

Business success is in the can

Opportunity jars educators into buying and operating food venture

by Paul Galinski | Powell River Peak

Wednesday, November 4, 2009



STICKING WITH IT: Brooks Secondary School student Justin Ostensen prepares strawberry and fig jam as part of the production component of Mountain Ash Preserves, a business running out of the school to provide course participants with real-life entrepreneurial experience. (paul galinski photo)

Some Brooks Secondary School students are finding themselves in a jam. A new course called management initiative 12 is teaching Brooks students how to produce and market preserves in a real-life business venture.

Powell River Educational Services Society (PRESS), set up by School District 47 to administer educational programs outside of the traditional classroom environment, purchased a business formerly called Mountain Ash Farms, from Elaine Steiger. The new name of the business is Mountain Ash Preserves and many of the clients that Steiger supplied plan to continue to support this student-operated business.

The class runs under the guidance of Michael Austin, a Red Seal chef, and Anne Hutchings, business instructor at Brooks. Students are involved in all aspects of the business, including cooking, labelling, delivering, invoicing and contacting Mountain Ash wholesale customers. The course operates out of the state-of-the-art kitchen at Brooks.

“It’s a linear program, which means it runs all year,” Hutchings said. “Right now, we’re working Tuesdays after school...The students are involved here on Tuesdays in production, but on other days of the week, they may be involved in delivering, filling orders, making labels and different business components that are involved in production.”

Hutchings said this was an initiative proposed by Jay Yule, superintendent of schools, and Steve Hopkins, secretary-treasurer.

“The fact that Mountain Ash was an existing business and had a client list helped the startup,” Hutchings said. “The clients were very positive about working with a student group. Elaine explained to them ahead of time that ownership would be transferred to PRESS and it would be operated by students.

“The business people in Powell River and in the Courtenay and Cumberland communities were very welcoming and took time to explain their businesses to the students. Overall, I think it has been very positive so far. It’s been helpful to have those clients already in position and the students do have some ideas of new clients they would like to approach.”

Some of Mountain Ash Preserves’ clients buying jams, salsas and pickles include: Brambles Market, Courtenay; Edible BC Culinary Experiences, Granville Island Market; Edible Island, Courtenay; Mitchell Brothers, Powell River; Nanaimo Sausage House; Plenty Epicurean Pantry, Victoria; Seeds Natural Foods, Cumberland and Sunshine Organics & Ecosentials, Powell River.

Hutchings had students work with her before production started to set up a database to determine which products are most in demand. “We realized we had 300 products and so we entered all of the 2008 invoices into a program to determine what products were really popular,” she said. “What we are focusing on are the top sellers. We’ll probably be looking at the top 30 to 50 products.”

Hutchings said some of the students have come up with some different ideas of items they would like to produce in addition to the existing product line. “We are now producing top sellers that we know our clients need for their pre-Christmas sales so we’re focusing on that. Eventually we will start introducing some new products,” she said.

Austin said he and Hutchings are trying to ensure the students are familiar with all facets, from production through to the marketing. “They are knowledgeable on the products we use, how it was canned and how it’s been handled, rather than just being the marketing guys, who don’t have that knowledge,” he said. “Students are involved in everything.”

Timing of the business purchase this past summer caused intricacies in the first year of production. “There is a big demand for pickles,” Austin said. “We really didn’t know until late June that the business was ours. Then we were trying to contact local suppliers and asked if they had any dills we could buy. They are going, are you crazy?”

“We got what we could get and I was here in the dog days of summer, when it was 40°C outside, making pickles. The couple of hundred units that we made were gone with the first few customers.”

Planning is already underway for next year, however. Austin said a supply of organic dills for next summer has already been found on Vancouver Island.

Turnaround of the products is quick. While helping students prepare a batch of strawberry and fig jam on a production day, Austin said the strawberries would be canned the same day and gone by the end of the week. “We produced some stuff last Tuesday and it was taken over to the island and sold right away,” he said.

Hutchings said she believes the business has the potential to expand. “I think it has great viability and definitely adds to the business experience for those students who are taking grade 11 and 12 courses and would like to include this as a practical course,” she said.

Hopkins said the school district decided Steiger’s business was an appropriate fit for PRESS in terms of owning the business. “It didn’t make sense for the school board to own an independent, incorporated entity, but we did see a good fit with PRESS to be run as a partnership with the school district,” he said.

“The school program has worked out really well. It’s a board-approved course with a mix of students from culinary and business from the year before. The school board is pretty excited about the prospect. It’s a school-run, standalone business. It puts a face to a lesson.”