

Secret recipe spawns salmon empire



Ellen Melcosky not only transformed herself from a housewife to a global businesswoman, she created jobs for others along the way

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With her mother's secret smoked-salmon recipe under one arm and a business plan under the other, Ellen Melcosky approached a handful of lenders looking for help to start her home-based gourmet food business.

Nobody bit.

Instead of giving up, Ms. Melcosky cast a wider net.

Friends and family, who had tasted the special salmon made from a unique brining process, insisted on lending the former housewife money to get her business off the ground. After collecting nearly \$100,000, including a \$30,000 loan from the federally funded Women's Enterprise Centre, her company Little Miss Chief was founded and began distributing smoked salmon in 1996.

She paid off her debt within months and today the product is sold in gift shops, airports, supermarkets and high-end food shops across Canada, the United States and in European countries such as Holland, Poland and Spain.

Not only did Ms. Melcosky transform herself from a housewife to a global businesswoman, she created jobs for others along the way.

Most of them are in her home province of British Columbia, including fishermen and processors she has contracted out on Vancouver Island, as well as casual staff who help pack the product and ship it out from a warehouse near her home in Westbank, B.C., a suburb of Kelowna.

She has also hired artists to design the packaging, such as cedar boxes, in which the product is sold.

Little Miss Chief has distributors worldwide, one of whom is Ruud Janssen of Pacific Salmon Import in Holland, who for the past three years has put the product in food

baskets that are often given as gifts. Mr. Janssen said people in his country like the product because it's made from wild salmon, which is rare there, and it is a native recipe from Canada, a popular vacation spot for the Dutch.

"They like the product and the package itself. It makes a nice gift and when you are visiting friends is better than a bunch of flowers," Mr. Janssen said in an interview from his home in Zandvoort, on Holland's west coast. (He's travelling to Vancouver next month for the Olympics, and to do business with Ms. Melcosky.)

While the recession hurt her business last year, Ms. Melcosky said it is still making money and at age 64 she's looking to possibly expand into other products and maybe bring a partner on board.

"I will keep moving forward," she said.

As for a succession plan, if she ever considers retirement: "I know I should have one, but I don't."

Ms. Melcosky will receive an award in March at the 2010 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards for her contribution to business and the positive impact it's had on her community.