

With
Love
and
Quiches



With Love and Quiches

A LONG ISLAND HOUSEWIFE'S SURPRISING JOURNEY
FROM KITCHEN TO BOARDROOM

SUSAN AXELROD

CHAIRWOMAN AND FOUNDER OF LOVE AND QUICHES GOURMET®



GREENLEAF
BOOK GROUP PRESS

Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press
Austin, Texas
www.gbgroup.com

Copyright ©2014 Susan Axelrod

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the copyright holder.

Distributed by Greenleaf Book Group LLC

For ordering information or special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Greenleaf Book Group LLC at PO Box 91869, Austin, TX 78709, 512.891.6100.

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group LLC

Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group LLC

Cover images:

Pie-chart: ©iStockphoto.com/alexsl-Alex Slobodkin

Cake slice: ©John Montana photography/www.jmontana.com

Cataloging-in-Publication data

ISBN 13: 978-1-62634-071-8

Part of the Tree Neutral® program, which offsets the number of trees consumed in the production and printing of this book by taking proactive steps, such as planting trees in direct proportion to the number of trees used: www.treeneutral.com

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

14 15 16 17 18 19 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition



To Irwin, my “stealth editor”



Contents

PROLOGUE: An Accidental Business

Part I

1: Finding the Passion (Early Days–1973)	7
2: Getting Started (1973–1974)	27
3: Becoming Love and Quiches (1974)	45
4: The Transition (1975)	53
5: The Mini-Factory (1976–1980)	65
6: Freeport, Here We Come! (1980)	92
7: Spreading Our Wings (1980–1989)	103
8: Securing Our Position (1990–2000)	123

Part II

9: Adversity	141
10: From Overstuffed to Lean and Mean	147
11: The Next Level	154
12: Company Culture	165
13: Constant Learning	177
14: Marketing and Branding	187

15: You Can't Taste a Cheesecake over the Internet . . .	197
16: A Global Perspective	205
17: Family Matters	211
18: A Look in the Mirror	219
EPILOGUE: Where Will We Go from Here?	237
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	241

Coda

RECIPES FOR SUCCESS: My Accidental Business Primer . . .	245
RECIPES FOR THE MIND: A Few Favorite Books	251
RECIPES FOR THE SOUL: Travels Abroad	257
RECIPES FROM THE HEART: A Few Favorite Recipes	277
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	307

Prologue

An Accidental Business

*Life is a great big canvas, and you should
throw on it all the paint you can.*

—*Danny Kaye*

When I sold my first quiche in 1973, I had no idea that my fledgling operation would one day, decades later, be competing with the giants of the food industry. How could I have known? I was just a clueless Long Island housewife who made that first quiche in my kitchen almost on a whim. And yet here we are today: With no preparation for business ownership whatsoever, I was able to translate a passionate love of cooking and food into a multimillion-dollar family business that ships top quality quiches and desserts to every corner of the country and now the globe.

I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into—a recurring theme during the early years of my business life—but it is an eventful story. So I've decided to tell it. I'm going to take you on a

journey from my kitchen, through my neighborhood, and to the global business that I have loved from day one.

My business came out of nowhere, an accident that I was not ready for. And so, for years, I would refer to it as my “accidental business.” Everything I learned was in the line of fire, and I will share it all, both the pain and the glory, laced with plenty of advice that I only wish I could have had. If there was a “how to” manual, I never got it. I had neither role models nor advisors; nobody cautioned me about the hazards involved. Looking back across the decades, I’m glad I was so innocent about those hazards; otherwise, I might have lost my courage before I truly got started. Yet, once I *did* get started, I knew deep inside that I was going to do this thing, that I *could* do this thing.

In many ways this story is a cautionary tale of what *not* to do when you want to start a new business. Yet here I am. I have done it. My company has become an integral and well-recognized member of the food service industry, serving almost every segment of the trade from hotels to airlines to multi-unit chain restaurants to supermarket bakeries. We are now primarily a dessert manufacturer, and we ship our products worldwide.

So why am I telling my story now? Well, recently there was a spectacular exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York called *The Steins Collect*, displaying the astonishing amount of art amassed by Gertrude Stein and her brothers during their years in Europe. The exhibit’s accompanying explanations were primarily focused on the Stein family and their glittering circle of compatriots, including Picasso and Matisse. One thing that Ms. Stein said resonated with me: “Somebody told me to write a book, so I wrote one.” Simple as that. I am not comparing myself to Gertrude Stein, but that is what happened to me. Our marketing department told me to tell my story, so I did.

In Part I of this story, I’ll take you on the wild ride that was the early years of my business. You’ll see some of our biggest successes as we got off the ground—and witness some pretty hilarious mistakes.

In the first chapters of Part II, we'll pick the story up just after the events of 9/11, when I nearly lost the business completely. It was in the subsequent rebound that I learned some of the greatest business lessons of my career. I'll begin sharing those lessons in short chapters in the rest of Part II that offer insight and advice on topics ranging from company culture, to marketing and branding, to the trials and rewards of working with family. In other words, information that any small business owner can use.

It has been an arduous journey, with hard truths and some brutal lessons. I was able to conquer them, and, for sure, I have never, ever, been bored.

Would I do it all over again? Oh yes, I would. In a heartbeat.

Chapter 2

Getting Started (1973–1974)

There are times when you want a bull in a china shop.

—*Somerset Maugham*

Once I had processed what Jill asked me that day in the kitchen, my answer was immediate: “Yes.” I was game. Why *not* start a food-related business together? Jill was a great cook, and her mother had run a small but successful business selling Christmas decorations to the exclusive department store Henri Bendel, so Jill had always hoped to start a business of her own. To Jill, I seemed like a natural choice for a partner. I agreed.

Over the next few weeks, our planning commenced. Without giving it too much thought, we decided to call ourselves “Bonne Femme” (Good Lady). We thought it had a good ring to it, and we’d both always leaned toward the French style of cooking.

Our start-up was both very funny and bittersweet. It should be

written in stone that no business, however small, should be started without *some* kind of rudimentary business plan, but that's exactly what we did. We had no idea what kind of food-related business we even wanted: Would we eventually run a small café? Sell food we'd cooked to restaurants? What kind of food should we sell? Instead of answering any of these basic questions, we just started taking step after step, somewhat blindly. We started with no business plan. We simply started.

