

The Buffalo News : Life

Sunday, March 2, 2008

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Everyone loved their homemade marshmallows, so two local women took their unique confections to market

Call them ‘Puff Girls’ : The marshmallow moment

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Updated: 02/27/08 12:27 PM

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Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News
Robyn Starr, left, and Patty Olender are the owners of Puff Girls. They make chocolate covered marshmallows and they two have known each other for more than 30 years.



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Some people call it the “Aha Moment.” It’s that tiny portion of time when suddenly a perfect idea pops into your head and it seems gloriously clear.

Almost anything can set it off. History is full of examples: Edison had his light bulb; Newton had his apple; Ben Franklin had his bolt of lightning.

And, a little more current and closer to home, local women Patty Olender and Robyn Starr had their marshmallow. Since they had some time on their hands on a Saturday morning, they’ll never regard the candy as a mere bit of fluff again. Today, they run Puff Girls Treat Factory, and they make and sell marshmallow concoctions — still batch by batch and still by hand.

Talk about a sweet story. One weekend morning a couple of years ago, Olender and Starr were hanging out at Olender’s Tonawanda house, idly leafing through a Williams-Sonoma catalog.

“We were bored,” Olender said, “when suddenly we saw this ad for caramel covered marshmallows for an exceedingly ridiculous amount of money. ‘I can do that,’ I said. ‘I know how to cook sugar.’”

Olender, who is communications director for the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County, had graduated from the Niagara County baking and pastry program.

So they found a recipe on the Internet. “And,” said Starr, a social studies teacher at Alden Middle School, “we went right off . . . to buy the ingredients.”

Aha.

Calling themselves “the artist” (Starr) and “the mad scientist” (Olender), the women set to work, moving a long way from the Williams-Sonoma model. They constructed bite-size s’mores from the marshmallow they made.

“We just happened to be discussing them at the time,” Starr said, referring to the All-American Girl Scout treat that sandwiches marshmallows and a Hershey chocolate bar between two graham crackers.

But for the Puff Girls, that was only a starting point.

Their version of s’mores is based on a graham cracker, topped with handcrafted marshmallow, slathered with ganache (rich chocolate filling), finally enrobed in dark chocolate. (In a smaller variation called “s’morsels,” the graham cracker is eliminated.)

Along along the way, the women started to add flavors to the marshmallow, too.

First came peanut butter — “nothing tastes worse with the addition of peanut butter,” they reasoned. And that was followed by triple vanilla, strawberry, rocky road, pumpkin spice and heavenly hash. (Think sweet trail mix.) There are now over a dozen flavors, varying by season. A half-pound sells for \$8.

At first the products were meant for gifts, but then the word spread. “It was kind of a two to three degree kind of separation thing,” says Olender, who brought s’mores to her office. Starr shared them with her carpool. The women took pink s’mores to baby showers.

“And people kept saying, ‘These are wonderful — you should sell them.’ But they always tell you that,” Olender said.

Finally, around Valentine’s Day 2007, they got so many orders that it became clear “that we had to go big or go home.”

During last year’s Christmas holidays, they sold 46 pans of regular s’mores — 2,400 pieces in all. Half that number was sold the following Valentine’s Day.

Puff Girls’ marshmallows are now made in an inspected kitchen called Go Veggies in the Town of Tonawanda. The marshmallows are enrobed at Platter’s Chocolates, a North Tonawanda firm. But the women are still doing the heavy work, carrying the supplies to the kitchens in the back seats of their automobiles; packing the candy piece by piece. (They admit that Lucy and Ethel often come to mind.)

“Marshmallow making is really scientific when you come to think of it,” said Olender. The Puff Girls’ recipe is very simple — sugar, water, corn syrup and gelatin and a “secret ingredient,” which turns out to be cream of tartar. “It inhibits crystallization,” explained Olender, mad scientist to the end.

Its a matter of 1) cooking (to the proper degree), 2) pouring (into a bowl), 3) beating (for about 10 minutes until the mixture puffs up and thickens, 4) scraping (into an ordinary 13-by 9-inch pan) and 5) patting (into place).

The women are well aware that something like 99 percent of Americans think of marshmallows as something that comes in a red, white and blue commercial package with a picture of a campfire on it. “Most people have never even tasted a fresh marshmallow,” Olender said.

A homemade marshmallow (at least the Puff Girls’ version) is much lighter and airier in texture than a commercial marshmallow, and much less sweet.

“This is not something we ever thought we’d do,” said Starr, who insists that both of them fully intend to keep their day jobs. At this point, Puff Girls is a very small retail operation. Orders still come in mostly from friends and family; they are still filled individually. The two women are the only employees, and no one knows what the future holds.

But they fully intend to keep exploring flavors. They just invented something called Almond Delirium and they are working with raspberry puree. Both are aware of how innovative candy ingredients have become of late and they keep an open mind.

An open mind only to a degree, that is. “Will we ever see a bacon-flavored Puff Girl S’More or a Chile Pepper S’More?” we had to ask. (After all, both those things do turn up in contemporary candy bars.) Not to worry, as it turns out.

“As far as a Bacon Marshmallow goes? The answer is definitely no.”

For more information about Puff Girls, e-mail puffgirls@roadrunner.com .

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