



Eating local can be clean and green

By Monica Fleming/Staff Reporter



Dessert: Clean and green cookies and candy

What started as simply a way for Kelly and Mark Leishear to make treats for their own daughter has turned into the Milton business Bella's Cookies. They are tried-and-true clean and green, from the ingredients in the cookies to the wrappers they come in.

"All our packaging is recyclable," said Mark Leishear. They also use steam to clean their machines for rolling out dough and use an organic, plant-based cleaner in the 900-square-foot bakery behind their house. The walls are made from a special insulated foam. The fluorescent lighting holds special energy-efficient bulbs, and they are equipped with Energy Star appliances.

"We like to practice what we preach, and with the building I tried to go as energy-efficient as I could with the money I had at the time," said Mark.

Mark is a vegetarian and Kelly is a vegan, so the idea for the cookies is an extension of practices they were already familiar with in their family. After seeing what was available to her daughter at school in the way of snacks, Kelly thought of making her own, to feel better about what Bella was eating.

"We started, and people would taste them and want more, and it kind of grew from there," she said.

This idea of "clean and green" extends to the cookies — all ingredients are natural and organic.

"There are certain ingredients we feel strongly about being organic," the couple said, such as flours, sweeteners, oils, etc., and other ingredients they are comfortable using all-natural but not necessarily organic, such as chocolate, sea salt, baking powder, etc. They use no trans-fats, no hydrogenated oils, no artificial colors or flavors, no preservatives, no refined sugars and no high-fructose or even any corn syrup at all.

They also have sugar-free cookies, vegan cookies and gluten-free cookies available.

"We're meeting the demand," said Mark. "Any more and we'd have to expand. As it is, we can produce 5,000 to 6,000 cookies a week."

Something exciting for the future for them is that Bella's Cookies will be available at Delmarva Shorebirds minor-league baseball games starting opening-day Thursday night, April 3.

Kelly started her adult life thinking she would be a naturopathic physician and was a ballet dancer at one time as well.

"This is a nice mixture of the art and science," she said of the cookie-making.

She has to find just the right recipe to make it healthy and taste good, and there can be days, like any baker, where most creations end up in the trash, but then there are days where she'll find it — like when she perfected her sugar-free cookie or the vegan apple-snickerdoodle made with tofu.

For the most part, the Leishears are having fun balancing work and family life.

"When it stops being fun, I'll stop," said Kelly.

Mark, the marketing force behind the company, likes to get out there to have face-time with people at farmer's markets.

"It gives you face-time with people. People like to see who they are buying things from face to face," he said.

Just recently, so as not to leave son Liam out, the family introduced Verdi Good, a new candy line of caramels, truffles, toffee, fudge and peanut brittle with organic sugar, organic brown rice syrup and exceptional chocolate.

In the future, they are hoping to forge relationships with the Ocean Conservatory and with the National Wildlife Federation, to donate a portion of the proceeds from Bella's Cookies and Verdi Good, respectively. They would also like to get more active in the schools and want to give back by giving bonds to kids who think of ways they can contribute to the environment such as starting recycling at their school.

"We'd really like to represent our company, to get kids educated and interested. When I die, I want to be remembered for doing something good," said Kelly.

Bella's Cookies are available locally at Good Earth Market in Clarksville, Good For You Natural Market on Route 9, Beebe Hospital, Java Beach, Capriotti's, Salisbury University and Harvest Market in Hockessin. For more information, visit www.bellascookies.com online.

All three of these companies — all small, local, young and starting from the ground up — are within about a 30- to 40-mile drive to the Ocean View area. Many have heard of each other and do business with each other, which is the backbone of the local farming and eating operation — support.

Driving that distance may seem far to go at first and it might appear backward environmentally to burn all that gas for transit, but consumers may want to consider that, according to reports, a typical ingredient the average North American eats has traveled at least 1,500 miles, to which an 80-mile round trip looks like a drop in the bucket.

Each of these local businesses also supports green living inside and out, as well as respect the environment within the human body, by getting back to basics with food, which is something that is hard to put a value on.