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Dream in a bottle

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She looks at the bottle of sauce that bears her name and says, "Why I didn't do this earlier ... I don't know."

What Evelyn Criswell does know is that she and her husband, Don, are having the times of their lives selling Evelyn's Gourmet Recipes Meat Sauce (in mild and spicy varieties). After a career that now spans 35 years as a caterer, she is still going strong, and the sauce that is taking so much of her time currently isn't new at all.

She first made the sauce for a wedding rehearsal party for her brother in 1965. Forty years, and a lot of experience in food and catering, set the stage for this product's debut.

Her meat sauce is versatile. While it can be used as it was 40 years ago as the sauce for party meatballs, it also is a flavorful marinade, and Evelyn has discovered other uses for it as well - as an ingredient in a party dip or a salad dressing. And she's still experimenting.

When the Criswells decided the time was right for putting the sauce in a bottle, they did not realize that it would take time - a lot of time - to find a company that would both produce and bottle the sauce to their satisfaction.

After some searching and some hit-and-miss experiences, they were directed to a company in Tiger, Ga., by Scott Perry of Contri Brothers here.

The finished product, handsomely labeled in 12-ounce bottles, arrived just before Christmas. The Criswells have placed it in a some stores here, and they are working for more distribution around the area. It is also in a couple of stores in Mississippi and Texas.

Evelyn says it has been the encouragement of brides and grooms for whom she has catered that pushed her into putting her meat sauce on the commercial market. "I'm on my second generation of brides," she says.

Currently, Evelyn Criswell's Gourmet Recipes Meat Sauce is being sold at Contri's three locations; Piggly Wiggly in Crestline; Western Supermarket in Mountain Brook Village; Williams Orchard in Springville; Trussville Antique Mall; and Homestead Hollow General Store in Springville when it is open for festivals.

A career begins:

When Evelyn Criswell discovered she was among the 100 finalists in the Pillsbury Bake-Off in 1971, she was happily a stay-at-home mom who had always enjoyed preparing meals for her family and occasional entertaining for friends.

After that year, a good friend (they were classmates at Woodlawn High School in the '50s) asked Evelyn to help her cater a wedding. Before the wedding day arrived, Evelyn's friend had moved out of town, and the young wife and mother with no catering experience took over.

The rest, as they say, is history,

Criswell, with help from her husband, Don, and sometimes from one or all of her children, has been catering as much as she can schedule since the 1970s. She did win finalist slots in the Pillsbury Bake-Off two more times, and while she never won big money, she received a lot of large kitchen appliances which came in handy with her expanding catering career.

The Criswell family lived in South East Lake for more than 30 years and moved to a home in the hills of Springville in the '90s. As part of the home's master plan, a commercial kitchen was planned for the basement so there would be ample and health-department-approved space for her catering work.

That kitchen has been going strong since it was completed, and Don, now retired after a 36-year career as a land surveyor, has pitched in more than ever with his wife's business.

He says he cooks "when I have to," and he is experienced in making meatballs, cutting fruit for party trays and even baking cakes. "I'm kind of the go-fer," he says.

He can tell a visitor, however, the best way to ensure a cake's layers are even, and he can get information off the computer that reveals the catering company in the past year made 47 wedding cakes, completely catered 17 weddings (which included cakes) and did a number of corporate parties and other special events.

Some parties that the Criswells have especially enjoyed doing have been for Gov. and Mrs. Bob Riley at the governor's mansion in Montgomery. It was through her daughter, Dawn Stephens, and an interest in Hannah Home, that Evelyn Criswell first went to the governor's mansion for an event and did some catering there.

She has done a reception at the governor's mansion as well as a Christmas party there and has enjoyed the Rileys and the staff at the mansion.

The Criswells are also civic minded and participate in activities involving Springville and St. Clair County, and recently catered a breakfast for all the mayors in St. Clair County.

Family support:

Through all of her efforts, the energetic caterer has had the support of her husband as well as her now-adult children, Dawn, Keith and Kevin, as well as their spouses. A new generation of six grandchildren, though too young to participate in the work yet, are exposed to the food - both plain and fancy - that comes from their grandparents' kitchen.

Dawn's husband, Greg, who is in the computer business, has been handling the books for the meat sauce endeavor.

The Criswells feel the venture is all in the family.

Looking ahead:

Though the meat sauce is still in its early stages, the Criswells are already looking to fine-tune the meat sauce so it will be considered all organic.

Though no preservatives were knowingly used in the sauce, one secondary ingredient contains one-tenth of one percent of a chemical that falls into the preservative category, regardless of the minute amount.

Without any preservatives, the meat sauce still has a two-year shelf life, according to tests conducted at Auburn University.

The sauce is low in calories, has no fat or cholesterol. Plans are to make new batches of the sauce totally preservative free, which opens new marketing doors for the product, such as growing numbers of stores who confine products sold to organic only.

Also, Evelyn Criswell is looking at new opportunities. Some of her product possibilities are cinnamon rolls (based on a favorite recipe of hers), a robust sauce for Buffalo wings, and even sweet sauces, such as praline, chocolate or a combination of peanut butter and chocolate.

The couple forge ahead. "One product a year," she says.

She reflects on all they have learned in getting the first product produced and recalls friends such as Bill McMichael, former owner of the Irondale Cafe who now markets the Whistlestop products. "He helped me not make mistakes he had," she says. "We've learned a lot."

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