



Livin' La Vida Salsa

For the Salsa Sisters, it's not the sky that's the limit--they want to get onto Oprah! The McDowell sisters produce a line of salsas and jellies that quickly gained popularity across Kentucky and beyond.

By Jennifer Nice

Sisters Belinda Fay and Carla McDowell give a whole new meaning to the old saying, "A woman's place is in the kitchen."

They don't mind the cliché. In fact, they'll tell you there's no place they would rather be.

Belinda and Carla grew up in their kitchen, helping their mother, Doris, with her never-ending canning.

Then, when Doris died, the kitchen was the place they gathered to grieve and, eventually, to heal. From that grieving process sprouted a unique opportunity that transformed their kitchen yet again—into the home base of their company, McDowell Farms Salsa.

The sisters produce a line of salsas and jellies, and the popularity of their products has spread like wildfire across Kentucky.

Belinda Faye and Carla McDowell own McDowell Farms Salsa. The moniker "Salsa Sisters" was coined by a reporter from the Cincinnati Inquirer.

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With help from their families, friends and even Uncle Sam, they produce approximately 17,000 jars of their products each year; they've earned the Kentucky Entrepreneurs of the Year award (2004), the Innovations in Agriculture Award (2005), and have been featured on numerous local television and radio shows, and in area newspapers.

Although already very successful in the eyes of many, for Belinda and Carla, the true measure of their success can only come one way.

"Our goal is to get onto 'Oprah,'" says Carla. "We want to be one of Oprah's favorite foods. One of these days, we'll make it really big and Oprah will want us to come on her show."

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[From Mother's Help to Uncle Sam's Help](#)

Belinda, of Maysville, Ky., and Carla, of nearby Germantown, thank their mother for just about everything, and Doris continues to get credit for the good things that happen to the sisters even though she died six years ago.

If it weren't for her dedication to her family, there would be no McDowell Farms Salsa company. Doris knew how important it was for a family to be self-sufficient and she was determined to make sure her family always had enough food on the table.

"My mother grew up during the Depression," says Carla. "She was always canning. We had a garden and she canned everything. Ever since we were little, Belinda and I helped her."

They credit their mother for their canning skills.

"We go over to Dad's now and he still has jars of jelly she made," says Carla. "I keep telling him that we need to throw some of it away, but Dad says, 'Oh, no, it was your mother's, it's still good.'"

When their mother died, the sisters were devastated. They took their grief into the kitchen and started making salsa from Doris's recipe to give to friends. One day, their local extension agent tried the salsa and suggested that they make it for



resale. The sisters dismissed the idea.

“Mentally, we weren’t ready,” says Belinda. “We were still grieving.”

One year later, the extension agent came back and said, “It’s time.”

Desperately Seeking Salsa

Belinda Faye and Carla McDowell started with their mother’s salsa recipe, grew all the ingredients themselves, and then canned them. The response was tremendous and McDowell Farms Salsa Company was born.

The sisters currently make four salsas: Mild, “for those who want to taste their salsa, rather than be scared by it”;

Medium, which is “full of flavor, with a pleasant kick”;

Hot, which comes with a stern warning; and

Very hot—the sisters wear gloves and goggles when they make it.

Belinda and Carla expanded their product line to include a variety of pepper jellies, also made from their mother’s recipes.

They make the jellies seasonally, depending on when the fresh-fruit ingredients are available. During the Christmas holidays, they offer red- and green-pepper jelly.

Around Thanksgiving, you can get orange-pepper jelly.

During strawberry, peach and blackberry season, they make peach-jalapeño jelly (fabulous on pork!), strawberry-jalapeño jelly and their latest creation, blackberry-jalapeño jelly.

Carla and Belinda make the jellies once a year and once they’re gone, they’re gone until next season.

They also create gift baskets for any occasion, which include a selection of salsas, jellies and other goodies, as well as recipe cards for dishes made with their products.

The salsas can be ordered online or purchased at retailers across Kentucky and at several locations in Ohio.

Visit the McDowell Farms Salsa website for a list of retailers.

For more information about the Salsa Sisters and McDowell Farms Salsa, to order their products online or to find a store near you that carries their salsas and jellies, contact:

Salsa Sisters
Carla McDowell and Belinda Fay
2261 Bridgeville Road
Germantown, KY 41044
(606) 728-2433
www.mcdowellfarmssalsa.com

TopWhat made it “time” was Kentucky House Bill 391.

“Home-based microprocessing came out of House Bill 391, which was put into effect so that farmers could take something they grew on their farm, make a product from it and sell it,” Belinda explains. “So that’s how we got started.”

