

Recipe for success

Favorites

Friendship, marketing savvy fuel Ohio cookbook company



PHOTOS BY DAN NEMAN

Vickie Hutchins, left, and Jo Ann Martin are friends and business partners.

By DANIEL NEMAN
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DUBLIN, OHIO — Two hundred cookbooks. Nine million copies in print. Twenty-seven years of friendship.

Vickie Hutchins and Jo Ann Martin had no background in business and no formal cooking training when they met and became instant friends. Now they're at the head of a national country cookbook phenomenon.

Their company, Gooseberry Patch, is recognized as a national bestselling publisher. They have a big presence on Amazon and in bookstores, but most of their cookbooks and calendars are sold at gift shops and home stores.

They sell very well at Cracker Barrel restaurants, which embody the same down-home country appeal found in the books.

And it all started with a backyard fence.

In 1984, Ms. Martin and Ms. Hutchins lived next door to each other in Delaware, Ohio, north of Columbus. They had seen each other in the neighborhood, but did not know one another until a chance encounter at their shared fence changed their lives.

They started talking, and the more they talked the more they realized how much they had in common. Soon they were going to flea markets together, auctions, and antique stores. With person-

alities that meshed well and similar tastes, ambitions, and drive, they began to look for a business to go into together.

They first thought of opening a store, but both had young children and "the retail hours are death for a family," Ms. Martin said from her spacious home in Dublin, Ohio, not too many miles from the neighborhood where they first met.

It was the '80s, and mail-order catalogs were big, so they decided to sell household items and gifts through catalogs. Ducks and geese were popular motifs at the time, so they decided to call their



A table in Jo Ann Martin's home in Dublin, Ohio, holds some of the 200 cookbooks published by Gooseberry Patch.

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company Gooseberry Patch.

And one more thing: They didn't want people to throw away the catalogs. So they decided to sprinkle stories, tips, and recipes throughout, knowing that women — they were marketing to women — would keep them around if the recipes were good enough.

They were good enough. "People were commenting as much on our recipes as they were on the catalogs," Ms. Martin said. Then "people started sending in their own recipes, I guess because they wanted them in the catalog."

Even with the catalog and recipes catching on, they were still a small operation working out of their own houses. Ms. Hutchins' parents became the first employees at \$2 an hour. That was \$2 an hour more than Ms. Martin and Ms. Hutchins were making at the time. They worked on their kitchen tables and used their basements as warehouse space.

"In 1998, we decided to move downtown. And it's

scary when you move downtown, because when you fail everyone knows it," Ms. Hutchins said.

They needn't have worried. In 1992, they were receiving so many recipes that they decided to put out their first cookbook. *Old-Fashioned Country Christmas* used the recipes that had been submitted, adding the name and hometown of each one's author.

"They sent in their best, because their names were on it," Ms. Hutchins said.

Not many cookbooks at the time ran the names and hometowns of the recipe creators, and it turned out to be a brilliant marketing move. Family members wanted to buy copies of the book that had the name of their mother or sister in it. The initial printing of 5,000 sold out so fast that just months later they ordered a second printing of 10,000.

"That's when we knew we had a winner," said Ms. Hutchins.

The cookbook sales quickly outpaced the business they were doing from the catalogs, and 1½ years ago the company shut down the catalog division (Gooseberry Patch is privately owned and does not release financial information). Last year they also moved to

an office park on the outskirts of Columbus, near Dublin.

The second and third cookbooks were released in 1994, *Welcome Home for the Holidays* and *Old-Fashioned Country Cookies*, which originally had a picture of a reindeer cookie on the cover. But with a marketing instinct they must have been born with, Ms. Martin and Ms. Hutchins quickly replaced it with a more generic cookie so they could sell the book year-round.

If anything, this marketing savvy has become even more finely tuned. For all the country charm of its cookbooks, the company has eagerly embraced social media, with YouTube videos featuring the photogenic owners, a Twitter account, a Circle of Friends email club with 380,000 members, an online recipe box with thousands of free recipes, a Scribd page, and even its own app.

The company has grown, but the 25-person staff still personally tests many of the recipes that come in, and the office holds potluck lunches to try out some of the others. Both women like to cook, and they often go back to some of their favorite recipes they have printed. Ms. Martin (whose husband, Jay, is a pro-

fessor and soccer coach at Ohio Wesleyan University) likes a hearty chicken casserole and a crustless pumpkin pie — "It's easy, it makes your house smell good," she said. Ms. Hutchins (whose husband, Shelby, died a few years ago) favors a tomato pie she created herself.

But along with the good recipes come some of the bad. "We get a lot of recipes with pretzels in gelatin," Ms. Hutchins said with disapproval. Zesty chicken salsa muffins were a particular disaster, they said, not because the recipe was bad but because they turned out dry and dense when the two were cooking them on a Columbus television program.

The two women laugh together often and seem attuned to what the other is going to say. Though both have moved from the houses they were living in when they met, they still live just a few miles from each other. And they are together every day of the work week.

"We're like a couple of married people," said Ms. Hutchins.

"Or sisters," Ms. Martin said.

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3 recipes from Ohio's Gooseberry Patch

Vickie's Tomato Pie

9-inch pie crust
4 tomatoes, chopped
1 onion, chopped
10 to 12 leaves fresh basil, chopped
1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
1 cup shredded Cheddar cheese
1 cup mayonnaise
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 400°. Place crust in a 9-inch pie plate and set on a baking sheet. Bake for about 12 minutes, until lightly golden; cool. Place tomatoes between paper towels to absorb as much moisture as possible. Layer half each of tomato, onion, and basil in pie crust; repeat layers. Mix mozzarella and Cheddar cheeses with mayonnaise; spread mixture over pie. Top with Parmesan cheese. Return pie plate to baking sheet; cover edge of crust with aluminum foil. Bake at 350° for 50 to 60 minutes. Let stand 15 minutes before slicing.

Yield: Makes 6 servings.
Source: Shared by Vickie Hutchins, Gooseberry Patch

Crustless Pumpkin Pie

4 eggs, beaten
1 (15-ounce) can pumpkin
1 (12-ounce) can evaporated milk
1½ cups sugar
2 teaspoons pumpkin pie spice
1 teaspoon salt
1 (18½-ounce) package yellow cake mix
1 cup chopped pecans or walnuts
1 cup butter, melted
Whipped topping, chopped nuts, and cinnamon, optional

Preheat oven to 350°. Combine eggs, pumpkin, milk, sugar, spice, and salt. Mix well; pour into an ungreased 13-by-9-inch baking pan. Sprinkle dry cake mix and nuts over top. Drizzle with butter; do not stir. Bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour, testing for doneness with a toothpick. Serve with whipped topping, sprinkled with nuts and cinnamon.

Yield: 8 to 10 servings.
Source: Shared by Linda Webb



DAN NEMAN

Jo Ann Martin, left, and Vickie Hutchins make brownies.

Chicken Casserole Supreme

1 to 1½ pounds cooked chicken, cubed
1 (16-ounce) container sour cream
1 (10¼-ounce) can cream of mushroom soup
1 (6-ounce) package herb-flavored stuffing mix
½ cup butter, melted
1 cup chicken broth

Combine chicken with sour cream and soup; transfer to a lightly greased 2-quart casserole dish. Mix dry stuffing mix, butter, and broth; layer over top of chicken mixture. Bake, uncovered, at 350° for 45 minutes, or until hot and bubbly.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings
Source: Shared by Gwen Linton