

# Retired entrepreneurs sample sweet taste of success

By KURT BEGALKA

McHENRY – Don't like how those strawberries slide down your ice cream, or how the chocolate chips melt when baking?

That's how the cookie crumbles. But what if you had Crumble-Ons? It all began in 2009 with a little post-bonfire bravado. After a bonfire at the home of Gary and Mary Jo Bergland, on the shores of Meyers Bay in Pistakee Lake, the next morning Mary Jo chopped the remaining s'mores ingredients in a bowl and added it to pancakes batter.

That is when the "ah-hah moment" happened. A neighbor, 59-year-old Tom Henry, retired director of the dairy group for ConAgra Foods, was consulted and immediately jumped on board. He was sure that, with a little tweaking, S'mores Crunch would be a hit.

"It was so unique. It was an opportunity to do something that was never done before," Henry said. "We looked at the marketplace and engineered the product."



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"It's a matter of doing anything you can to gain traction, to get to the point where people recognize the product," said Gary Bergland (left) of Crumble-Ons S'mores Crunch – a confectionary condiment used on ice cream and in pancakes. Also pictured are his wife, Mary Jo, and neighbor Tom Henry. The three started Meyers Bay Food Co. in McHenry.

Henry – who had worked for ConAgra and its predecessor, Beatrice Foods, for a combined 30 years before his retirement in 2007 – met Mary Jo years before when she was working as food publicity manager for Swift-Eckrich, now a division of ConAgra.

"I went over there and Mary Jo was setting up photos, the hotline and all things turkey," Henry said. "I remembered her and remembered when they retired they moved up here from Glen Ellyn. I had a lot of respect for all the work she had done in the areas of cooking and her involvement in food."

That connection came in handy when the former Westmont resident unknowingly moved in across the street from the Berglands. But as an expert in product testing and manufacturing, he realized the potential of Crumble-Ons S'mores lay far beyond pancakes.

Its crunchy blend of marshmallow and graham cracker, wrapped in milk and milk chocolate coatings, made an excellent dessert topping and baking ingredient – provided that it was exposed to high heat for a long period.

"This was a hard product to work on because of all the sugar. Marshmallows dissolve rapidly in water," Henry said. "We had to make sure it was bulletproof for the consumer. A lot of work went into the coating."

The trio also spent a lot of time doing Cumble-Ons taste tests in The Villages, Fla. Customers at Ollie's Frozen Custard voted with their empty sample cups, placing them in the "don't like it at all," "like it" or "love it" slots.

Over a period of two years, they were able to raise the "love it" score by 30 points to 90 percent. They then convinced John B. Sanfilippo & Son Inc. in Elgin, parent company of Fisher nuts, to manufacture and package their product.

"They understood the industrial uniqueness, too," Gary Bergland said. "Sanfilippo was able to duplicate the chocolate coating over graham cracker pieces; it was able to make marshmallows that kept their integrity."

The unique snack began in the Bergland's home kitchen, then moved to a certified test kitchen in McHenry for three subsequent revisions. In their first attempt at production, Mary Jo said with a laugh, they made 70 pounds of product and spent \$800.



Photo provided

Art Wollpert (left), a research and development scientist for confectionary products at contract manufacturer John B. Sanfilippo & Son Inc. in Elgin shows Meyers Bay Foods Co. partner Tom Henry a panning machine. Liquid chocolate is sprayed on the tumbling marshmallows and cookie pieces in the rotating drum, or pan.

"It took us a little bit longer," Henry said. "We are fast in deciding things, unlike the corporate area. But where we were slow was trying to get our proper co-packer." It is essential to find someone who can deliver the product with the quality and in the quantity you expect.

Crumble-Ons are sold in 3-ounce snack packages and in 2.5-pound packages, four per case. Its target customers are food service providers, yogurt and custard shops, and restaurants – including Walker Brothers Original Pancake House in Lake Zurich, Millie's Restaurants & Shopping Village in Delavan, Wis., and the Red Apple Pancake House and Restaurant in Carol Stream.

"It's the true essence of each individual circle thing," said Jen Gusta, who co-owns the Windhill Pancake Parlor in McHenry with her husband, Tom. "One is marshmallow. One is graham cracker flavored, and one is chocolate flavored. It's like a Jelly Belly for chocolate. We tried them in the pancakes and waffles, and on top of our ice cream."

The trick now, Gary Bergland said, is attracting regional dis-



tributors; a process he likened to putting together a complex puzzle while all the while keeping an eye on inventory. They have more than tripled production at Sanfilippo, from 8,000 pounds in their first run to 33,000 pounds this time.

