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# It takes a tough mom to make tender cookies

By *PAM GEORGE, Special to The News Journal*

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Bella's Cookies is a family business, based near Milton. Mark and Kelly Leishear's work benefits from daughter Bella and son Liam's taste tests. ([Buy photo](#))

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MILTON -- The delicious fragrance greets visitors as soon as they step onto the driveway of the Leishears' home in Milton.

There is a waft of vanilla, a tinge of sugar and something indefinable -- an aroma that blankets the senses with comforting familiarity.

The scent emanates from a nondescript building behind the garage. This is the home of Bella's Cookies, Delaware's only natural and organic cookie company.

The beach-area business, located in farmland just minutes from busy Del. 1, began in 2004. But the cookies are now so popular that owners Kelly and Mark Leishear

are contemplating a West Coast location to ease shipping costs to distribution sites in California and Seattle.

Customers clamor for the line, which includes the new Woo-Woo, a white chocolate-cherry cookie with a sweet-tart finish, and the Whoop-de-doo, inspired by Pennsylvania Dutch whoopee pies. There are sugar-free and gluten-free cookies, low-fat breakfast cookies

-- even all-natural and organic canine cookies.

"I don't put anything in any product that I wouldn't feed to my kids, and I am a tough mom," Kelly Leishear says.

The idea for the business stemmed from the family's devotion to healthful food. Leishear, a vegan, is a runner and fitness buff who gets up at 4:50 a.m. to work out.

Originally from Syracuse, N.Y., she grew up helping her mother bake. "She baked elaborate birthday cakes, and I always took great interest in them when I was little," says Leishear, who has a dietetics degree.

When Kelly and Mark Leishear moved to Milton, she baked holiday gifts for Mark's clients. (He handles marketing and advertising for WBOC-TV.) The other moms at daughter Bella's preschool were intrigued by Bella's homemade snacks.

The interest prompted the couple to open a business, which started in their home kitchen. Since home bakeries are not allowed to sell wholesale to stores, the couple built the backyard bakery in May 2006.

The space, about the size of a two-car garage, houses supplies, an industrial mixer and a commercial refrigerator that is already too small to hold cookies awaiting shipment. (Because they're made sans preservatives, the cookies must be kept cold.)

On a recent day, the door opens suddenly and in comes the Leishears' 6-year-old daughter, Bella, the company's namesake, trailed by 4-year-old Liam. He helpfully tells his mother each time the phone rings. "It usually rings nonstop," Kelly Leishear says.

She is surprised that the business grew so fast. "I make 500 cookies a day. Pretty soon, we'll be moving up to 1,000 a day."

She ships to up to 30 locations, including stores in Seattle. Locally, you can find Bella's at Harvest Market in Hockessin.

Orders also come via the bakery's Web site.

Mark Leishear handles promotion. Kelly, who is busy in the kitchen, has a kitchen helper and a cleaning person to wash dishes. She's hiring someone to handle sales and run errands. She tries to hire low-income people looking to improve their lives.

The kids are expert tasters. "My favorite is Choco-Bomb," says Bella, who enjoys serving as the company spokesgirl and posing for the tags that adorn packages.

Liam may follow in his mother's footsteps. He can sit for hours, watching her work, Kelly Leishear says.

She spends up to 50 hours in the bakery, cooking, bagging and tagging cookies. In addition to filling orders, she whips up new recipes. It's a painstaking process. It took about 85 tries before she perfected her Champion Chunk cookie.

Rumrazin is made with brown honey rum from Milton-based Dogfish Head, better known for its craft beers. Dogfish Head founder Sam Calagione, who appears on the cookie's packaging in a pirate costume, is a fan of Bella's.

"The time is right for all-natural cookies from a local artisan producer, and Bella's is filling that niche nicely," he says. His brewpub in

Rehoboth Beach, Dogfish Head Brewings & Eats, sells an ice-cream sandwich made with Rumrazin cookies.

When things "calm down," Kelly Leishear hopes to enter an Ironman competition. Right now the Leishears are enjoying the sweet taste of success.

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