The first step we took was a good one, at least: We contacted the New York State Department of Agriculture to have my house licensed as a "Bakery/Food Processing Plant." Lots of people illegally sold food to restaurants from unlicensed home kitchens, but not me; I was brought up to always do the right thing. Somehow we got the license from the state, though I still have no idea how we managed to pull it off—for starters, my water heater surely wasn't hot enough to qualify! I imagine we took them by surprise because not many people had asked before. Today, home kitchens are rarely, if ever, able to obtain such licenses, instead having to rent space in licensed commercial kitchens, but back in the early 1970s it must've been easier. We got a pass, and we still have the same plant number to this day.

So off we went, my partner and I, charging blindly forward. Now the next question: What to do? We started off with a stab at catering. By virtue of our culinary reputations, Jill and I were able to take on a half-dozen jobs in the neighborhood before we decided that catering was not for us. Neither Jill nor I liked walking in through the back door of events as hired help. (Little did I know that catering would have been a walk in the park compared to the path I'd take over the next few years—"Humble Pie" would become my middle name for a very long time.)

Now that catering was out, what next? I don't remember exactly where the idea of quiche Lorraine came from, but once we happened upon it, it simply felt right. We looked at each other and said, "Let's give *that* a try." Our first quiche may have been an amateurish effort,

but I still consider it to be one of the best I have ever tasted. Without realizing it, I was marching into my destiny—and in that offhand manner, Bonne Femme was off to the races.

With a name, a license, and a product, all we had to do now was persuade somebody to buy our quiche. In our first attempt, we took a few samples to our local gourmet supermarket, the Windmill Foodstore of Hewlett. As regular shoppers there, Jill and I both knew the owner. Our plan was to sell our quiche Lorraine to the store frozen raw, but we baked some off for the owner to sample. He ordered on the spot—our first sale, and it felt *very* good! Even better, he reordered, and then reordered again. Now we had our first repeat customer, and the journey had officially begun.

Our second regular customer followed soon after. I had the idea that we could make up some of the wonderful sauces I used for my dinner parties and sell them to the fish market just next door to the Windmill for use in their prepared foods section. I figured their customers would appreciate being able to pick up a delicious Newburg or cucumber-and-dill sauce with their purchase of fresh fish. The owner agreed, apparently, and soon Jill and I were cooking up and delivering the stuff by the gallon.

As owner-operators of Bonne Femme, we were truly clueless. We had no plan, no capital, kept our books in our heads, had no idea how to price our products, didn't realize that our own labor was actually worth something, and operated in just my kitchen with equipment gathered from both of our homes. Despite our ignorance, at the end of a three-month period, we had ten or fifteen customers, all local. Most of our new customers were restaurants, and they were selling our quiches as fast as we could make them. The company had started to take shape.

Our days at Bonne Femme started at five in the morning, when Jill and I would have a phone call to plan the day. As soon as the kids left for school, Jill would come over and we'd get started—rolling dough, frying bacon, grating cheese, and all the rest. (I very often grated my

fingers along with the Swiss cheese, but even back then I had the sense to know I had to toss the cheese, not just pick through it to remove the bloody bits.) Everything was done by hand in tiny batches, and we were busy all day.

In the afternoon, I would run out to make deliveries while Jill, while doing her share, would typically pursue other interests. Somehow she still found time to run out for golf tournaments and things. After school, all of our children would get home, and we'd put them to work cracking eggs for the next day's production. Things were beyond hectic, but I loved it.

With things up and running, Jill and I started asking questions of anyone who would listen. We got some good advice from a master baker who, with his father, owned and ran an old line European pastry shop two towns over. He taught us useful and practical things: for example, that water was a great binder, and free! He stored quiches for us as well and sold us pie pans at his cost.

I also had an old friend whose family owned a very successful local supermarket chain, and he offered to sell us ends and scraps of bacon in fifteen-pound packages really cheap! Prior to that we had been clearing local supermarket shelves of their most expensive bacon in very small packages. Of course this added to our labor and waste, but what did we know? Buying from my friend was a tiny step forward. He would even drop off the packets of ends and scraps for us on his way home from work. And we found ourselves buying quite a bit of it as we got more and more customers. I might add that frying all that bacon played havoc with my kitchen. It took years to finally clean out all the vents, which were almost completely blocked with the accumulated grease, and I am quite thankful that I didn't burn my house down.

For all of our non-bacon ingredients, we were still raiding the local supermarkets and throwing off all their standard ordering patterns. We piled our grocery carts to the top with a hundred five-pound bags

of flour, and we'd clean out their shelves of Swiss, Gruyère, broccoli, spinach, and everything else we needed for our quiches. It fascinated the other shoppers and infuriated the management. The managers used to say, "Here they come again—hide everything!" So we had to keep changing supermarkets.

So far, we were still only selling frozen raw quiches, which we stored at my house, Jill's house, and then all over the neighborhood. Then one of our customers, a local hamburger joint, asked if we could make them a pecan pie. That we could do! We had the pans, so why not? The dessert was a hit with the customers of that establishment, and our foray into desserts—our first line extension—was born. Soon we were also selling pecan pies to *all* of our restaurant customers.

Wholesale? What's Wholesale?

The unbaked quiches needed to be frozen before we could pack them in plastic bags and stack them at our friends' houses around town. We had come up with a system: We juxtaposed blocks from our children's toy sets to add as many levels as possible in my laundry room freezer and the extra freezer in my garage, in order to freeze as many quiches at a time as we could. And by now we had *two* sizes: six inch for retail and nine inch for restaurants.

Once we started making desserts, we couldn't exactly sell them frozen raw like our quiche (although we *tried* with the pecan pie), so we had to find a way to bake them efficiently. We came up with a similar system for baking desserts in our standard double ovens so that we could sneak in a few extra pies at a time. Nine per oven! Both of our houses! We started ferrying pails of pecan pie batter between houses. During one trip, a teenage hot-rodder came barreling out of a side street and slammed straight into my car, practically folding it in half and causing a veritable tsunami of batter all over the place. We repaired the car, but six months later the odor of very old butter

and eggs was still so strong that dozens of scrubblings couldn't erase it; we gave up and got rid of the car.

