

BUSINESS | The entrepreneurial spirit

From kitchen to stores – OMG!

By JACKIE R. BROACH
COASTAL OBSERVER

In 2007, Laura Tiller had just gone through a divorce, sold her house in Waverly and was in the process of moving.

"It was just a mess," she said of her life at that time.

But from that chaotic period came something wonderful, something delicious. It was then that the seeds were planted for Onion Made Goodness, a caramelized onion dip better known as "OMG!" The dip was recently made available at all Piggly Wiggly stores in three states (the Carolinas and Georgia), in addition to a small selection of regional stores.

The recipe started with Kelli Bair, a friend of Tiller's from North Myrtle Beach, who became her business partner. She drove down to help Tiller with her move and brought a homemade onion dip with her. Tiller couldn't believe how good the dip was.

"It was the best I had ever had," recalled Tiller, who now lives in Ricefields. She was running a catering business out of her home at the time and liked the dip so much, she started making it and added it to her menu, with Bair's blessing.

Tiller quickly found she wasn't the only one who loved the recipe as it became a favorite with her customers.

"People started asking for it and whenever we'd make a batch on the weekends, it would sell out," she said.

Then, last summer Brian and Sassy Henry opened Get Carried Away, a carry-out food business. Tiller was looking for a new home for her business at the same time. She offered some advice to the Henrys as their venture moved forward and ended up going to work for them instead of proceeding with her own catering service.

The Henrys also wanted to stock OMG! in a refrigerator section of Get Carried Away that features locally made products, including the Henrys' creation, Palmetto Cheese, offered through their company, Pawleys Island Specialty Foods.

Palmetto Cheese started in the Henrys' kitchen, being offered for special events, and then at their other business, the Sea View Inn. They've expanded the brand to the point that it is now available in 2,700 locations in 24 states, plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

The goal is to have OMG! take a similar path now that it too is being offered through Pawleys Island Specialty Foods and mass produced by the same South Carolina company that manufactures and distributes Palmetto Cheese.

"You could call it a joint agreement," said Brian Henry. "We're helping them get their product on the market by using the

Pawleys Island Specialty Food brand and sort of piggybacking on the success of Palmetto Cheese. It's a product that's packaged very similarly through our tutoring, so we decided to do it under the same umbrella."

The Henrys were happy to get involved. Tiller and Bair had a quality product that was a good fit for their company and had already developed a local following. Additionally, helping others test market local food products and giving those products a larger audience was part of the Henrys' mission with Get Carried Away from Day 1.

With so many tourists coming in, the business is a great way to spread the word about local products because those tourists get hooked while they're here, take the products back home and ask their local grocery stores to start carrying them, according to Henry.

"We get phone calls on a fairly regular basis from people who want counsel on how to get a product started, and if they want to get it in an outlet and get immediate feedback on the quality and potential demand, we tell them they're welcome to put it in our store and see how it goes," Henry said. "We'll sample it and see if it sells. If it does, it's a springboard to go to a grocery store and say 'Hey, we've had some success down the road at Get Carried Away.'"

That's what Tiller and Bair initially did. They said the Henrys' experience and advice have been invaluable in growing OMG!, and since putting their product under the Pawleys Island Specialty Foods umbrella, so have the contacts made while forging their path with Palmetto Cheese.

Tiller remembers plenty of late nights with Bair, making OMG! in the Get Carried Away kitchen after hours.

"We'd make what we thought then was a lot," she said — enough for probably 40 containers. The demand increased and the Henrys helped get the product into other local stores, such as Independent Seafood.

As of last week, Tiller reported 900 containers of OMG! are sold every week. It's not anywhere close to the 75,000 containers of Palmetto Cheese sold weekly, but it's more than Tiller expected when she and Bair agreed to start selling it, and the product is still young. It was made available at Get Carried Away less than a year ago and was just introduced into a large chunk of the southeast's Piggly Wiggly stores last month, when Pawleys Island Specialty Foods acquired an ownership interest in the product.

Tiller doesn't question that the product will continue to grow in popularity and be accepted in more stores, because

like Palmetto Cheese, it's something special, made remarkable by its high quality and Lowcountry flavor, and people appreciate that.

"There's not another onion dip I have found that's like it," she said. "Normal French onion dips mostly use dry onions, basically like opening a pack of Lipton onion soup mix. We use real onions and caramelize them. That makes it unique. It stands on its own."

The dip is good in a variety of ways, including on burgers, chicken

and baked potatoes, but it seems to be most often eaten with potato chips. There are plenty of other ideas and recipes for using OMG! online at omg-dip.com.

Tiller said people are starting to recognize her now as one of the women behind OMG! and she frequently hears about how much they love it and their favorite ways to eat it — something she gets excited about every time.

"Everybody says it's the best onion dip they've ever had," she said. "I think the word is out."



Tanya Ackerman/Coastal Observer

Laura Tiller and Kelli Bair sell 900 packages of OMG! dip a week.

Marketing is new goal for soccer standout

By ROGER GREENE
COASTAL OBSERVER

For many college seniors, graduation and what will follow are marked with uncertainty. But Justin Bloomdahl is one of the fortunate few who already have a head start on their futures.

After graduating from Newberry College in a couple of weeks, Bloomdahl will begin his professional career with Inlet Life, a start-up endeavor owned and operated by his family that offers a line of lifestyle products.

"It's a good feeling to know what I'm going to be doing," said Bloomdahl, who will graduate with a degree in sports management. "A lot of people won't have this kind of opportunity. The best part is that it is a family business and I'll get to stay close to my family and friends. I won't be off living in an-

other state somewhere." Bloomdahl, who grew up in Murrells Inlet, will spend plenty of time on the road promoting products to other inlet locales along the East Coast. Those products for the Waccamaw Neck have a definite local flavor including T-shirts, decals, visors and koozies are available at Walgreens and Lee's Farmers Market. Local flavor is one of the primary aspects Bloomdahl will promote.

"I have an appreciation for how I grew up, being so close to the inlets and the ocean," Bloomdahl said. "I loved being able to enjoy all the things that went along with that. It will be nice to take that idea on the road. I'm looking forward to meeting new people and seeing different places. I know I'm going to enjoy it."

A stand-out soccer player at Waccamaw High

and a scholarship player at Newberry for the last four years, Bloomdahl also plans to stay connected with the sport he grew up playing. He has always had an active role in local camps and does not plan to alter that schedule.

"I've been involved with sports my whole life, so it's not something I could just stop doing," Bloomdahl said. "I'll be working with the same summer camps that I always have and I'll try to help out as much as time allows."

PLAYING FOR NEWBERRY, Bloomdahl earned a reputation for his versatility. He played virtually every position, spending much of his time at either center-midfield or center-back. Though the success of his college teams didn't match that of the Waccamaw teams he was part of, Bloomdahl said he wouldn't change much, if

anything, about the last four years.

"I had a great time," he said. "I was able to meet so many cool people and have built relationships that will hopefully last my entire life."

Those types of experiences are one of the main reasons you play."

Bloomdahl is still trying to grasp the fact that the college days are coming to an end.

"It feels like yesterday when I walked in as a freshman," Bloomdahl said. "I can't believe I'll be graduating in just a few weeks. But I got everything out of it that I could. I don't have any regrets."

"The one thing I tell people who are just starting is to enjoy every minute. Take advantage of as many opportunities as you can, from your first day as a freshman until your last day as a senior. It goes by quick, so have fun."

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