



Betsy's Best

BY ELIZABETH VIA BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ROBERTSON JR.

"No Southern tea table would be complete without a dish of mints, a bowl of mixed nuts or a plate of cheese straws."

IT'S BAKING DAY at Betsy's Cheese Straws in Millbrook and the aroma of butter and cheese is so tempting, you could spread it on a cracker with a knife. Betsy Parker and her daughter-in-law and business partner, Ashley Parker, are overseeing the preparations for this week's orders and for the first time since 2000, when the gourmet bakery moved into its current headquarters, the staff is baking to stock the shelves for future orders.

Until recently, the little house on Grandview Road also doubled as a daycare for Ashley's three small children, but now that they are in school and mothers' day-out programs, there is room to store labels and packaging. With the holiday rush over, the part-time staff of six women has the time to prepare in advance, and Betsy and Ashley are adding yet one more new feature to their nearly 10 year-old business.

It all began with the somewhat innocent comment by Betsy and Robert Parker's son, Bob Parker, who in 1998 had yet to marry Ashley. Both were living in Birmingham, where Ashley was working in marketing, and during a visit home, Bob praised his mom's cheese straws with a compliment of "You ought to sell these!"

"I can do the marketing," Ashley said, and with that – and many trial and error batches and lots of prayer – Betsy's Cheese Straws was off and running. At first, the partners used the

kitchen at Camp Grandview to prepare the orders they took from friends, but within two years they knew they had to expand into a permanent home. By then, Ashley and Bob had married and moved to Montgomery, where Bob is now a home builder, but before that job, he spent two years helping his wife and mother launch their bakery.

Like most Southern women, Betsy grew up eating cheese straws at teas and wedding showers, but the ones of her youth in Tennessee were light and airy and not at all like the spicy crunchy ones she was introduced to by her mother-in-law in Alabama. As a child in Mobile, Ashley didn't like cheese straws, but Betsy's were delicious enough to change her mind. Together they baked and tested until they achieved what is now their popular trademark confection named in honor of Betsy.

"It's the butter," said Betsy, explaining what makes the cheese straws so delicious and different from many on the market. The cheese straws are made without artificial flavors or preservative and with all natural ingredients —most especially fresh, creamy, real butter and extra sharp cheese. Packed by hand and by weight into four-ounce boxes and eight-, 12- and 16-ounce round tins, the straws have a shelf life of six months. According to Betsy, the straws are as good crumbled on salads or into soups and chili as they are straight from the box.

Hot classic, chives, pecan and blue cheese in the savory line and raspberry and lemon-lime in the sweet offerings have joined the ever-popular classic straws. And, no, the sweet straws do not contain cheese — They are simply straw-shaped cookies.

It took a few tries with other logos for the partners to settle on the easily recognizable script on striped boxes and white tins. The color of the stripes of the labels on white boxes denotes the



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straws within – yellow for the classic; orangey-red for hot; brown for pecan; blue for blue cheese; lime green for the lemon-lime cookies and pinky-red for raspberry.

The cheese straws are available by special order or at a dozen or so specialty stores in Montgomery, Wetumpka, Millbrook and Prattville. “Now that we are able to keep them in stock, you can buy them at our bakery,” said Betsy, “where we can sell them in bulk in half pound and pound packages.”

After years of selling the straws themselves, the partners now have a marketing representative and have begun selling them at the gourmet buyers’ market in Atlanta and to other special brokers, such as Priester’s in Ft. Deposit, Tucker Pecan in Montgomery and online Websites.

“They are like the cheese straws your mother would make,” said Anne Richardson, whose pharmacy and gift shop is one of the largest retail sellers of Betsy’s Cheese Straws. The classic variety remains the most popular at Richardson’s, and people buy them for themselves and for gifts.

“It’s the butter,” said Pat Holland, echoing Betsy, and whose wife, Gigi Lambert owns Gigi’s New York Kitchen Company. The butter, explained Holland, is what makes the cheese straws so delicious and is the fragrance that “engulfs” him when he picks up orders at the bakery.

Lambert said the cheese straws are a top seller year-round in her specialty food shop, and she likes stocking them because the bakery is a local company. The straws are often offered on the taste-table in the store.

Though the Parkers started out with the desire to succeed, their company has developed more through their “piddling” than from a rigid business plan said Betsy. As orders have increased, new machinery and ovens replaced the old three-quart mixer and seven-pan oven. The pizza cutter, apron and old-fashioned cookie press used in the beginning and samples of former packaging form a nostalgic vignette above the office window. A scrapbook shows the company’s progress from kitchen table to the walk-in oven that now occupies a room in the house.

For now, the partners’ goal is to stay a bit ahead of the orders while they branch out into other markets. Mainly sold in the Southeast, the straws have been introduced to such far away places as Ohio, Seattle and Pennsylvania by friends eager to share their gourmet find. Both Betsy and Ashley attribute their success to their spiritual faith and each box carries a verse of scripture that expresses their religious commitment. **ML**

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