Bonne Femme was not yet quite a full-time enterprise for either Jill or me, and I still had time to cook for friends. One evening, Irwin and I had our across-the-street neighbors and their children over for dinner. During the meal, we were discussing my little business, and I became the inadvertent entertainment, the butt of jokes and good-natured laughter, when I explained where we were buying our supplies.

"How about wholesale?" my neighbor said. "Wholesale?" I said. It had never occurred to us that we could buy such small amounts at wholesale. But we could, my neighbor told me, and we did! The very next day, Jill and I pulled out the Yellow Pages and found a ton of local suppliers.

One was a fresh egg supplier who would break the eggs for us and sell them to us by the pail. He would deliver them too. It amazed me to learn that a case of extra large eggs (thirty dozen) would weigh *exactly* forty pounds every time! Only problem was that we were sure he had a habit of putting his finger on the scale, so I suspect that we rarely got what we had actually paid for.

I found myself with an enterprise that seemed to have a will and a pull of its own. We were getting busier, and needed help. By now we had a few friends and neighbors coming in on occasion, some for two hours every Tuesday and Thursday, others maybe for one hour every Monday and Wednesday. They rolled dough, grated cheese, packed the frozen quiches, and tasks like that. I don't even remember whether we paid them at first. But Jill and I still did all the mixing. The extra hands gave us some relief, but I couldn't help noticing that my kitchen was feeling more cramped by the day.

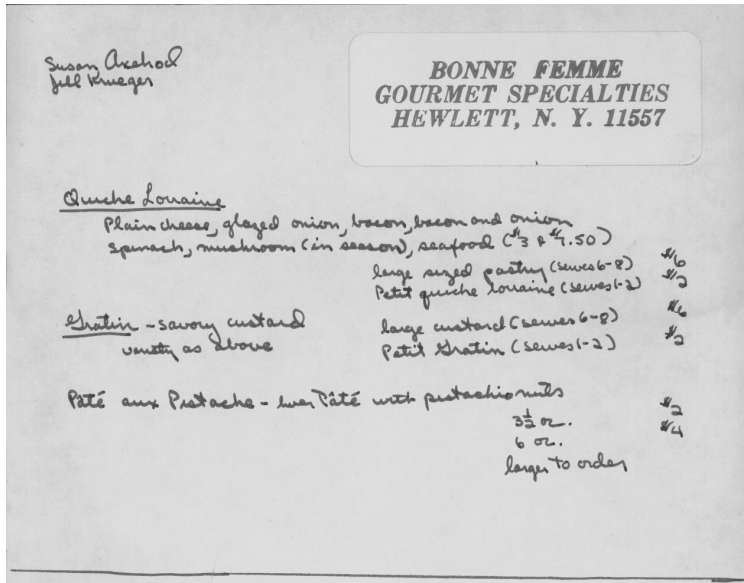
The Keystone Kops Quiche Factory

In the first year of Bonne Femme, I learned loud and clear that I wasn't going to stop—not until what we had started became real. A spark had been lit inside me. We already had our tentative market identified, so, to my thinking, all we needed to do was reach *more of it*. But to do that we needed more product, along with more storage space and better equipment. Little by little we began to segue from my kitchen into my garage, our very first move. My kitchen, by now a complete wreck, must've been relieved.

We had the garage fitted out with 220-volt outlets and bought our first commercial equipment. We found a local restaurant equipment supply wholesaler who sold us a life-altering commercial-grade freezer that was three times the size of our current one, a huge commercial fridge, and a miraculous free-standing double convection oven with six shelves in each. We could bake up to thirty-six pies at a time in each one! No more toy building blocks for us. No more ferrying batter between houses either. We now had room to buy a few bakers' racks, several dozen bun pans, and some other wonderful kitchen aides. Our work table was made up of two sawhorses and a huge plywood slab, and we felt we were luxuriating in space!

In the months after our move to the garage, we gathered a few more customers, widening our sales area by a few slightly larger concentric circles. How fast we could grow was limited because I was still the only delivery guy. I had a little freezer truck going in the trunk of my car. Did you know that newspaper is the quintessential insulator? It was my secret to keeping the raw quiches from melting and the pecan pies from wilting.

Bonne Femme's customer count grew to about twenty-five. We concentrated on the pubs, yogurt shops, and sandwich shops: no place too fancy because we didn't yet have that much to sell. We were preparing maybe 150 products a week, but at an average of about \$3.00 each, it didn't amount to much. Notice that we did not list any weights on our very first price list:



Still clueless, we continued to operate in the Keystone Kops tradition; two steps forward, three steps back. Nevertheless, the garage was our first mini-factory, and we started to think of our little enterprise as more of a business and less of a hobby.

We met up with a dealer in secondhand bakery equipment who served as somewhat of a mentor to us. The owner of another local bakery right in our hometown of Hewlett introduced us to him. That bakery—another place where we learned a great deal—is still there to this day and has been thriving in a world where most independent bakeries are a dying breed.

This dealer introduced us to the Comtec Pie Press. With the press of a button on this miracle labor-saving machine, we could stamp our dough into the pie pan, fluted border and all, in two seconds! Prior to that, we often felt as if we were spending our entire lives rolling dough by hand. We used to stand side by side in front of our worktable and have rolling contests set to music—Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Ray Charles, and some rock and roll—to help pace us and get the work

done a little faster. The pie press was revolutionary for us. The dealer also sold us two twenty-quart mixers, and so, *finally*, we graduated from our original kitchen Mix Masters (with ten times the capacity). Every single thing he sold us was secondhand and reconditioned, but it all worked just as if it were brand-new. He also taught us a lot about the bakery business, pointing out where we could go to find potential new customers and for better sources of supplies, as well as encouraging us to raise prices a bit.

Money Expended		
Susan	Certify Blending Form	.60
Jill	Xerox	.40
Susan	Selfin and Burns (pictures)	30.77
Jill	Waterbook	.60
S.J.	Food Testing	15.00
Jill	A.D.	25
Jill	Registering name	5
S.J.	Food processing license	20.00

Owed to Jill 32.56
 " " Susan 92.38
 Dairy - 79
 Freezer
 Cholesterol

What we had going was still embarrassingly rudimentary, however. We *did* start keeping records several months in, but they were just running lists that we jotted down on whatever paper we could find.

