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Big Prize for Cookies Gives Tate's a Boost

By Sylvie Bigar

A voice on the phone said, "You won, hands down!" And with that, a Southampton woman's plan to take her local business national received a major boost.

Kathleen King, the baking brains and hands behind Tate's Bake Shop at 43 North Sea Road, is now selling her prizewinning chocolate chip cookies nationally at the rate of half a million packages a year.



Kathleen King enjoying a cookie from her Southampton bakeshop Tate's. DANA SHAW

Her employee roster has grown to 40 employees and this month, she moved into a new baking facility three times the size of her current space.

Winning a national taste test of chocolate chip cookies over entries from 50 different suppliers has represented powerful recognition for Ms. King's operation since the results were published last October. The boost came from Rachael Ray, the high-wattage TV cookery star, and her magazine, *Every Day with Rachael Ray*, which organized the contest.

Ms. Ray, fresh from garnering a huge TV audience for her daily show on the Food Network, launched the magazine last year to instant applause. *Adweek Magazine* called it "the startup of the year."

Ms. King, now 48, got her own start much earlier: 37 years ago when she was 11 and began selling her home-baked cookies from her family's Southampton farm stand. Cookie sales then helped her pay her way through college, and by the time she turned 20, she had established her own business.

Ms. King's chance to enter the chocolate chip cookie contest came via the "Big Bite" column in Ms. Ray's magazine, which regularly runs taste tests of popular food products. In addition to chocolate chip cookies, the editors have rated, among other items, the best chips (North Fork) and the best salad dressing (Johnny's Fine Foods Great Caesar.) In the coming months, the magazine will assess peanut butter and pickles.

Extensive scouting of bakeries and supermarkets identified dozens of chocolate chip cookie brands. The team narrowed the choices down to 50, which were rated by a 10-member panel. “We tasted a lot of bad cookies,” said travel editor Gina Hamadey.

“The winning choice was pretty unanimous,” said Ms. Hamadey. “We were looking for a cookie that tasted homemade, something fresh without any funky taste. We liked the crispness of Tate’s, the hint of caramel from the pan.”

So what is the secret of Ms. King’s cookies? For one thing, the baking champ says she will not compromise on quality. “Even lovers of chubby cookies enjoy our crisp thin ones,” she said. “The taste is old-fashioned in an Americana kind of way. We don’t skimp on the content and we respect our customers. We use all natural ingredients, which means no preservatives, no artificial coloring, no artificial flavor.”

This year, the Tate’s Bake Shop chocolate chip cookies also came in as first runner-up out of hundreds of entries in the 2007 Gallo Family Vineyards Gold Medal Awards, which recognize excellence in artisanal food products around the country.

The cookies sell for about \$5 a package, made up by weight rather than number of cookies. The fairly simple recipe can be found in Tate’s Bake Shop Cookbook (St. Martin’s Press 2005) available at the shop or online at www.tatesbakeshoponline.com.

While most of the baking will be done in the new facility in East Moriches, allowing for increased output, the old-fashioned bake shop will remain in Southampton.

After slowly nurturing her business and testing and preparing hundreds of recipes over almost four decades, Ms. King now sounds like a woman in a hurry. Even so, she is confident she can handle expansion and maintain the high quality of her baked goods.

“We want to keep the same reliability and consumer’s trust that has helped us gain our reputation,” she said. “The national recognition has served as a great marketing tool, but in terms of sales, it’s hard to quantify. Now, if I got on Oprah ...”

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