

EXPO

Home-grown

Virginia foods
often start in family kitchen

BY LINDA MCNATT
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

FOUR YEARS AGO, armed with a favorite family recipe with a secret ingredient, Tim Ashman entered the best new product competition at the Savor Virginia Food and Beverage Expo in Richmond.

He brought home the top prize for his Virginia Gentleman 90 Proof Chipotle Hot Sauce. Since then, Ashman, who lives in Virginia Beach, has added several products to his own sauce line. But he's also done more than that, according to officials with

the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which sponsors the event.

Ashman has helped other companies get off the ground, helped them bring time-tested family recipes from the home kitchen to the gourmet market.

"It's a tremendous uphill climb for a new business just to get started," said Susan Simpson of VDACS. "And there are a lot of start-ups in the home."

Rowena Fullinwider, president and owner of Rowena's

Please see Virginia, Page F2



The Hubbard Peanut Co. was on hand with its products at the Virginia Food and Beverage Expo. Lynne H.

Rabl, left, David Bento and Carol Funkhouser man the company booth at the Richmond expo.



Wissle's Cakes of Virginia Beach showed off its confections, above. So did Rowena's Inc., a Norfolk-based company that won the Best New Product award with its Luscious Lemon Scoopable Cheesecake.

Virginia: Expo is a showcase for home-grown products

Continued from Page F1

Inc., a Norfolk-based company that specializes in cakes and desserts, is a good example. Rowena built a million-dollar company with her pound cake recipes. At this year's show, Rowena's brought home the Best New Product award with Luscious Lemon Scoopable Cheesecake. The contest was judged by those who participated in and attended the expo this year.

The smells of baked goods, cheese, sauces, candy, nuts, fruits, vegetables and grilling meats assaulted the senses of people entering the Greater Richmond Convention Center.

Virginia herb growers, apple growers, even mushroom producers – Dave and Dee's Mushrooms, of Newsoms – were lined up in the center aisle. At the end of the aisle, a chef featured on the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation's cable television program prepared recipes using products that have made the state famous for flavor.

Some Virginia foods companies scurried to have products ready in time for the show to fit in with the new low-carb dieting trend.

"It's the demand; everybody wants it," said Walter Flemins, of Wescott & Schindt Bakers in Manassas. "The interest has been phenomenal."

Flemins said that John Panas, a native of Greece who owns the bakery, brought a chef in from Spain just a couple of months before the food show to experiment with the recipes.

Elsewhere, at the Good Earth Peanut Co. booth, Lindsey Vincent, stuck with the tried and true.

"I'm on the peanut diet," Vincent said, laughing. "I eat peanuts all the time. Gives me the energy to work the calories off."



Rowena and Peter Fullinwider of Norfolk-based Rowena's had the best new product with their Luscious Scoopable Lemon Cheesecake.

Vincent, of Skippers, near Emporia, was a peanut farmer for years. When the prices went down and his farm started suffering, he started the company that features a variety of peanut products.

"I grew up on a peanut farm," Vincent said. "My father and I used to talk about doing something like this. It was time."

Good Earth's entry in the new product competition?

Good Earth Natural Peanut Butter, manufactured in Suffolk by Producers Peanuts.

Peanuts have been good business for Hubbard Peanut Co., of Sedley, for years. The family-owned business that ships its large, gourmet peanuts all over the world was celebrating its 50th anniversary at the food expo this year.

Hubs Peanuts is like many of the small companies that began in a home kitchen. It



JOHN H. SHEALLY II PHOTOS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Tim Ashman, president of Ashman Manufacturing and Distributing Co. in Virginia Beach, talks about his line of sauces.

was born in the kitchen of the late Dorothy Hubbard, who started cooking peanuts to make extra money.

Linda Vick of Newsoms, another Southampton County community, has a similar story, although Vick is just getting started.

Vick, who is also a peanut farmer, also started her company as a way of staying in the business. She still grows peanuts, but she also has a

Vick Farms gift catalog, featuring peanuts and candy.

Vick, for her success with peanuts, recently received the "Business Person of the Year" award from the Newsoms Ruritan Club.

The Virginia Diner, of Wakefield, entered sugar-free chocolate-covered peanuts in the new products competition.

New products are always interesting, said Simpson. "This way, they get to surf

the competition," Simpson said, as she strolled the aisles. "And they get to talk with others about how to get started, market, expand."

Her department offers some help, too, said Simpson.

"When somebody comes to us with a new product or a family recipe, the product may be great, but the packaging just isn't what we're looking for," she said.

And that can make the difference between success and failure. "We give them hints, make suggestions," she said. "We can get them lined up with the food inspections and weights and measures folks. They may have the most wonderful product, but until they can get it manufactured in an accredited kitchen, they can't get it into the marketplace."

That's where Tim Ashman, of Ashman Manufacturing and Distributing Co., provides a hand. His professional kitchen produces and bottles his products as well as the recipes for other food entrepreneurs.

Kent C. Von Fecht Jr. was operating Lendy's Cafe & Raw Bar in Virginia Beach, using an old family recipe for his hot wings sauce. It was so popular he started bottling it and recently won first place in the wing sauce category at the 2003 Scovie Award, Fiery Food and BBQ Show in Albuquerque, N.M. The restaurant now markets four varieties of sauce, all of them bottled by Ashman's.

"That's what makes this show so neat," Von Fecht said. "A lot of people come from Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, and most of them either are – or they started out as – mom-and-pop places. They've found a product or a special recipe and created their own niche."

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