We called our receivables “owables,” our term for “those who owed us”! Of course, we had no “payables” because we had no credit and had to pay for everything up front. Nevertheless, we were coming upon the end of our first year in business with a grand total of \$23,597 in gross sales! On our tax return we actually showed our cost of labor for the year as being \$222, so we must have paid somebody for something, but for what, I can’t recall. We were still unaware that our own labor even counted; we were just feeling our way.

Form 1065
 Department of the Treasury
 Internal Revenue Service

Partnership Return and Single Return

U.S. Partnership Return of Income
 FOR CALENDAR YEAR 1973 or other taxable year beginning
 APRIL 4, 1973, and ending MARCH 31, 1974

1973

A Principal business activity (See page 6 of instructions)
Bakery Goods

B Principal product or service (See page 6 of instructions)
Baked Goods

C Enter total assets from line 33, column (D), Schedule L
 \$ 12,959

D Employer Identification No.

E Business Code No. (See page 6 of instructions)
 5140

F County in which located
 NASSAU

G Date business commenced
 APRIL 4, 1973

Name
 BONNE FEMME

Number and street
 1315 HARBOR ROAD

City or town, State, and ZIP code
 HEWLETT HARBOR, NEW YORK 11557

IMPORTANT—All applicable lines and schedules must be filled in. If the lines on the schedules are not sufficient, see Instruction P.

1a	Gross receipts or sales \$	23,597	1b	Less returns and allowances \$		1c	Balance	23,597
2	Less: Cost of goods sold and/or operations (line 34, Schedule A)					2		11,961
3	Gross profit					3		6,633
4	Ordinary income (loss) from other partnerships, syndicates, etc. (attach statement)					4		
						5		

Up to that point, even with Jill's and my discounted labor of \$0.00 per hour, we still had no profit. Businesses exist to make a profit, not to fill up the day. We had yet to figure that simple tenet out. (About that time we hired a young accountant fresh out of school. Ours was considered a "shoebox business," one in which all receipts, sales, purchases, employee records, notes, etc. were kept on scraps of paper in a small box that we would hand over to him at the end of the year. It was our hope that he would make some sense out of it all.)

Nevertheless, some patterns began to emerge. At first Jill and I generally shopped, baked, and developed new products together, but little by little, Jill became more the inside person holding down the fort, and I became more the outside sales "expert." By now we were paying our friends for their time, and Jill did the payroll each week. As she confided to me recently, at that time this was an agonizing learning curve. *Still* we continued to grow, and the garage began to get really crowded. We were in the second half of our first year, a transitional period for us.

At that point we were still selling only quiches and pecan pie in about equal amounts, but we were definitely ready to add to our repertoire. We started by adding other desserts. We would try out our recipes on our friends during the weekends to see which ones they liked best. This was a lesson in learning from your customers! We started producing a delicious cheesecake in a nine-inch pie pan because that was still the *only* pan size we had, and then we added a few apple slices to make

an apple cheesecake. One day we dropped an entire pail of cheesecake batter on the floor, but we had all these lovely apples prepared already, which prompted the accidental birth of our Swiss Apple Tart. There was just enough cheesecake batter left in which to bathe the apples, so—*voilà*—our third product! I assume that we added a chocolate dessert shortly after this, too, because there was still chocolate on the ceiling in my kitchen for the next fifteen years until I got around to redoing it.

Keystone Kops antics kept up all throughout the early days. First, we experienced what we termed our great Pecan Pie Disaster. Classic pecan pie filling is extremely dense, and if there is the slightest flaw in the crust, the batter will seep through during baking and the crust will rise to the surface, just under the pecans. The result is upside-down pecan pies, not exactly salable. (Even we knew that!) As usual, we found this out the hard way. Once was bad enough, but when it happened a *second* time, we needed to do something about it. We laid out all thirty of the ruined pies on the table and started picking off the pecans to see what was just under the surface. To our dismay, it was the crust, not the filling. We started absentmindedly eating the caramelized pecans, one by one, until we had eaten *at least two pounds* each. Not a very good thing to have done. We didn't quite get sick, but we examined the prepared crusts a lot more carefully after that, closing any gaps before filling them with batter. Unfortunately a few errant pies slipped through, prompting our very first customer complaints.

Then there was the Pâté Disaster. In our desire to round out our offerings, we started producing a very elegant liver pâté for our very first account, the Windmill supermarket. But we had only a *bakery* license from the state; to make products with meat, you need to be USDA inspected. Our bakery inspector went crazy when she came in for a visit and saw the pâté in the fridge, and we went running to the Windmill to clear it all off the shelf. The inspector gave us a pass, but we should've known better. We *did* use bacon in the quiche, but after the pâté fiasco, we were careful to keep it to less than 3 percent of the total weight so that the USDA requirement wouldn't apply to us.

We still had no scales; everything was poured by eye. I suspect, now, that we always gave more, not less, so maybe that's one of the places that our hoped-for profits went. It should have been easy to figure out by the sad lack of growth in our bank account. Our friends still kept coming to help us out as we grew, and our kids still had to show up after school to help out. It was about then that my housekeeper, Bridget, my regal sidekick from my dinner party days, started spending a few hours a day in the garage with us. She was Bonne Femme's first real employee, even if she was only commuting from inside the house. She was our efficiency expert and would point out obvious ways to speed up our methods, making us feel somewhat silly.

Putting Quiche on the Map

After our first year in business, things started to accelerate at an almost dizzying pace. Our quaint little kitchen business, which hadn't even been my idea in the first place, was taking on a life of its own. For me, a former bored housewife, the process of growing into something big was exhilarating.

One of the most important steps in the process was meeting Marvin Paige. He was a well-regarded New York City restaurateur, and the brother of my college roommate was kind enough to introduce us. Marvin looked just like Santa Claus, had an outsized personality, and was very giving. He didn't know me from a hole in the wall, but he had the patience to spend countless hours on the phone teaching me all about the restaurant business before we even met in person. Meeting him changed everything!

