

Homegrown and homespun

Delaware's Gooseberry Patch mail-order craft business is growing fast

By AMBER STEPHENS

Just outside of downtown Delaware, some 250 seasonal workers and dozens of permanent staffers for Gooseberry Patch are busy filling orders, wrapping purchases and shipping them to thousands of customers during the hectic holiday season. From July through December this home-grown catalog-based business, which started in the homes of two local neighbors in 1984, will ship more than 250,000 packages nationwide.

And that's just the holiday season. This year alone, the company that features country crafts-inspired items, cookbooks and other homey kitsch, expects \$20 million in sales, says Liz Plotnick-Snay, chief operating officer.

The catalog and website, which feature items meant to evoke the feelings associated with adult shoppers' childhoods, have become increasingly popular as Americans return to nesting and spending more time with their families, she says. It was this urge to spend time with their families while earning money that led founders Vickie Hutchins and Jo Ann Martin to start the business.

Their first catalog, which featured about 40 items on 12 pages, has grown to 96 pages and more than 350 products, Martin says their roles as mothers led them to create a catalog business,

instead of a retail outlet that would take them away from their children who were preschoolers at the time. "It gave us both the perfect opportunity to work from home and keep an eye on the kids! It also allowed us the ability to spend valuable time with our families. That's an objective that hasn't changed throughout the years," she says.

These days, Gooseberry Patch orders are filled in a new 52,000-square-foot build-

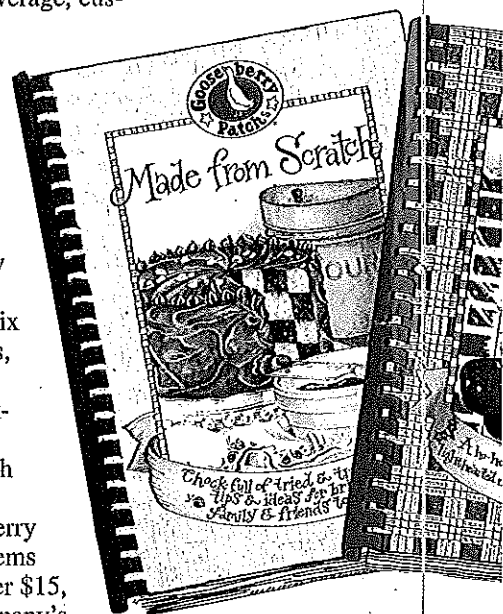
ing that houses everyone from the co-founders and design department to an order fulfillment center and warehouse where skids are packed from floor to ceiling with cookbooks alone. In the call center, order takers known as personal shoppers take calls 24 hours a day.

On average, customers spend about \$60 or \$65 per order, which typically includes five or six products, says Plotnick-Snay. Although most Gooseberry Patch items are under \$15, the company's first catalog was full of pricey items based more on what the co-founders liked than what they could sell, Martin says.

By the second catalog, the slick pages and most of the high-price items were gone. "After the first glossy catalog, when we switched to a chattier, hand-illustrated format...it just felt right. I think we knew at that point that the catalog was becoming what we had originally wanted it to be; the overwhelming response from our customers confirmed it," Martin says.

Instead of using photography, a team of eight watercolor artists illustrates all of the products featured in the catalog. To keep customer satisfaction levels up and return rates low, the artists must truthfully depict each item, Plotnick-Snay says.

Although Gooseberry Patch staffers do not make the home interiors products sold in the catalog and over the



Gooseberry Patch co-founders Vickie Hutchins and Jo Ann Martin have seen their catalog business grow to more than \$20 million in sales

Internet, the creative department develops the most popular items — cookbooks. The collection includes nearly 70 different cookbooks and an assortment of smaller collections known as Gooseberry Patch Classics.

Each week the creative department receives hundreds of e-mails from folks submitting everything from sugar cookie recipes to broccoli salad ingredients for upcoming cookbooks. Forty percent of the company's sales come from the books, which feature recipes from cooks around the country, family tradition stories, craft ideas, and of course, the story of how the co-founders went from a home-based business to a big corporation.

While Martin and Hutchins no longer are filling orders from their

kitchen tables, they remain highly involved with the company. "We do have separate duties, as my talents are definitely on the creative side. Jo Ann manages the business end while I direct the creative projects. We love to brainstorm new

ideas for cookbooks, calendars and the website too," Hutchins says.

One of the biggest changes over the years, she says, was the move out of their homes and into a business location. In the past six years alone, the company's expansion has resulted in three separate moves. During that same time, the full-time employee count went from 13 to 70, Plotnick-Snay says. "From a business perspective, our growth has certainly been one of the biggest changes," Martin says.

"At first people were taken aback because we no longer had the ladies in the basement sewing everything," Plotnick-Snay says of the rapid expansion and change from more locally crafted items to more imports and an

expanded product base.

