

Organic eatery's expansion has owners feeling good

St. James' FeelGoods Café inks distribution agreement

By AMBROSE CLANCY

The life-sized banana waved at passing traffic on a leafy stretch of Route 25A in front of FeelGoods Healthy Family Café. Every 10th car or so responded with a toot of the horn.

"Our regulars," said the pretty face of Arianna Clark peaking out of the banana suit. An employee of the small St. James health food restaurant, was enticing regulars and first-timers to lunch on veggie burgers and other wholesome vegetarian and organic fare.

The takeout or eat-in restaurant, in business less than three years, will be having many more regulars as of September, but not just at the St. James location.

Supermarket meat aisles, upmarket food emporiums and schools and universities across the region soon will be hosting the FeelGoods brand courtesy of Holtsville's J. Kings Food Service Professionals, which will be preparing and distributing the products.

Nicole Lawrence and Kathy Gerdes, owners of FeelGoods, are going big time with their agreement with J. Kings, ready to see recipes they've created in their cramped kitchen be transformed into thousands of meals a month at a new facility in Bay Shore.

Inside FeelGoods one afternoon last week there were still 15 customers, all women, chowing down even after the lunch hour had

passed, when Lawrence and Gerdes settled in to talk about their business.

Theirs is the rare restaurant or food service that isn't struggling against the recessionary tide but instead catching a wave, with revenue up 30 percent over last year, Lawrence said.

That healthy-eating wave is cresting nationwide. Twenty years ago organic food sales in the United States were about \$1 billion. Last year U.S. organic food sales topped \$24.8 billion, according to a recent survey by the Organic Trade Association.

Also, the FeelGoods brand is following a trend of going mainstream, with 54 percent of all organic food sold in supermarkets.

Lawrence, with economics and management degrees from Cornell, said everything fell into place when Gerdes came on board not long after the launch. She had put a notice on Craigslist looking for a manager, but when Gerdes answered, she knew she'd found a business partner instead.

"Kathy's a great cook who lives the lifestyle," Lawrence said.

One customer who is also in love with the healthy lifestyle is Joanne Meyers of St. James, who stopped by to say she's lost 40 pounds since eating exclusively at FeelGoods. Husband Ken has shed 10 pounds.

Pointing at the counter that held dozens of grain- and bean-based burgers, Meyers said, "I dream of the sweet potato and spinach burger. Really, I dream about them."

Lawrence and Gerdes' success has come from marketing their food and service to



Bob Gigliome

Nicole Lawrence (left) and Kathy Gerdes: Their recipes will be used to create thousands of meals a month.

local nutritionists, doctors and chiropractors who have recommended FeelGoods to their patients.

The J. Kings deal also came about through word of mouth when John King, chief executive of the food distributor, began hearing good things about the place.

Then Chris Gerdes, Kathy's husband and chef at Wading River's Blackwell's restaurant, mentioned his wife's business to King and it all clicked.

King is turning part of a facility in Bay Shore over to his own brand called "Krazy Kooks Kitchen," where food will be prepared and distributed. The U.S. Department of

Agriculture, which must inspect all prepared foods sold to major retailers, has an office in the facility and can sign off on the brands going out the door, King said.

FeelGoods and J. Kings have a licensing agreement but neither party would disclose financial terms. Lawrence and Gerdes will oversee J. Kings food preparers and receive a percentage of sales for the use of their brand, King said.

In five years, Krazy Kooks Kitchen, which will handle other brands besides FeelGoods, expects to be selling in the \$5 million range annually, King said.

Long Island and New York City universities and schools, hospitals and supermarkets are the targets for the new healthy brand. Many are already on board, King said, but are waiting for an official launch to announce agreements, which should be within the next couple of months.

For supermarkets, King said plans are in the works for FeelGoods to have their own kiosk for their products.

"It's like Ben & Jerry's," King said. "They had a great product but needed the capital a big company could provide to really take off. I'm going to make these ladies the Ben & Jerry's of health food."

Lawrence and Gerdes are still thinking big. They've been scouting other locations to expand their business.

"And we've talked about franchising FeelGoods," Lawrence said.

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