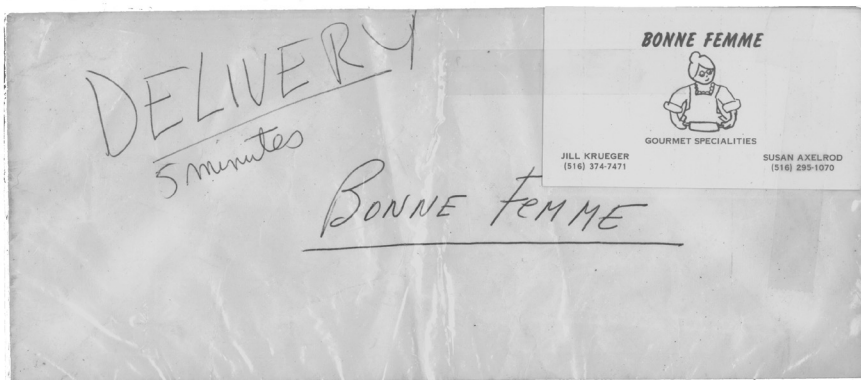
Marvin introduced me to the manager of O'Neal's Balloon, a highly visible establishment across from Lincoln Center, and I was able to convince him to try my quiche as a lunch special to be served with salad. It proved so popular that it went onto the regular menu.

The rest is pretty much history. Pub after pub tried out our quiche and started ordering from us. Restaurant managers all over the city

shared their ideas, and Bonne Femme picked up many more accounts, all by word of mouth.

I was running all over the city hawking my wares, and almost everywhere I went, the restaurant manager would try out our quiche. We were still the only quiche company around, so we had a head start before the field became crowded. This was between 1973 and 1974, a recessionary period during which you could shoot a cannon through a white tablecloth restaurant and not hit anybody. We, of course, did not invent the quiche, but we started the trend that popularized it as pub food. Jill and I began to realize that thanks to Marvin's introductions and the relative novelty of our product, Bonne Femme had a tiger by the tail.

We were still operating entirely out of my garage, and I was still delivering in my car, driving as fast as I dared, my trunk still stuffed with newspaper, my secret insulating material. I was making sales calls between deliveries, up Third Avenue and down Second. I had this ridiculous paper sign reading "*DELIVERY—5 minutes—BONNE FEMME*" that I would put on the windshield of my Chevy. All the police in the city must have been scratching their heads—"Who *is* this crazy lady?" But I never got a ticket, not even once!



The success of our quiche in restaurants across the city marked the beginning of the end of the Keystone Kops Quiche Factory. By now

we had fifty or more accounts between New York City and Nassau County, where we started. We found ourselves out of space again, with no place to keep our finished inventory, so we started stashing it in our friends' freezers all over the neighborhood, a logistical nightmare.

Our fame was growing, and I was on the road at least three days a week. At this point Jill and I were definitely defining our roles and dividing the labor. And it looked as if we would reach almost \$65,000 in sales by the end of our second year, maybe even \$75,000.

I smile to myself when I recall the names of our original accounts, some of which are still going strong and have become icons in the city; others that are now known nationally and internationally, with many hundreds or thousands of units. More and more restaurants were trying out the quiche and our desserts. I already mentioned O'Neal's Balloon, which was owned by my new friend Michael O'Neal and his late brother, the actor Patrick O'Neal; there was Charlie's, PJ Clark's, J. G. Melon's, the Wicked Wolf, Puffing Billy, Proof of the Pudding, the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station, and the iconic Copacabana night club. Another was the Peartree Café, owned by Michael "Buzzy" O'Keeffe, who went on to open the River Café, today considered one of the finest restaurants in the country.

And then there was Friday's (long before it was sold and became TGIF!). Besides Friday's there was also a Tuesday's and a Thursday's, also owned by Alan Stillman, as he began his long career as a successful restaurateur. I remember the delivery to Thursday's was really frightening, located as it was in the bowels of a building on 58th Street with dark, endless corridors that never ceased to scare the daylights out of me. I also remember with a smile that the manager of Friday's told me he always kept one of my pecan pies at home on top of his refrigerator; every night when he got home at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, he rewarded himself with a slice before falling into bed.

Our packaging was still quite rudimentary. We did not yet have boxes in which to pack our products since we simply would have had no place to store them. So we were still using plastic bags—and, I am

embarrassed to admit, in some cases tin foil. How I carried them into the restaurants I cannot imagine, but I am quite sure it must have made me look pretty foolish and unprofessional, which I, most definitely, still was.

During the process of our initial expansion, I learned one of my very big lessons in business. We were selling our newest product, a Chocolate Mixed Nut Pie, to a restaurant called Gertrude's on East 64th Street. It was one of those restaurants that were very hot—all the celebrities and beautiful people flocked there almost before the expression “beautiful people” existed. I got a call from Gertrude at 1:00 in the morning telling me she needed four more pies right away.

“Gertrude, do you realize what time it is?” I asked wearily.

“*You have to, Susan!*” she said. Of course, she was right, and it only took me a moment to realize it. Even back then I began to understand that customer service is as important as the product. I dragged myself out of bed, packed up the pies, and began the hour-long drive to Gertrude's.

By then I was getting some help with my deliveries; hardly anyone in our neighborhood left for the city without making a delivery. Even people we hardly knew, friends of our friends.

We still had no real profits, but our reputation was growing, a fact that began causing problems. It got to the point where we had lots of retail customers driving up to the house to stock up on our products, and large delivery trucks were pulling into the driveway to bring us ingredients all week long. Once again, desperate for space, we also began a slow creep back into the house—back through the kitchen and into the dining room, the library, the sun porch.

Our neighbors were proud of us, and very protective, but the village was another story. We lived in an exclusive residential community, and finally we got the letter I had figured would show up eventually. In not-so-polite language, it suggested that the village thought it was time for Bonne Femme to move its operations elsewhere.

The next leg of our journey was about to begin.

Chapter 12

Company Culture

A single twig breaks, but the bundle of twigs is strong.

—*Tecumseh*

All of us who are running businesses today compete in an exceedingly fast new world. To succeed in this environment, we have to develop a company culture that can keep pace with that world. The heart of our business is its culture, one that is cohesive and well nurtured. Without this mission, a company is likely to end up directionless, stagnant, and fractured. At Love and Quiches, we've worked hard to build a culture that unifies our people and enlists all of them in maintaining our agility, supplying us with new ideas and new thinking, and keeping our customers loyal. Our *people* are the most important component of our operation, as they must be in yours.