Customers, she says, did not want to pay a higher price for similar items that could be produced elsewhere cheaper.

"During all of this growth, we had to make sure we maintained that careful balance between work and family," Martin says. And even though they no longer work from home, Hutchins says the Gooseberry Patch headquarters still feels like an extension of the home.

The homey feeling at the office may be aided by the company's relatively open work spaces where designers can work in clusters and package handlers swap shop talk while wrapping orders. Every four weeks, Plotnick-Snay says, employees have a potluck luncheon, making recipes from the latest cookbook.

"It's a wonderful place to work. We're here to run a business, but we have a lot of fun together," she says.

With more hardcover cookbooks under way and cookbooklets in the works, employees will continue to have more potlucks in the future. Hutchins hopes this type of interaction also spreads to customers through the addition of a message board on the company's website.

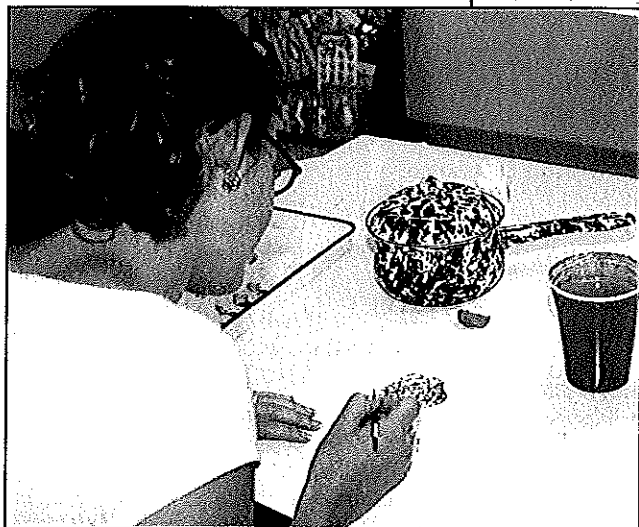
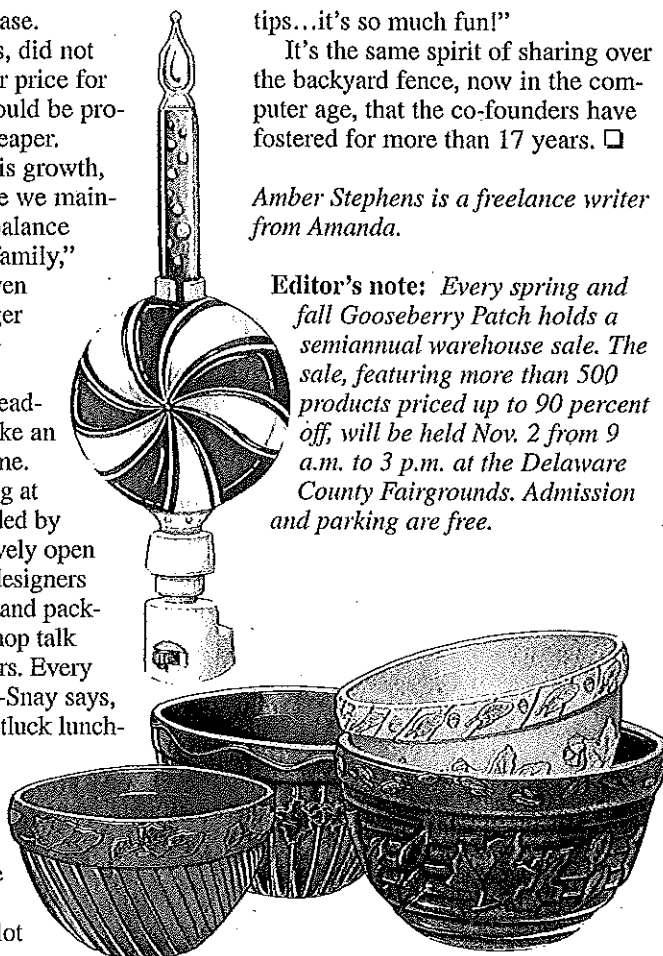
"It's great to see them interact and come together like old friends, sharing recipes and stories about their families and giving each other gardening and decorating

tips...it's so much fun!"

It's the same spirit of sharing over the backyard fence, now in the computer age, that the co-founders have fostered for more than 17 years. □

Amber Stephens is a freelance writer from Amanda.

Editor's note: Every spring and fall Gooseberry Patch holds a semiannual warehouse sale. The sale, featuring more than 500 products priced up to 90 percent off, will be held Nov. 2 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Delaware County Fairgrounds. Admission and parking are free.



The Gooseberry Patch catalog features hand-drawn illustrations, rather than photographs, of the products. Marlo Linch and Stella Hickman are two of the artists who craft the colorful illustrations.