

Domestic Artists Roll In the Dough

—By Erin Feher

Published: January, 2007

Dished in Demand

Jill Litwin has a lot of hungry little mouths to feed — thousands, to be specific. She is the creator of Puffets, an organic insta-meal for toddlers and kids that has become a savior to the sanity of busy, health-conscious parents.

But this 32-year-old former graphic designer is still in mild shock that her home cooking has been such a hit. Litwin was working as a colorist for a snowboard company in Burlington, Vermont when she got the call to head back to the kitchen. A pregnant friend with a toddler to care for was zapped of time and energy and admitted to Litwin that she had resorted to feeding her child green beans straight from the can.

"I told her that I just couldn't let her son grow up on canned green beans and I asked her to let me cook for her son," recalls Litwin. "She told me that she would pay me, and I said no, don't pay me, just tell me if he likes the food."

Before hitting the ovens, Litwin worked with a nutritionist to create recipes that were healthy and age-appropriate. Working from the start with only fresh, organic ingredients, Puffets were born out of Litwin's tiny apartment kitchen in Burlington. Shaped like mini burger patties, Puffets are hand-held meals with a kid mass appeal on par with Cheerios.

"It's still spinach and broccoli, but it's incorporated with cheese and eggs and other things. It's almost disguised," she says. "It's like a veggie sneak attack. You're feeding these kids veggies without them even knowing."

Litwin's focus grew from that one blonde-haired toddler (who now graces the front of the Puffets' box) to 15-kid "focus groups" to try new flavors, and soon she was turning parents away for lack of supply. Litwin had clearly discovered a demand in the mom-market for easy, healthy meals so she decided to take her kid cooking full time.

Litwin learned how to cook from her mother, and while she had always enjoyed it, she definitely didn't foresee spending her days over a stove. "I always loved to cook," she says. "But I never imagined this is what I would be doing in a million years."

She got a degree in fashion design, and was working her way up in New York City and New Orleans when the snowboard company in Vermont recruited her. "I really enjoyed what I was doing, but I just always knew that I was meant to contribute to the world in a different way, to make more of an impact, especially with nutrition and health."

Litwin decided to take her business, which she calls Peas Of Mind, to San Francisco, where she felt new ideas were more readily embraced, and with its bustling urban environment, it was sure to be packed with working parents looking for a healthy helping hand.

A Place to Get Cookin'

After taking a business-planning course, Litwin applied for kitchen space at La Cocina, a nonprofit commercial kitchen whose founders had already embraced the idea that home-cooking is ready for its marketplace debut. After being accepted to the program, Litwin joined other women in the reduced-rate kitchen space, spending their days turning out family recipes as well as writing business plans, learning about marketing and discovering that demand for their skills had grown well beyond the dining room table.

In her two years there, Litwin perfected the four flavors of Puffets: Black Bean Polenta, Eat Your Greens, Carrot Risotto and Nana's Banana. She scaled her recipes for larger production, created packaging and made connections with local grocers who agreed to stock her product.

"We're an incubator for small-business. The women who come here are already great cooks — they wouldn't be here if they weren't. But formalizing their skills and making them more efficient is a different kind of game," says Caleb Zigas, Program Coordinator for La Cocina.

According to Executive Director Valeria Perez Ferreiro, after one to five years in the incubation program, which is aimed at low-income, immigrant women — many of whom are running informal businesses out of their homes — businesses should be able to survive on their own. The kitchen officially opened in 2005, with Litwin as its very first participant.

The Mission district kitchen is bustling now, with 14 women and their businesses operating out of its ovens. And as of Jan. 1, Litwin will be the first to graduate.

The demand for Puffets has gone well beyond what she and her assistant can handle on their own. She has signed on with a co-packer, a factory that will produce the Puffets en masse, and a distributor, who will market Puffets to grocery stores throughout California, as well as pick them up and deliver them. Whole Foods Market has agreed to start carrying them in its Northern California markets this month.

According to Litwin, her call to the kitchen came at just the right time in her life. While still slightly dazed by her success, she is confident that she can handle it. "It will be a whole different ballgame. But I'm ready."

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