

IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST BITE.

BY RACHEL TRAVERS

Perfect amount of crunch without being hard, dissolving into flakiness that only hints at butter, not sweet like a cookie, and definitely not a cracker, but diabolically delicious with a lightly nutty flavor.



These were all mental notes as I had my first taste of the recently launched product, Effie's Homemade Oatcakes – the brand new baby of Joan MacIsaac and Irene Costello that's catching on quickly.

I've been telling everybody about them. I ate the three boxes they sent me to sample without sharing once. I've gone out of my way to buy them on several occasions now, each time vowing to turn someone else on to them – but no, I want them all to myself. These little rectangles of old-fashioned love work for breakfast with a bite of good cheese and a cup of coffee, and have become my favorite mid-morning or mid-afternoon snack – lately when paired with To Die For's Cheddar and Horseradish Spread. This is a combination I don't even have words for.

However, I can share the story of how this product came to be and where it's likely to go, which is "to the moon!" as Jackie Gleason might have roared.

Joan MacIsaac, 46, and Irene Costello, 47, actually went to the same high school, Milton High, but didn't get reconnected until the late 1990s through friends they had in common. Joan ran Ruby Chard Catering that turned into Ruby Chard Take-Away Café and Catering in West Roxbury from 1998-2003. She partnered with Irene in 2005.

Irene was an accomplished corporate professional with 20 years in product development, strategic planning and sales. But her heart did not soar, so in 2000 she began the Master's program in Gastronomy at Boston University. Joan, who had been through that program, tried to talk her out of it, knowing her friend would never be making the kind of salary she was commanding at the time.

"I heard her, but I thought I could figure a way to make more money out of it," said Irene, who now admits Joan was right about the money, but has zero regrets. "I never ever miss being back in that life. You just make accommodations with your spending habits and adjust."

They've worked together for three years now, not including some on and off time before that, and began running full-time cooking classes and corporate team building programs when they closed the café. Various business plans emerged while Irene went to Boston University, and a wholesale venture was always part of the mix.

But the idea of doing a product, and particularly of starting with the oatcakes, was always in the background. The oatcakes did well in their West Roxbury café, and from 1998-2001 were also being produced in Seattle by a friend, Leslie Mackie, who owned Macrina Bakery.

"This is a family recipe, originally from Scotland – my great grandmother on my mother's side began passing it down," says Joan who grew up in Dorchester, then Milton. "But my family grew up in Nova Scotia on big farms. These were families with only a ninth grade education. This was farm food. You used what you had, and on a farm there were oats.

"Growing up in Dorchester the oatcakes were constantly in the house. I can picture them in a green Tupperware container in the cabinet, always full. My dad ate them every night with butter or cheese as a late night snack with a cup of tea. We ate them sometimes for dessert, sometimes after school. When friends or members of my dad's big family got together, the oatcakes would always be put out with little sandwiches and a pot of tea, maybe with some pickles," continues Joan. On Cape Breton they'd use steel cut oats and lard. But the recipe was adapted when the family came to the United States, where rolled oats were common. Joan still uses rolled oats – and definitely butter, not lard.

But launching a product or product line was still on the back burner until Joan attended a Women Chefs and Entrepreneurs class offered in her Master's program. Ruth Reichl was on the panel and said what she found was that "the most successful businesses were the ones that stayed true to their origins."

"That was my aha moment," says Joan, thinking about her mother's oatcakes and how simply delicious they were.

And in April 2007 the effort went full thrust. Both women did side work and their corporate team building continued, but they went through a major test period. "I tried maybe ten different ways of changing the recipe," says Joan, "and then went back to the original way I was doing it."

They wanted to carefully brand their product so eventually they could build a line. "Joan has been the chef and the creative force," says Irene, "and I bring more of a professional business strategy and approach to it. We were very fortunate to know people that we could call on to seek advice and wisdom in putting together our business plan. And people have shot holes into our original assumptions and sent us back to the drawing board with our plan."

It takes a huge support network to launch a new product and Joan and Irene's list is long. However, two women went above and beyond the call of duty with Effie's. Rebecca Gournay, a New Jersey business woman they met at the Fancy Food Show in New York, did pro bono work for them and used her wealth of consumer packaged goods and food background to help them revamp their sales strategy. Andrea Taber at Ever So Humble Pie Company let them use her specialized equipment (they needed a "sheeter") so they could make the oatcakes at her kitchen during off hours. Irene is quick to state that it's "all about pass it forward..."

They launched their product in February at the Boston Wine Expo, thinking this public event would be a great springboard. "We designed a booth with a black curtain that framed the table, and even had a valance, hung up our sign, and created a very charming, inviting homemade look that really popped," says Irene. "People found us easily – and it didn't hurt that we were right across from *The Boston Globe*."

They hit the pavement hard after the Expo weekend, and in week one placed their product in 13 stores. Their plan is to be in 100 outlets by June.

Plans for an expanded product line continue. "Some of the items we're considering are rusks, made with cornmeal and honey, perhaps with anise; multigrain rusks; and a semolina cracker that tastes like pasta that's been toasted." ♦

Effie's Oatcakes are sold at the following retailers:

A. Russo & Sons in Watertown
Bo-Tes Imports in Norwell
Esprit du Vin in Milton
Flora Gift and Garden Shop in Wellesley
Fruit Center Marketplace in Hingham
John Dewar & Company in Newton and Wellesley
Lookout Farm in Natick
Tilly & Salvy's Bacon Street Farm in Natick
Verrill Farm in Concord
Ward's Berry Farm in Sharon
Wasik's in Wellesley

Their distribution is increasing daily so please check their website for an update on additional retail outlets: www.effieshomemade.com.

Rachel Travers is a freelance food, lifestyle and travel writer who has contributed regularly to *The Boston Globe*, as well as a smattering of regional and national magazines and online sites. She is currently on the Board of the Boston Public Market Association and has been committed to "locally produced" for years. She can be reached at alphasoup2@aol.com.