

Jo Ann Martin (left) and Vickie Hutchins

GOOSEBERRY PATCH

The Gooseberry Patch is cooking

By Hope Katz Gibbs

THINGS ARE cooking at Gooseberry Patch, a multimillion-dollar company with a country flair that publishes catalogs, comfort-food-friendly cookbooks, calendars and organizers.

Last year, the company published its 100th cookbook and shipped out more than 350,000 packages from its catalog of more than 500 items less than \$20—which includes a selection of wall and pocket-size calendars, night lights, Mason jars, bowls, kitchen accessories, food items and kits, Christmas ornaments and soap pumps.

Books and more keep customers happy



The company's 100 employees are like family, say founders Vickie Hutchins and Jo Ann Martin—two entrepreneurs who didn't expect to build an empire back in 1984. They were both stay-at-home moms looking for something to do after the kids went off to school. One morning the neighbors were chatting over their shared backyard fence in picturesque Delaware, Ohio, and decided to start a catalog company.

Their concept was simple: They wanted

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to put the things they loved about the country into "a store that arrived in your mailbox." They invested \$5,000 each and promised not to take a salary until they turned a profit. Within months, orders came pouring in.

Into that first 96-page catalog went a few of their favorite country cooking recipes, "because everyone loves to try a good new recipe," Hutchins says. She was right. By 1992, Hutchins and Martin had received so much positive feedback from readers about those recipes that Gooseberry Patch began publishing its own line of cookbooks.

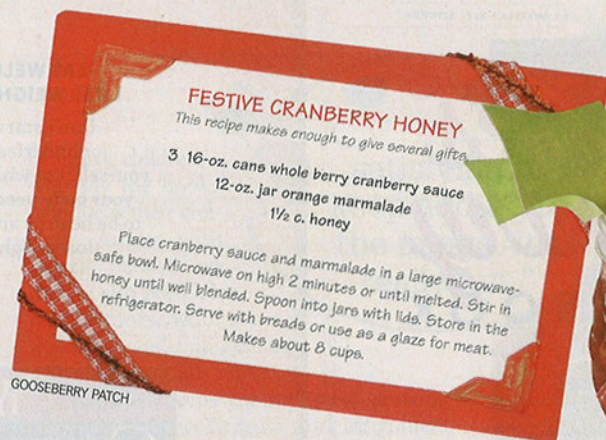
"Most of our good ideas come from our customers," Martin says, proudly noting that today the company has more than 8-million cookbooks in print.

A perennial hit, *Christmas All Through the House* features



The Costco Connection

Christmas All Through the House is available in most Costco warehouses and at costco.com.



GOOSEBERRY PATCH

Gooseberry Patch specializes in homemade treats



dozens of holiday recipes and simple craft ideas. Other popular titles include *Church Suppers*, *Harvest Kitchen* and *Super-Fast Slow Cooking*. Additional titles are in the works.

The co-founders say that there have been tough times. In 1998 their business grew dramatically, and they hadn't quite mastered how to handle the demand.

"We were still working out of our homes and our products were here, there and everywhere, so that was a logistical nightmare," Martin shares. "Finally, we moved into a 53,000-square-foot building and put everything under one roof."

Then came the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The anthrax scare made people afraid to use the post office, and their mail-order business took a hit. It rebounded, but in 2008 the nature of their business has changed once again due to the increased efficiency of the Internet. They can be found online at www.gooseberrypatch.com.

Through it all, Hutchins and Martin have managed to keep their friendship strong.

"Our offices are still right next to each other," Martin explains. "I'm in charge of the back end of operations, and Vickie works more on the creative side of things, so we don't step on each other's toes. We also escape now and then and do the one thing we both adore: going to antique flea markets."

Both say the most important lesson they have learned is to stay true to who you are.

"After you've had some success, it's easy to go off your path and get into things you shouldn't," says Hutchins. "But it's important to remember what brought you to the dance. We try to give our customers a little more than they expect, and if we can continue to build a company that provides nice surprises and gives people a little comfort when they need it, I think we'll have succeeded." [E]

Hope Katz Gibbs is a freelance writer in northern Virginia.