Our company mission provides critical direction. To reach its goals, every business should have a mission statement that focuses on culture.

Our brand promise is: “To Always Deliver Ultimate Taste, Quality, Innovation & Value to Our Customers Across the Globe.” It has taken a thousand baby steps to get there, but now our entire organization is critical to that effort.

Building Team Spirit

In one form or another, we have always taken steps to come together as a team, even if in the earlier years it was merely Team Building 101. We’ve never been just a collection of people doing their jobs. We’ve always strived to be a real team, one that’s made up of people who fit the culture of the company. The strength of our teams and their teamwork informs our success.

Ever since we started hiring, we have employed some *very* smart people—if not always formally educated ones—who helped move the organization forward. These include a production worker who became one of our best quality assurance directors; a line worker who is now our operations director; a truck driver who became our IT manager (and who then, as mentioned earlier, moved on to a top position with the New York Jets); and of course Don, our first driver, who ended up running the back of the house. Then there was Karen, who started as a receptionist thirty years ago and recently retired in a position very close to running the company.

There were a lot more. If we saw that they had it in them, we gave them the chance. We sent many of them to school and provided other formal training. We promote within the company cautiously, though, keeping in mind the Peter Principle, Elevating workers to the point of incompetency is not good for them or for the company. (On the other side of the coin, we *never* single out an employee for public humiliation, no matter how grievous the error.)

We keep track of many of the Love and Quiches alumni, and we have watched them all grow up and start families. They are constantly stopping in to say hello, even now, decades later—a real testament to the culture of this place.

In spite of the rosy picture I have been painting here, things were rarely perfect or easy. No matter how great your team spirit is, there will always be some problems between employees; it is a business, after all, not a love affair. As we grew, employees started to offer their input, which we encouraged, but as is often the case, not everyone saw things in exactly the same way. So I often honed my newfound leadership skills by moderating differences of opinion between employees. It was all part of the job. And, inevitably, there is some jockeying for position. I am relieved that today we deal with these issues on a much more formalized basis through our more structured Human Resources Department.

Whether your company has an HR department or isn't quite big enough for that yet, promoting collaboration is the key to keeping your team culturally vibrant. Some companies promote healthy competition between departments and teams, but to my way of thinking, *too* much competition isn't very healthy. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, collaboration is a far better way to go, and that is the type of team interaction we strongly promote.

In our company, we maintain detailed job descriptions; everybody knows exactly what is expected of them, and it follows that they know exactly where they stand. Nobody has to waste time looking over his or her shoulder, as is often the case in larger corporations. We all know that, sink or swim, we are in this together, and we can get a lot more done this way. Along one wall in our employee lounge, for instance, we have an organizational chart that turns the traditional format on its head. The top line includes all of the line leaders; the next line lists the supervisors they answer to, then the managers, the directors, on down to the executive team at the bottom. It's just one of the many ways in which we show our people that it doesn't matter where you are on the org chart; each person is a vital part of our team's success.

Of course, providing plenty of opportunities for your employees to bond and have fun together is a great way to develop culture and increase collaboration. Since the beginning, we've always thrown parties for our crew. In 2008, however, we made a joint decision with

middle management to scale back our many extravagances. The yearly events in the park were just too distracting and time-consuming to plan when we needed to concentrate on the very survival of the business. Each step we take is commensurate with the economic climate we find ourselves in, whatever year, whatever time. And because of our long tradition of blowouts, this step was not an easy one to take. But major decisions like these were no longer made just at the top, and we decided, together, that this needed doing.

We didn't cut the fun out entirely, and coming together to celebrate remains an important part of our culture. We still hold quarterly fiestas in the employee lounge, where we bring in delicious and varied catered food and top management does the serving. We still have music and dancing, and we do it several times on each fiesta day so that each shift can have its party. We all dance, mix, and match, but some of the Latin dance songs seem *never* to end, and my feet pay the price. During these fiestas we are a family; when there is work to be done, we are a team.

Through all the years, some of them difficult, we have managed to maintain our esprit de corps. This was demonstrated vividly by the amazing behavior of all 250-plus of us in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which fell on Halloween in 2012. All of Long Island was decimated by the storm, and our Freeport facility suffered extensive damage. *Everybody* on our staff showed up, wanting to know what they could do to help. Once our electricity was restored—which was within two days, since our village has its own power company, unique for Long Island—everybody pitched in no matter their position in the company, hands and knees on the ground, whatever it took, and we were up and running within seventy-two hours. They were magnificent.

Culture and Hiring

At Love and Quiches, our culture thrives on having the very best team members seated on our bus. That means that we don't want to hire good people—we want the *great* people. We have taken off the

rose-colored glasses, and we realize that weak links affect the whole, and can inhibit our overall success. As a result, we devote a lot of our energy to building our teams and making sure our hires are both a good fit culturally and in line with what we need to accomplish. We promote from within or recruit from outside to get the best people on board. And of course it is not only getting the *right people* on the bus; it is also putting them in the *right seat*.

As you may have noted throughout the book, we have always been rather color and gender blind in our hiring policy, and this diversity turned out to be fundamental to our processes. We learned that innovation can come from *anywhere*, and we throw a wide net to get it.

It is a great skill to know how to hire right the first time. Love at first sight will never do, nor will a gut feeling that this or that person is the answer to all your prayers. That never works, and only rarely does hiring someone from a competitor work well. If you think back to some of my stories, we made some colossal mistakes, more painful because they were so very costly.

But as the years passed, our hiring practices have evolved. Besides using some of the free or nominal-cost online services, we don't hesitate to use a search agency for important hires; they have access to a wider range of candidates than we do and pre-screen them before offering them up to be interviewed. After that, it is up to us to make the right decisions. We look for people with a good track record and problem-solving skills.

And we no longer make all hiring decisions at the top. When we are evaluating a candidate, we now have them meet and speak with a few people within the team they will be joining to make sure the cultural fit is there. Afterward, the department director selects the optimal candidate.

Our constant learning never stops. We now use the STAR job interview technique to evaluate the candidate's problem-solving skills. The questions in this process are designed by behavioral psychologists: We ask every candidate to describe a *difficult situation* they found

themselves in, the *path* they took to resolve the issues, the specific *actions* they implemented, and the *end result*. Many large companies use this process, and if it is good enough for Sara Lee, it is good enough for us. Of course, each candidate's past experience and qualifications also are key to the hiring process. In particular we take a hard look at the candidate's employment history because we've found that a person who changes jobs constantly (called a "jumper"), even if he or she claims to have been looking for the right place to finally pursue a career, is not a good bet.

