



LINDA COAN O'KRESIK | BDN
Sarah Wilder and her husband, Ryan Cowan, started their own small-batch ice cream business called Wild Cow Creamery in Hampden in 2013. In just three seasons, they have made more than 80 flavors and always have up to 12 different flavors available at any one time

Ice cream

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co-owner Kathy Chamberlain, who makes trendy flavors like caramel sea salt with dairy from cows milking nearby.

Though it's a well-known fact that "Mainers eat ice cream year-round," and the state is one of the country's top ice cream-eating regions, there's more behind the rise of small-batch makers. Like the farm movement, it's local, fresh and transparent.

"I think we are certainly riding on the coattails of the locavore movement, between wanting to know who makes the ice cream and wanting to meet them, wanting to talk to that person and hear their story," said Chamberlain, who ditched livestock farming, sold her horses, cows and pigs and turned to ice cream. Along with her husband, Bruce, she keeps a hand in haying, but their focus is now ice cream.

Stone Fox Farm Creamery has four full-time employees,

and can be found in 60 stores and scoop shops from Maine to Massachusetts.

"It's been a long journey," Chamberlain said. "We are trying and we work hard."

In Hampden, Sarah Wilder and Ryan Cowan of Wild Cow Creamery make one and a half gallons of homemade ice cream at a time in their sunroom-turned ice cream studio. Sales at their food truck stand on the Bangor Waterfront (which opens in mid-May) are brisk. Wholesome flavors like Orange Cranberry Walnut attract customers who are hip to what they consume, cones, cups and all.

"People are really starting to notice what's in their ice cream. If you make it commercially there are lots of problems. Things like stabilizers. It seems like ice cream, but things are added for a longer shelf life," said Wilder, who was drawn to ice cream making for the science behind the technique. "When you are making small-batch ice cream, you are using ingredients that you can find in your kitchen like milk, sugar, eggs. It can be more delicate." Top sellers like Lemon

Heaven start with the above, plus the zest and juice of fresh lemons.

"People love it. It's like lemonade or creamy lemon meringue pie," said Wilder, a Belfast native. "It's very refreshing in the summer."

This summer Wilder introduces two new flavors: Carrot Cake and Hummingbird Cake. The latter is inspired by the tropical dessert made with pineapple, coconut, lots of spices, cinnamon, nutmeg and clove.

"I like turning regular desserts into ice cream," Wilder said.

For inspiration, Wilder and Cowan go on ice cream adventures to taste test. From across New England to New York City, they haven't been bowled over yet.

"Maine's small batch rivals the stuff we tasted," said Wilder. "Maine has a lot of wonderful ice cream producers that are just as good."

Soon she hopes there will be a small-batch ice cream trail, just like there is a beer trail. The idea would be to "promote tours of Maine, hitting the best ice cream makers who do it all small batch."

Stonewall

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step," Stiker said. "We don't want to be everywhere. It would cheapen the brand."

"Before we even sold, we asked ourselves, 'What do we need to look at on the 10- to 20-year horizon,'" Lori King, president and chief operating officer, said. "We didn't give up ownership for 23 years. We used capital very conservatively. And we have the same mindset today. We add capacity when we need it."

King has seen the company through its expansion to date. Jonathan King's sister-in-law, she has been with the company for 18 years. She said in the beginning, King and Stott were similarly mindful of the brand they were building.

"We wouldn't go just anywhere," she said. "We were in places like Tuttle's [in Dover] and Angela's Pasta [in Manchester]. The focus went into the creativity of the product. We were making something that was different. It was the handwriting on the jar and the dark green lid. Jonathan was just a creative guru. We had our own design team, photographer, our own marketing team. We were branding not just a product but a way of life."

Meanwhile, Jonathan King, who remains "chief creation officer," and a product development team were traveling, reading, tasting and "on the lookout for the next trend," Lori King said. "We're blessed that Portsmouth and Portland are foodie towns, and we have a lot of chefs coming through our cooking school. And we are always looking for a great combination of flavors."

The flavors, textures and combinations of foods are brought to the research and development team, which creates in tiny batches the sauce, jam or aioli inspired by them. These are tasted two days a week by an inter-

nal "testing panel" of Stonewall Kitchen employees — "27 people selected for the quality of their tastebuds," Stiker said. "They can sense whether a flavor is there or not. Things pop for them."

Each product is rated on a scale of one to nine for visual appeal, texture and flavor, "and a product has to score an eight or better on average" to go into production. Testing includes the company's many dry products like oatmeal, pancake mixes and cheese sticks manufactured at facilities in New England and New York.

Products to be manufactured in York are cooked in the company's kitchen. Ninety-gallon kettles are soon to be replaced by 150-gallon kettles, and the food is then pumped into a vacuum kettle that allows fruit, for instance, to be suspended throughout the jar of jam and not rise to the top.

The two production lines first introduced when the company opened a small store and production facility at York Corner still are in use today, Lori King said. Both lines run for one shift, one line runs for a second shift and there is a third sanitation shift. Over the years, they've bought a faster labeler and replaced a four-head filler with an eight-head one, King said.

On any given day, four to six products come off the production lines to be boxed, stored and distributed, King said. These include small runs of as little as 350 jars to a big run of 10 to 15 batches, reserved for best-sellers. One recent day, for instance, 14 batches of hot pepper jelly were made, using 15,000 jars.

"You'd be shocked at how much product we can make on those two shifts," Stiker said. "Our self-manufactured products represent about 70 percent of our sales."

The future

King believes the company will not need a third line until 2019, maybe 2020, as the company slowly builds

its brand nationwide and beyond — a process that is underway.

Right now, 68 percent of the company's products are shipped to wholesalers. Some of its best customers are Whole Foods, Macy's, The Fresh Market, New York-based Kings Food Market, LL Bean, California-based Gelson's Market and Florida-based Publix Supermarket. The company also wholesales to Harrods in the United Kingdom as well as to companies in 42 countries around the world.

The goal and the challenge is to grow the company in line with the precepts that have held it in good stead thus far. The company has five domestic and one international sales managers, under the direction of Jonathan King's sister Natalie — the third of the three Kings, as they are known. They will target the high-end stores in a particular supermarket chain and only sell to them — an idea that store management understands, Stiker said.

"Big grocery chains get it because it's all about segmenting the stores as well," he said. "They see the success that Whole foods has had — more fresh produce, wood floors, specialty products — and they want to replicate that in some of their markets."

The other big push is online. While Stonewall Kitchen has its own robust online store, the company is looking to expand its presence through online distributors like Jet.com and Whisperwind, Stiker said. "But we are particular about adhering to recommended pricing levels. We have a retail price that we know our customers are comfortable paying. To the extent they start running crazy discounts, we'll stop shipping to them."

The big kahuna is Amazon.com, and Stiker is encouraging the company to begin selling its products there.

"Amazon is taking over the world," King said, "and we should be a part of that."

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