

BUSINESS



Piatka is the founder of Nadja Foods. She was photographed in her office, Sunday, Jan.29, 2012.

Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News

STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS /NADJA FOODS

Talent in kitchen turns into growing food business

By **STEPHEN T. WATSON**

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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As a teenager, Nadja Piatka was working at the diner her parents owned in Toronto when she noticed how popular her mother's pierogi were with their customers.

Piatka thought her family should focus on making pierogi, but her mother stuck with the restaurant.

"That was my first kind of experience going, gee, if you have a product that's unique

and delicious and good value, people are going to buy it," she said.

Several decades later, Piatka is following her own advice. Her Nadja Foods makes low-fat, low-calorie snacks sold through restaurant and supermarket chains across North America.

Before finding success with Nadja Foods, Piatka endured the breakup of her first marriage, leaving her a single mother

struggling to find work while dodging debt collectors.

The Canadian native now runs her company from Buffalo, where she moved for love, and she has a network of companies that bake, package and ship her food for her.

Today, Nadja Foods is expanding into gluten-free products and moving into new marketplaces. And the onetime teacher comes up with the recipes, develops new business and makes sure everything is done to her standards.

“I think everybody has layers and layers of talents. Sometimes we don’t reach for them, or look for them. I think adversity makes us do that,” said Piatka, in a recent interview in her Elmwood Village home, where “Mac,” a black rescue cat named after her gluten-free macaroons, was underfoot.

Piatka left the classroom years ago to be a stay-at-home mother to her two children.

They were living in Edmonton when her dentist husband left her for another woman.

Piatka had trouble finding another teaching job, and she tried to ignore creditors who came to her house.

After she and her daughter were forced to hide under the kitchen table one afternoon, until the knocking at the door ceased, she realized something had to change.

She sent out 30 resumes but got only one interview, and she cried in that meeting. “That’s when I thought, what can I do? What do I do?” she said.

Piatka liked cooking, and she had enjoyed working at her parents’ restaurant, which was named Nadja’s because she was the only one of three daughters who willingly worked there. She began baking muffins, brownies and other snacks in her kitchen, packing them up and delivering them herself to local coffee shops, taking the name Three Blondes and a Brownie for her small company.

She logged long work shifts of baking and driving, beginning at 4 a.m. She worried that a single mistake with a batch of food, or one problem with her car, could prove catastrophic.

“I realized I was working hard, not smart,” Piatka said.

But she didn’t have the savings, nor the ability to borrow, to expand by hiring more workers.

So Piatka contracted with bakeries and other companies, a process known as “outsourcing,” which allowed her to begin mass-producing her treats.

Piatka didn’t have business experience, but she had confidence, and her break came when she contacted the regional McDonald’s Canada headquarters in Edmonton, which was expanding its breakfast menu. The company tested Piatka’s low-fat muffins against those of other companies, including Quaker Oats Co., and she won the contract.

“It was right timing, right product, right attitude,” she said.

Restaurants, supermarkets and their customers responded to snacks that taste good but are relatively healthy, such as her 145-calorie brownies sold through Subway.

Those brownies, for example, get moisture and texture, as well as some of their sugar content, from pureed dates and they don’t contain artificial sweeteners.

“I really believe the best food starts in a bowl in someone’s kitchen,” Piatka said.

Now, a lot of people write to her saying they also have a great recipe and they want to know how they can sell it to a food-services conglomerate.

Piatka tells them that when she sold her “fat wise” muffin recipe to Quaker Oats, the company was paying for the value it represented — the volume of sales behind the recipe — and not the list of ingredients.

Her recipes have to be scalable, and the finished products must be able to withstand packaging, shipping, sitting on display at the retail location and making it to the customer’s home — and taste good in the end.

Piatka talks about the “wow” factor for her snacks: “When you bite into something and you go, ‘Oh, wow, this tastes really good.’ That’s it.”

Nadja Foods’ products are independently tested for their nutritional value, and the food items must be made to her stringent requirements.

One facility wasn’t meeting those standards, Piatka said, and Nadja Foods no longer works with that company.

The snacks—including her 120-calorie Nadja’s Petite Angel Cakes — are produced in

Alberta, Canada, and Iowa and warehoused in Pueblo, Colo.

Piatka is based in Buffalo, where she moved after meeting her husband, Douglas Smith, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in the late 1990s.

She works out of the office in her home on Lexington Avenue with her daughter, Veronica, the company's only other full-time employee.

Piatka declined to reveal annual sales figures for the privately held Nadja Foods, which also has brokers in the United States and Canada who work as a commissioned sales force.

She sees the company's recent push into gluten-free products as a natural extension of the brand's emphasis on low-calorie, low-fat snacks.

Gluten-free food is growing in popularity among people who have celiac disease — and therefore can't eat wheat, rye or barley — and those who think it's healthier to follow this diet.

Nadja Foods traditionally has sold its snacks through large clients such as McDonald's, Subway, Wegmans and Price Chopper supermarkets.

Now the company is selling its brownies through school districts, including in the Cayman Islands, that want to offer healthier snacks to their students. "My school business has really jumped," Piatka said.

Looking ahead, Piatka said she wants to form an outsourcing partnership with a local facility.

"I would like to create things in Buffalo, because this is my home," Piatka said.

She also puts together an annual trip for professional women that is held at a hotel in Quebec and offers bonding and networking opportunities.

Nadja's biography titled, "Under the Table to the Top of the World" will be published later this year.

Piatka is in remission from leukemia and talks in the book about how she tried, even in the face of her cancer diagnosis, to focus on things in her life she was thankful for.

She has another message she regularly shares with audiences, one aimed at anyone who finds herself in the same circumstances she faced 20 years ago: "Do something."

"I really want this book to make them realize that you can follow your dreams regardless of how little money you have [or] your situation in life," she said.

swatson@buffnews.com