Although there are two schools of thought on the subject, we have never discouraged nepotism. We have employed married couples, children, siblings, and so on, without any issues. But employees who are dating one another present a trickier situation, particularly if there comes a bitter or volatile breakup. It is hard to control these liaisons, yet I do not believe in interfering in people's lives as long as it doesn't affect performance on the job. I know some larger corporations have unbending rules in this regard, but we never have. (Remember, we even held a wedding right on the production floor in the early days!)

Culture and Customer Service

Building a strong culture makes everyone's time at work more enjoyable, and just as importantly, your company's cultural values affect how your customers will be treated and thus how they see you. If most of your people have "9 to 5" syndrome and fly out the door as early as possible, your level of service will drop. But if your people are invested and committed, your customers are going to get truly great service.

You may recall that one of my first lessons in what customer service truly means was when I was just starting out, and Gertrude of Gertrude's, one of the top "in" restaurants at the time, made me get up in the middle of the night to drive to the city and bring her four Chocolate Mixed Nut Pies. I did it because even back then, I knew I needed to answer when my customers called. It was a mere \$20 sale, but she

did me a great favor. One of my next lessons in customer service was changing to ten-inch straight-sided pans for my cheesecakes instead of forcing my then current nine-inch pie-shaped versions down the throats of my customer base because that was the only size pan I had at the time.

In short, I learned early on to do whatever it takes to keep customers happy, and that became a cornerstone of the Love and Quiches culture. There were plenty of initial lapses in customer service that were both stressful and harmful, but I was learning a whole new business language and didn't know any better. The company finally reached a level of reliable customer service in the mini-factory in the late 1970s.

It is not enough to have a high-quality product; the service and spirit behind it have to be high quality too. Our employees are taught that the image conveyed to our customers and the industry in general is what, at the end of the day, pays our salaries. There are plenty of other choices out there, and our products alone don't tell the entire story. We must give customers and prospects myriad reasons to choose *us* over our competitors, including polite demeanor on the phone *or* by email, responsiveness to their needs, flexibility within reason to emergency requests, on time delivery, and good fulfillment rates.

Our company culture trickles down throughout the organization, both the front and the back of the house, and it is management's responsibility as part of the training to convey the image we want to show to the outside world. In particular, we want a *consistent* image. Manners count, and we have a dress code (informal, but neat; no jeans), both for ourselves and because we have frequent visitors. And this consistent image extends way beyond our customers; we must show the same professionalism to our vendors, truckers, freight forwarders, and agencies, as well as to anybody else we deal with in the course of conducting business. We then both provide good service and get good service in return.

So at the end of the day, as a supplier, our most important strategy is to engender in our expanding customer base the confidence that we

can flawlessly meet their needs for service, quality, and innovation in order to help *them* distinguish themselves from their competition and *us* to distinguish ourselves from *ours*. We partner with our customers and participate in their dessert development and planning processes, even halfway across the world. But more importantly, we try to strategically balance the needs of the company with the needs of our customers.

On occasion, we see the other side of this coin. When a customer is *too* demanding (and this does happen, but thankfully not too often), it can become demoralizing and disruptive to the teams and the organization as a whole. Then a decision has to be made to walk away for the good of the whole.

High-Impact Meetings

Every company has meetings, but not everyone realizes that how meetings are handled is a vital component of the company's culture. Meetings are where people come together; they're how we keep it all running smoothly. If your meetings are long, boring, and full of patronizing behavior, company culture is going to suffer. On the other hand, if you do meetings right, you can give your team's morale and effectiveness a huge boost.

At Love and Quiches, we communicate a lot; we meet a lot. We hold daily huddles, weekly management meetings, weekly executive meetings, weekly cap-ex meetings, team-building meetings, and ongoing training meetings. We also have monthly town hall meetings during which we share news about our plans and our progress, as well as discuss any issues. We do not talk down to or patronize our employees at these meetings; we need them. I urge you not to listen to those who complain that when there are so many meetings nobody can get anything done. Meetings are important; businesses need to communicate to make sure everyone is marching in the same direction and to avoid working at cross purposes. Differences of opinion, conflicts, and conflict resolution are prime reasons for meetings; do not avoid them.

But once a decision is made, the team needs to implement it—even those who do not quite agree.

Effective meetings are one of the most essential ingredients of a successful company. Meetings are where decisions are made and agendas are set, and good meeting behavior is important to avoid descending into chaos. We learned some of this the hard way, and as a result, we have decided to hang a sign on the door to the conference room: “No Cell Phones or Egos.”

Here are my suggestions for meeting protocol, my rules of the road:

- Make sure to start and end on time, with a one-dollar fine in the pizza kitty for every minute late.
- Think about having a meeting standing up if it promises to be a short one.
- Have an agenda. Time cannot be replenished.
- Have someone take notes, or set up a white board/flip chart on which to record decisions and action items. Note how these action items will be implemented and the person responsible for that implementation, along with time lines and an end date.
- Discuss the progress being made on all of the action items at the next meeting.
- Don't allow multiple idea discussions. Focus on the topic at hand.
- Don't allow any interruptions when a person is talking.
- Don't tolerate any side conversations.
- Don't tolerate any personal attacks. Never! And treat each other with respect and dignity.

Keeping People Motivated

Your company culture depends on a group of employees who are motivated to do their best work. So how do you keep them invested? At the end of the day, money talks, but so does recognition, and we devote equal measure to ensuring both motivators. Our employees understand that their best job security is the success of the company and vice versa. We need each other, and we all know it.

We hold State of the Company meetings in which we inform *all* of our employees, from our porters to our managers, of our progress, and during which we express our appreciation for their good work. Our transparency is appreciated by our employees and keeps them engaged. We share financials with some levels within the hierarchy. We also recognize and reward longevity with gift cards, announce Employees of the Month from each department, raffle off TVs and other prizes when production goals are met, and so on. But when necessary, we do *not* hesitate to discuss any issues that need addressing so that we can all participate in the solution.