"As a customer you make the assumption that the stuff magically appears for you to buy. But there is a whole trail, a whole path from manufacturing to the consumer's stomach," Gary said. "As a manufacturer you have to circle back and support the whole effort. ... When you have skin in the game, you play the game really hard."

### Some more s'mores

The Berglands realize that this "legacy business" most likely will not reach its full potential for years, perhaps when their grandchildren are grown up. But in the interim they are reveling in an opportunity to do something new; to live the American dream and – just perhaps – show other that retirees can be just as innovative as young entrepreneurs.

"With enough resources and manpower, there is no reason we should not be right there with M&Ms." Gary Bergland said. "I haven't played golf as much as I want to, but on the flip side is the hunt. The chase is incredibly exciting."

Meyers Bay Foods Co. is working to develop 30 additional flavors, the first of which it hopes to launch next year. Mary Jo, 71, a former home economics teacher, newspaper food columnist and owner of a microwave cooking school, is in charge of innovation.

It is a process she finds "intellectually interesting" for the three "out-of-the-box thinkers." Even better, it's fun and collaborative.

"Every decision made is a team approach. The three of us work it out together," Mary Jo said. "Two out of three have to agree."

Gary, 73, a former college teacher who has a background in public relations and TV production, oversees sales and distribution. And Henry coordinates research and development. He carries the concept to the point of production, feeding off the energy of his partners.

"We each have something we bring to the table that allows us to make the decisions and grow the company," Gary said. "We all do a part of it."



### Meyers Bay Foods Co. LLC

Where: 28826 Manitoba Trail, McHenry.

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Web: www.crumbleons.com.

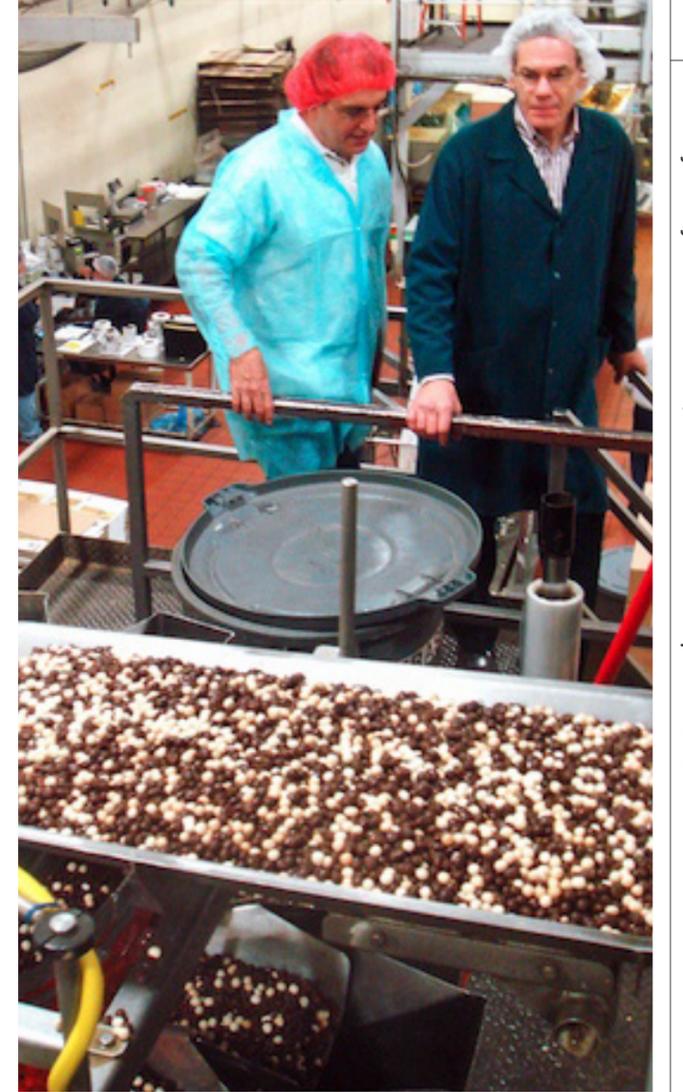


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Tom Burns (right), an employee at John B. Sanfilippo & Son Inc., in Elgin, and Meyers Bay Foods Co. partner Tom Henry watch Crumble-On S'mores Crunch go to the scales above the bagging line. "We'll push it but really the product will stand on its own," said Henry, in charge of research and development for the McHenry company. "I didn't put all this work into nothing."

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