The sisters enrolled in a home-processing course that was offered by the University of Kentucky; they became the first agricultural business in Kentucky to be certified and to get their home-based microprocessing business up and running. The McDowell Farms Salsa company was born.

The company gets its namesake from the McDowell family farm, which is owned by Carla and her husband, David.



"The farm has been in David's family for years," says Belinda. "Carla and David live on the farm." Belinda lives in Maysville, about 18 minutes from the farm, as does the sisters' father, Carl. The salsa and jellies are made at the farm.

Although House Bill 391 gave them their start, they quickly outgrew its parameters.

"The downside of Kentucky House Bill 391 is that it limits how much you can sell and how much money you can take in each year from sales," says Belinda. "We quickly realized that we needed to go commercial."

Kentucky House Bill 391 capped revenue at \$35,000 annually. It also limited where the sisters could sell their salsa. If they wanted to build a wholesale distribution network, they needed to go commercial.

Their decision to expand could not have come at a better time. For a second time, a government opportunity fell into their laps. They were able to secure a \$56,000 grant from Kentucky's Agricultural Development Board.

The grant program was one way the government was trying to help tobacco farmers through diversification and buy-outs. McDowell farms' primary crop is tobacco, but acreage for this crop has been decreasing steadily every year. Since 1996, their farm's federal tobacco quota has been cut in half.

With funding secured through bank loans and the grant, the sisters started building a commercial kitchen on the McDowell farm. They also enrolled in Ohio State University's four-day commercial certification course.

"When we came home, we had a roof on our kitchen," recalls Belinda. "I remember pulling into the drive, seeing the roof and thinking, 'Oh, my God! This is really happening!'"

The sisters celebrated the completion of the commercial kitchen with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in June 2004.

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Kentucky Proud Products

Carla and Belinda's original line of McDowell Farms Salsa products included mild, medium, hot and very hot tomato-based salsa, all from their mother's recipes. Next they added a product called chowchow.

"It's a very Southern relish that contains green tomatoes, cabbage, onions and carrots," Belinda explains. "A lot of people eat it on smokies and hot dogs. We make chowchow in regular and spicy, with jalapeños."

Then they added a line of jellies, also from their mother's recipes. They make orange-, green- and red-pepper jelly, and peach-jalapeño, strawberry-jalapeño and blackberry-jalapeño jelly.

"The new jelly line has just taken off like crazy," says Belinda. "We make the red- and green-pepper jelly for the holidays. We make the orange for Thanksgiving," she adds, admitting that she made the orange jelly accidentally.

"I thought Carla was going to kill me, so I suggested we sell it for Thanksgiving. She said no one would buy it, but we sold out." The sisters' latest endeavor is recipe cards for dishes made using their products.

When McDowell Farms Salsa started under House Bill 391, Carla and Belinda grew all the produce for their salsa.

Once they converted to a commercial operation, they couldn't grow enough produce to meet the demand for their salsa.

Recipes

Strawberry-jalapeño Appetizer

Ingredients 1 8-oz. jar McDowell Farms strawberry-jalapeño jelly 1 8-oz. block cream cheese, frozen Mini chocolate chips
Chopped pecans Extra creamy Cool Whip Fresh strawberries Club crackers

Preparation



Place frozen block of cream cheese on a plate. Melt strawberry-jalapeño jelly in microwave, stirring every 20 seconds until semi-soft. Pour slowly over block of frozen cream cheese. Let cool. Sprinkle with mini chocolate chips and pecans. Garnish rim of plate with fresh strawberries and Cool Whip. Serve with Club crackers.

McDowell Farms Bean Soup

Ingredients 48 oz. pre-cooked Great Northern beans 48 oz. pre-cooked Pinto beans 1 jar medium McDowell Farms salsa 1 medium onion, diced 1 package skinless kielbasa, sliced and quartered Salt and pepper to taste

Preparation

Put all ingredients in a crockpot. Cook on low for 10 hours. Make some cornbread and enjoy!

Top One of the requirements of the grant, which in essence was a forgivable loan, was that they purchase 90 percent of their produce from Kentucky farmers. The money they spend on that produce is considered a partial payment on the loan.

"What worked out even better is that the Governor's Office on Agricultural Policy built a new produce auction just 20 minutes from our farm," says Belinda. "All of our area farmers know what we want. Many of them are tobacco farmers who have diversified and now grow crops other than tobacco to make money.

"During the summer season, they take their produce to the auction, usually held twice a week. It's not unusual for us to leave with two tons of tomatoes—that's the amount we will need to carry us through a week of making salsa."

Folks around Maysville know that if they grow good produce, the sisters will buy it.

"We're on a first-name basis with a lot of the farmers," says Belinda. "It's a win-win situation."