Our employees share in our profits based on performance—a great motivator. And everybody who works here knows that we *always* look to promote from within before going outside. So all of us have skin in the game and the same goals at stake. We treat our employees as partners; we show them respect, and that goes a *very* long way.

Management by walking around is making a comeback, but I never stopped. I wander around in the back a few times each week, greeting employees and identifying issues. Our production workers look forward to top management spending time with them. To my production workers, I am “Miss Susan,” while Irwin is known as “Poppy.” This is how we do it. This is the Love and Quiches philosophy in the short form.

We have chosen to remain a private business, a family business with the second generation in place. This is key to the future of Love & Quiches Gourmet (our new name as of 2013, which you will learn about in chapter 14, “Marketing and Branding”). I have my partners—my husband, son, and daughter—at the top with me, as well as a few other essential executives.

I think being a family business provides a comfort level to the organization as a whole and encourages our teams to participate fully as we move forward. The process of improvement never stops; we are never good enough. Innovation can emerge from anywhere within the organization, and our employees are empowered to improve our company systems and products. We tap into those abilities across the entire organization, salute good work, and understand that mistakes will be made, which is fine as long as they are recognized and corrected as quickly as possible.

But each and every employee’s performance is also crucial to our future. Our cake pans need to be clean and ready for the next day’s production, and what we will bake depends on the orders we’ve received, which need to be scheduled properly so that they can ship on time. (And with hundreds of products, this is no easy task.) We need orders, so our sales force must be out there making it happen; our marketing department needs to help them by spreading the word; our R&D chefs need to keep the new products coming; our Quality Assurance Department needs to make sure everything is perfect; our CFO needs to be “Chief Bean Counter.” And that is only the start.

From the top, we try to generate a hunger for needed changes and initiatives rather than imposing them. We try to share the decision-making process, which means sharing the risks and the rewards. Real leaders don’t have all the answers, and that is how it should be. We need people better than we are in their particular areas to become a great company. At the top, we need to be visionaries. We need to set the direction in line with our resources while at the same time inviting the input of everybody below. And this implies some risk. As leaders,

we guide our employees to overcome the fear of that risk, the fear of change that creates barriers to moving the organization forward. And just as I had to overcome such barriers without any help, the strength of our numbers now helps us to overcome these fears together and keeps the dynamic going. We need creative ideas to tackle the barriers, which further means we need our people to generate those ideas. Fortunately, the employees of Love and Quiches have always been and still are a passionate group, and the ideas keep coming!

Epilogue

Where Will We Go from Here?

*If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more,
and become more, you are a leader.*

—John Quincy Adams

Here I am at the end of the chronicle of my accidental business. I have described my journey from my home kitchen to today, and my hope is that my story has entertained, informed, and inspired. Given a thousand chances, I would never have guessed that a simple idea—just one quiche—would start me on the road to where I find myself today.

I've told my personal story, the Love and Quiches story, drawing on my experiences during the past forty years as we grew from home kitchen to local business to international supplier. I learned so much during each stage of our development, and my hope is that other budding entrepreneurs and business owners will find wisdom and rules of the road to take away from my stories, too.

Although for decades we have flown hundreds of millions of our brownies all over the world with our name on them and although we've recently developed a Gourmet Grab and Go line of pre-wrapped snack products with our brand, Love & Quiches Gourmet is, nevertheless, an important "behind the scenes" supplier. We are not a household name yet, but we are an integral and well-recognized member of the foodservice community. We make our customers look good by supplying *them* with superb products, products that are on trend and of the moment. If our products are presented as their own, that makes us happy; that is our game; that is what we do.

The trend toward upscale, high-quality desserts is growing across all channels—even fast food—and that is helping to fuel our growth. This is an exciting time for us with new opportunities to explore.

As I have demonstrated, our road forward has not been an easy one. First, we had to overcome my utter lack of preparation for business ownership. Over the years, we weathered a flawed business model, economic recessions, 9/11, key account loss, and other storms, many of which were well beyond our control. Each time, we picked ourselves up, dusted ourselves off, and moved on, myself a little smarter, Love and Quiches that much stronger. We are still here, and we are now in a position to overcome almost any obstacle placed in our path. We can use even a bad economy to fuel our growth.

We have learned to focus on what we are good at, and we do it well. People will always have to eat, and if we operate smartly, a good share of all that can be ours. Our eyes are laser focused on the prize. We stay on message and our market knows they can depend upon us. . We are now well into the new century, a well-oiled machine that is ready for the future. Our organization has developed a sense of urgency to see what comes next. Our focus will be on sales growth, improving processes, increased efficiencies, cost reduction, *and* the bottom line. We will build only what we can *sustain*; if we aim for a star, it will be a *reachable* one.

We are still evolving and improving. Our walls are once again

stretching to their limits, and we have just taken an additional twenty thousand square feet of warehouse space around the corner, and more office space next door. We can grow another 20 percent or so in this facility, and then, perhaps, we will be in a position to move to our dream facility—the next leg of our journey—so stay tuned.

By owning my own business, the weight of responsibility on me to my family, my organization, and my customers is always there. Like breathing. It will *always* be there, but the burden has lightened as the years have passed and Love & Quiches Gourmet has grown. The responsibility is now shared by all of the talented people who work here and help run the company. I can step back quite a bit without worrying and let the others bask in the victories.

Business ownership has allowed me in many ways, to control my own destiny in spite of the many roadblocks thrown in my path. The many years of grating cheese, rolling dough, schlepping samples, scrubbing floors, suffering burns all up and down my arms, knocking on doors, and on and on, has toughened me. And I needed toughening to fight my way to the position we enjoy today. The scars have faded, but the lessons are still there.

Little by little, one step and some leaps at a time, we took a lesson from each and every foible, from each mistake and heartbreak that kept moving us to where we are today. Every business has its own story, but I truly believe that we would not be where we are today without what had come before—every bit of it.

Along the way, I have strived to become a good and effective leader. At the same time, I've provided encouragement to others who have a good idea, ambition, and a dream. In being able to inspire and motivate others to succeed and keep moving the company forward, I have achieved my most important accomplishment.

And I've had fun doing it. It has been a great ride. If I had to do it all over again, all the pain and the glory, would I make that choice? In a heartbeat, I would.