakes, but I know things will happen at times that are beyond my control," she says. "I am learning to keep things in

perspective so that I can relax and enjoy the journey."

Barnett is very hands on and uses tender loving care with her pimento cheese spread, which is made from extra-sharp old Vermont cheddar that is aged for nine months, all-natural mayonnaise, and spices. As to what sets her cheese apart, she says it comes down to using natural ingredients and a higher ratio of cheese to mayonnaise. That distinction — and the standout retro-looking square container she uses — required a higher price point than some other varieties on the market. However, the business model worked, and customers are buying.

MyThreeSons Gourmet offers three distinctive cheese flavors: Emmy's Original, Fire Roasted Jalapeno and Spicy White Cheddar. Emmy's original is traditional Southern pimento cheese, and the Fire Roasted Jalapeno flavor is for those who love a little kick. The Spicy White Cheddar — grated with a wide shredder for a chunky, thick texture — is made with a touch of cayenne pepper and garlic powder.

Good news travels fast, and in less than two years the dream Barnett conceived in her kitchen now is a reality. It's a sweet success for the former orthodontist.

"I used to create smiles, but now I give people something to smile about," she says. 

Lynne Brandon is a marketing and public relations professional based in the Triad.

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PHOTOS: CECELIA M. THOMPSON



Since MyThreeSons debuted, customers have been buying the company's cheeses in droves, using them as dips for fruits and vegetables or placing them on top of crackers for appetizers.



Barnett's strong business background and years of experience running an orthodontic practice helped prepare her for the transition into her new business.