The only drawback to this program is that it dictates when the sisters can make their products. Because they purchase only fresh, locally grown produce, they can only make their products when that produce is in season.

Therefore, just as there are peach, strawberry, blackberry, tomato and pepper seasons, there are certain times of the year when the sisters can make their jellies and salsas with these ingredients.

"Our production season for salsa is from the last week of July to the second week of October," says Belinda. "During that time we process approximately 14,000 jars of salsa."

The upside is that they produce a salsa that tastes wonderfully fresh, even though it's a canned product.

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A Family Venture

Surprisingly, both Carla and Belinda work elsewhere. Carla has been a schoolteacher for 25 years and currently teaches first grade in Mason County. Belinda is a registered nurse.

Because the sisters work full-time, their evenings and weekends are devoted to making their products. Fortunately, they have a large family willing to help.

"My daughters, our daughter-in-law and Belinda's daughter all help," says Carla. "And when you have that many women in the kitchen, it usually leads to some good male-bashing!"

The sisters, who are five years apart—Carla is older—but have always been close, enjoy their time together in the kitchen.

"We help each other get through the frustrations of what happened during the day," says Carla. "If we weren't doing this together, we would be doing something else together."

Belinda agrees. "The kitchen is very much a venting place," she says, "but it really gives us an opportunity to look ahead. Because we're there together and working, we start talking about new ideas.

The men in the family help out, too, including the sisters' 82-year-old father, who, with the help of his wife, drives the



company van and makes deliveries to local retail stores. Other members of the family, as well as friends, pitch in, too.

“Our families help out in every way,” says Belinda. “For example, Sunday is labeling day. We go to church, then we go out to eat with our dad and stepmother, Edna, and then everyone goes to the farm to label, including my two granddaughters.”

“Every jar is hand-poured; every tomato is cut by hand,” says Carla. “We want to make sure our quality stays high so people will come back and buy again.”

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Spreading Their Roots

Since starting their business, Kentucky festivals have been their main avenue for sales.

They hit the road every month to sell their products at such shows as Kentucky Crafted, the Maysville Craft and Antique Expo, the Kentucky Derby Governor’s Breakfast and the Kentucky Bourbon Festival, to name just a few.

“I love going to the shows, but I’ll admit there are times that I don’t,” says Belinda. “We went to an outdoor show one Mother’s Day weekend. The weather turned cold, no one was there, and we were freezing cold and miserable. It was horrible and so were our sales.

“We should have been home with our children and grandchildren,” she continues. “After that, we got our priorities in order. No more shows on Mother’s Day. I don’t want to lose my family because we gained a weekend.”

From October through December, the Salsa Sisters (a moniker originally coined by a reporter from the Cincinnati Inquirer) will sometimes attend two shows in a single weekend.

When the sisters split up to do shows, it usually becomes competitive. One weekend, for example, Belinda went to the Bourbon Festival in Bardstown and Carla and her husband went to the Gaslight Festival in Louisville. The sisters called each other frequently to check their sales.

At the end of the day, Belinda had sold \$100 more.

“It was only because a guy walked up at the last minute and bought two cases,” says Belinda. “I could’ve kissed him!”

The sisters have also built a solid wholesale distribution; McDowell Farms Salsa can currently be found in 53 stores in Kentucky and two in Ohio.

“We started distributing in just a small circle around us and slowly we’ve been pushing out further,” says Belinda. “We’re working on making it a regional, tri-county product. Then we’ll push a little bigger; we just need to make sure we can meet the demand.”

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Salsa Sunset

Both Carla and Belinda plan on retiring soon, but not from making salsa.

“Carla has two more years before she can retire with benefits from school, so we’re going to break her out first,” says Belinda. Hopefully, Belinda will be able to retire soon afterward so they can dedicate themselves full-time to their salsa company.

“It’s difficult for us to manage the business when we both work full-time,” says Belinda. The biggest challenge they have is contacting their retail customers, as most have left their businesses for the day by the time Carla and Belinda get home from work.

In the meantime, the Salsa Sisters have taken baby steps to grow their very successful business and will continue to do so; they don’t want to outgrow or promise more than they can produce.

“It amazes me just how much we’ve grown in these few years,” says Belinda. “The opportunities for the salsa company just seem to materialize before our very eyes—we practically trip over them sometimes!”



“We always remember that our mother is the one who taught us to can,” adds Carla. “We truly believe Mom is looking over us and we think she would be pleased with what we’ve accomplished with her recipes and our hard work.”

About the Author: Jennifer Nice is a writer and editor in the agriculture and equine industry. Based in San Francisco, she divides her time between the city and Napa Valley, where she enjoys her two favorite pastimes: wine and horses.

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