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Yummy in My Tummy offers organic baby food

BY JENNY STALETOVICH

Like many parents, Karen and Michael Stanley wanted to give their daughter the best when she was born 17 months ago.

Then they went a little crazy.

Michael, a partner in Brasserie Las Olas and manager of other restaurants including Tequila Ranch at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, and Karen, a political consultant, decided to feed Sophia only organic food. They started out buying packaged, but found their choices too limited. When they started cooking it themselves, countless pots of peas, squash and parsnips left them feeling overwhelmed. There had to be an easier way.

What they did was start their own business, Yummy in My Tummy, an all-organic baby food store at 13770 West State Road 84 in Davie's Shenandoah Square.

"I didn't want to give her something that was made and packaged when she was still in my stomach," Karen explained. "It was like the shelf life was longer than her entire life."

Yummy in my Tummy, which opens Tuesday, will provide a rotating menu of fresh organic vegetarian meals and finger foods using only locally grown, USDA certified organic food. The food will be prepared on site by Executive Chef James Casterlin, a graduate of Johnson & Wales and the Fort Lauderdale Art Institute, whom Michael met at Tequila Ranch.

While their idea sprung from need, the Stanleys' family project is actually part of a growing niche in the organic food market.

"It is a hot market," said Barbara Haumann, a spokesperson for the Massachusetts-based Organic Trade Association. Overall, organic food has undergone a seismic shift. Since 1990, sales rocketed from \$1 billion to \$20 billion in 2007 and are expected to reach \$23.6 billion this year, the association reported.

Within that, packaged organic baby food has made its own mark, growing 14 percent from 2005 to \$2.35 million in 2006, the last year sales were tracked.

"It's one of the gateways for consumers and shoppers to start buying organic," Haumann said. "Parents may not have been buying organic, but they start because they have children. It makes sense that baby food is an opportunity for entrepreneurs."

And while the faltering economy has hit other areas hard, the association has found that many who buy organic will cut in other ways but stick with their organic diet. Haumann also pointed out that conventional food prices are rising faster than organic.

NICHE RESEARCH

Before launching their company, the Stanleys spent a year researching. Karen read articles in Time, Business Week and Consumer Reports that reported the health benefits as well as the business opportunities. And they looked at organic baby food companies started in New York and California, to dissect their business models.

Michael already knew about buying local foods, but now they needed to know about food certified organic, so they visited Global Organics in Sarasota, a large wholesaler that also acts as an agent for local growers. They also hired consultants.

What they discovered was a rich community of resources. Not only did they enter the network of parent-entrepreneurs but the close-knit advocates of organics.

"Everyone tries to refer people to one another," Karen said.

They decided to sell only fresh food locally grown. So if it's not in season in Florida, they won't ship from Guatemala.

They also decided not to freeze their food because they felt the consistency and taste often deteriorates in defrosting. (Also, they felt a lot of frozen food ended up wasted if it wasn't immediately eaten.) That presented the problem of calculating a shelf life for each product, which required finding a lab to determine expiration dates for everything they prepared. And that, Michael said, probably complicated their undertaking more than anything else.

DELIVERY OFFERED

Selling fresh food, they knew, would also mean frequent visits by customers to the store. So they decided to offer delivery to Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties at a flat rate. Customers can also place orders on their website, www.yummyinmytummy.com.

The food, they said, will be competitively priced at between \$2.25 and \$2.75 per container. (A Consumer Reports study found organic baby food typically runs about 25 percent more than nonorganic.)

Then they started cooking, trying to find interesting vegetables in interesting combinations, which they also ran past a pediatrician to ensure its safety and foisted upon friends and relatives. Casterlin, who once delivered hundreds of meals a night, now sees himself operating a test kitchen, where texture and color can be as important to his little eaters as taste. Among his concoctions: creamy cauliflower, ratatouille or beets and jicama.

"Michael and Karen, if they like it, they're my first critic and if their daughter likes it, she's my second critic," he said.

The Stanleys also concluded that because their idea was fairly unique, they'd have trouble getting a bank, given the current climate, to lend them money. Michael considered a partnership, but dismissed the idea.

"If I'm going to open a restaurant, I'm going to use somebody else's money, but I wanted total control," said Michael, who majored in finance at the University of Illinois before getting a degree from the

Culinary Institute of America.

Between consultants, lab testing and remodeling the kitchen (which included installing a giant chiller that takes hot food to about 40 degrees to prevent any bacterial growth), they estimate they've spent between \$225,000 and \$250,000 opening the business.

"There were things we didn't expect, like all the testing, but it was important because you just can't avoid it," Michael explained. ``We made some mistakes, but it was part of the learning experience and I'd rather do it now than down the road."

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