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# CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

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STAFF BLOGS

## Nathan Skid

Table Talk



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## Salsa and .. cupcakes? How Crain's helped 2 local companies discover each other

Little did I know the parting comment I made at the end of a conversation some six months ago would lead to major deal for a local company.

### February 2008

The story begins in February 2008, a month after I started working for *Crain's*.

Fresh out of journalism school, I was asked to tag along with a reporter to interview and shoot a photo of a fast-growing company in Ferndale called **Garden Fresh**.

Garden Fresh had just signed a deal to make a full line of salsa, hummus, tortillas and dips for singer and songwriter Jimmy Buffett's **Margaritaville Foods** and was making a name for itself in a competitive and crowded retail market.

"How good can salsa made in Ferndale possibly be?" I thought to myself at the time.

Then I met Annette and Jack Aronson, the husband and wife team behind Garden Fresh, and tried Jack's Special salsa. That's when I, like many others, learned why their products were doing so well.



Nathan Skid

Jack and Annette Aronson in 2008.

Even with annual sales increasing from \$6 million in 2002 to \$46 million in 2007 all the way to \$100 million for 2011, the company still makes its salsas in five-gallon buckets.

The deal with Margaritaville Foods meant the company could double its size, which meant hiring more employees, increasing its footprint by 100,000 square feet and doubling its manufacturing capabilities.

Garden Fresh has been told many times that making salsa in five-gallon buckets is inefficient, that it's a waste of time and effort.

But Aronson told me they make the salsa that way because he and Annette believe in doing things the way they think is best.

After all, that is what got them to where they are now.



### June 2010

I had been covering food and restaurants for about a year and a half when I first talked with Pam Turkin, owner of **Just Baked Cup Cakes LLC**. A colleague said that this small bakery in Livonia was doing something different and that I should talk to her.

After a brief conversation, I decided to write a story about how she turned her passion for baking into a successful business.

During the interview, she talked about how she spent 25 years in the advertising world and while on a business trip in New York found herself standing in a long line at **Magnolia Bakery** for its famed cupcakes.

"It was nuts," she said in 2010. "I felt like we could do something like that here, but everyone told me I was crazy."

But instead of listening, she began formulating recipes, doing research and, more important, taking orders and criticism from family and friends.

It didn't take long for the operation to outgrow the kitchen of her home. So in 2008, she and her husband, Todd, used their life savings to move into the former **Burghardt's Bakery**, at 33309 Seven Mile Road in Livonia.

At the time, Just Baked had opened its fourth retail location, had 60 employees and was on the verge of signing a deal with **Faygo** — but Turkin was unsure whether it would go through.

She still wanted to crack eggs by hand and didn't know what kind of toll the increased business would have on her small company.

I told Pam to keep in touch if any news regarding Faygo ever came to pass. "That would make for a perfect *Crain's Detroit Business* story," I told her.

### November 2010

So when she called with news that **Faygo Beverages Inc.** and Just Baked signed an agreement allowing the bakery to use the Faygo name and soda flavors, I jumped on it.

The pop-flavored cupcakes were flying off store shelves, the 15 grocery stores were sold out by the time she finished delivering the first shipment, and more orders were coming in.

In the first week, 13,500 red pop, orange and grape Faygo-flavored cupcakes were sold, representing a 25 percent increase in sales. Before the introduction of the new product, Just Baked sold about 60,000 cupcakes a week.

The launch of the new products prompted Turkin to hire three more full-time employees and begin running 24 hours a day, four days a week, and 15 hours on the three other days. They also hired a full-time driver.

Turkin's story reminded me of that conversation I sat in on at Garden Fresh three years prior: A young company signing a deal with a major brand, an owner who wanted to make her product *her* way and growth potential that could double the company's size in a short time frame.

At the end of our discussion, I told her I thought she should talk to the folks at Garden Fresh. There were simply too many similarities to ignore and maybe they could help steer her in the right direction.



provided by Just Baked LLC

Turkin said the Faygo flavored cupcakes were a big hit in stores



Provided by Just Baked LLC

This is what the Just Baked cupcakes will look like in stores.

### March 2011

I was at my desk when I received a phone call from Turkin.

"I have been waiting months to make this call," she exclaimed.

After we ended our conversation four months ago, Turkin said she reached out to Jack Aronson on Facebook, saying she had a small cupcake shop and had an opportunity to sign a deal with Faygo but needed some advice.

"I had 10 questions I wanted to ask, mainly about distribution," Turkin said. "Sure, we can meet, come on in ... tomorrow," Aronson said.

So the next day, Turkin grabbed her list of questions and headed to Ferndale to meet the folks at Garden Fresh.

Her first encounter with Dave Zilko, president of Garden Fresh Gourmet, did not go as planned.

Zilko had just returned from a business trip and had a terrible toothache. He didn't have time to talk.

"He said he would call me when he felt better," Turkin said. "How often do you hear that line?"

But true to his word, Zilko did and answered all of Turkin's questions. He took a liking to Turkin and began mentoring her.

The pair started meeting once a week and talking over the phone regularly to discuss strategy.

Zilko, impressed with Just Baked's product line in an emerging market, introduced Turkin to Garden Fresh's business adviser at **UHY International**, who talked about growth potential and a possible business interest between the two companies.

The two companies worked out a deal giving Garden Fresh a large minority stake in the company. And in return, Just Baked will travel on roads paved by Garden Fresh, giving the self-proclaimed closet baker inroads into some 10,000 grocery stores over the next two years.

"We realized we needed investors and we met people along the way, but none of them were a right fit," Turkin said.

"Garden Fresh offers more than just money. They have sales experience, the right personalities and the know-how to put a production line together."

But above all else, Turkin said she liked that regardless of how big Garden Fresh had become, it still made salsa in five-gallon buckets.

"What we love," said Turkin, "is that we want to crack eggs and they want us to crack eggs."