

Making healthy cookies, snacks lead a single mom to millions

BY JENNIFER GISH
STAFF WRITER

Nadja Piatka has the kind of mom-to-millionaire story Oprah would love. And Oprah did love it enough to bring the owner of the Buffalo-based Nadja Foods company, a healthy cookie and snack maker, to her show.

On Tuesday, Piatka — who began her business in the early 1990s as a single mother baking low-fat goodies in her home and ultimately turning her enterprise into a company with international distribution — will bring her message to a smaller but key audience at the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women luncheon at the Desmond Hotel and Conference Center in Colonie.

Piatka has authored two cookbooks, sold one of her recipes to Quaker and had her low-fat muffins distributed by McDonald's restaurants in Canada. Recently, her Organic Macaroon and Chocolate Macaroon cookie dough arrived in the organic and kosher freezer section at Price Chopper. (The products are dairy- and gluten-free.)

But in the process of building a food business, she's also learned some lessons about self-preservation and healthy living that she'll share with Go Red attendees.

Q: So many jumping in the health food industry: a good sign, or is it watering down the field?

A: I love the idea that social pressure has made (companies) do that, because it translates into their bottom line, so companies that have for years been selling whatever they could get away with ... now they're going, "Hmmm. The consumers are educated. They're informed. They want better things from us. ..."

Years ago, those big international food companies really controlled what was on the shelves in stores. Now, you're getting more creative, smaller companies. ... I love to see little companies with big ideas, and there's a lot of them out there, and a lot of them are women-owned businesses. They're minority businesses. They're businesses that started in someone's kitchen, not a big laboratory kitchen. ...

My company's motto is that supplying

food is a privilege and a responsibility.

Q: You say exercise is important. When you were a single mom starting your business in the early 1990s, how did you find the time?

A: That's more of a challenge, because you only have 24 hours in a day. Sometimes it meant getting up at a ridiculous time. ... If I didn't work out, I didn't get that energy I needed to sustain myself and do what I needed to do.



When my kids were really little, and they would have their afternoon nap ... if they woke up and they were fussing, I would just say to them, "Just stay in your beds, and I'm going to get to you when I'm finished (exercising)." It would be maybe 20 minutes, and you know what? I came to them a happier mother. ...

The point that I think is so important is that being a martyr doesn't work for anybody. It doesn't work for you, and it doesn't work for your family.

If you feel that you got the short end of

the stick in everything, you just can't be that delightful, enthusiastic person.

Q: Your story is so amazing. But there are countless women who have started their own businesses and don't reach your level of success. Why do you think it worked for you?

A: Sometimes things happen to us that we don't understand, but there's a reason. It's going to put us in a place that we normally wouldn't have gone to. ...

I'm not going to lie and say I wasn't in the fetal position a few times, but I don't stay there. Get up and say, "I have to do something, and I can do it."

That's what I encourage everyone to do, and I think that might be the difference. You let it get you, or you don't.

Q: You've written two cookbooks about healthy eating. What are your top five foods for staying healthy?

A: I love whole-grain breads. I love that comfort food. I love bread. ... I like foods with good healthy fats in them. I love salmon.

I think that dairy is great. Some people can't have dairy. I enjoy dairy.

On weekends, I love bacon and eggs. I love bacon and eggs, and I have an 80-20 theory. Eighty percent of the time I watch what I eat. I watch the calories. I watch the fat. Twenty percent of the time, I indulge. If you try to be structured 100 percent of the time, it's really not going to work. When I'm on the 20 percent, I love every bite. I don't beat myself up and say, "I shouldn't have." I should have, of course, I love it.

Q: Do you think there are some foods that just shouldn't be made low-fat?

A: I used to have this newspaper column. ... People would send me their favorite family recipes, and I would make it over into a healthier version, and I found that there was always something you could tweak and make a little healthier for you. One thing I thought that you couldn't do was tiramisu. Sure enough, there is a tiramisu recipe that is low-fat on my website.

I'm bad. I look at something, and I kind of see, "OK I think we can doctor this up a bit."

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