

MARILYN ROOTHAM AND WILL ROOTHAM-ROBERTS OF ROOTHAM GOURMET PRESERVES

Rootham Gourmet Preserves enjoying second-generation success, growth

BY JAIME MYSLIK

PUSLINCH – From custom preserves to co-packing to entrepreneur mentorship, Rootham Gourmet Preserves has doubled over the last three years under the watchful eye of owner/operator Will Rootham-Roberts.

The Puslinch business comes from modest beginnings in Fergus. Founder Marilyn Rootham, Rootham-Roberts' mother, started the business over 30 years ago.

Though Rootham lived in Fergus, she and a friend had a coffee shop at the Guelph Farmer's Market and, at the end of the day, she would often get leftover produce because farmers didn't want to take it back home.

She would then spend the week making preserves.

"Over the summer I had jars and jars of everything you could imagine, so then my partner's sister came down, she owned a fairly high-end store in Muskoka and she said what are you doing?" Rootham said.

One thing led to another and Rootham ended up selling preserves in the woman's Muskoka store.

"My mother was with me at the time and she was a hand calligrapher so she hand calligraphed all these labels and we cut out little cloth tops and we tied ribbons on them and sent them off with her and they sold really fast," Rootham said.

"So she was asking for more, so she took all that year's sort of stuff that I made and sold it."

Other clients were soon approaching Rootham to purchase her preserves, so she would take orders and fill them throughout the summer.

Eventually Rootham purchased the Aberfoyle Antique Market and continued making her preserves in the kitchen there when the market wasn't on.

Rootham exhibited at various craft shows and markets, selling her product primarily to retail customers. However, she did have contracts with Eaton's and Holt Renfrew, but eventually the demand became too labour intensive.

"When [Will] came to the business he decided he didn't want to stand on the weekend and sell preserves," Rootham said. "Which I don't blame him, he went and did his own thing.

"So that's when we sort of mechanized and he started taking on other clients and doing the co-pack."

Rootham Gourmet Preserves is now located on the east side of Aberfoyle in its own facility.

The business is primarily wholesale now under Rootham-Roberts' eye.

Growing up with the business Rootham-Roberts has always worked for Rootham Gourmet Preserves, even when he was going through school at the University of Guelph.

"I saw an opportunity to come and work here after school because they needed some help," he said. "So at that point I started to take on some of the cooking. That was probably eight or nine years ago; I would do the cooking in the morning.

"Come in, start all the kettles and then I'd go to the back to do the shipping."

At that point the company was hand-filling the jars.

Rootham-Roberts slowly morphed the business into what it is today, with a fully automated system.

While Rootham still produces and sells its own preserves, the bigger part of the business is co-packing contracts.

"Basically a co-pack client is somebody that comes and we package their product ... for them," Rootham-Roberts explained.

Now, Rootham Gourmet Preserves produces about 150 co-packs and 50 of its own preserves.

"At any given time I'm working on about 10 or 15 different products or people," he said. "I've got stacks of recipes around here that I'm working on at any given time for different clients."

Clients come to Rootham-Roberts with an idea and he works with them to make sure it is a saleable product. Rootham-Roberts then takes the recipe and costs and sources everything that's required.

"We have to make sure that his product fits into the criteria that the government mandates for our facility ... no meat byproducts, cost stability, acid levels for the product, has to be pasteurized," Rootham-Roberts explained.



"It's always about food safety because if you don't provide the food safety then you have nothing to really sell."

- WILL ROOTHAM-ROBERTS, OWNER/OPERATOR, ROOTHAM GOURMET PRESERVES

"I have to help each client work though these problems with their product so they can be bottled, packaged and shelf stable for the consumer without incurring any food safety risk because that's ... the one thing that we always want to mitigate before taking on new business or new clients or making money.

"It's always about food safety because if you don't provide the food safety then you have nothing to really sell."

Once approved, the labels are designed and printed and the product is ready to be jarred.

"We try to help them find the most efficient avenue so they can get a good return on what they're doing," Rootham-Roberts said.

This is one of the details that sets the company apart from its competition. Some bottlers charge large consultation fees before any product has even been presented, Rootham said. She had some experiences when she first started out on her business journey.

At Rootham Gourmet Preserves, Rootham-Roberts tries to keep those fees at a minimum.

Clients also have access to the full facility and are often present and helping while their product is being bottled and packed.

"They work with our team in the kitchen, they don't have to come every time, but some of them ... are just so into their products I guess they want to be on site," Rootham-Roberts said.

"They like to help; it's like having another body that's basically another staff member in there so they're trained on what the protocol is - hair nets, handwashing, handling. Obviously the head chef still has control but they like to help and they like to be involved and that's great, they work well with the team."

Another perk of bottling with Rootham Gourmet Preserves is the facility is federally inspected.

This means all products bottled to those specific standards are exportable to the U.S. and between provinces in Canada.

"We allow the entrepreneur to receive an inspection level with only going in with a $1,000 or $2,000 initial batch run of like 500 units," Rootham Roberts said.

He explained many other commercial bottling companies require 5,000 to 15,000 unit runs to receive the federal inspection level.

"The inspection level allows the marketing and the confidence of the retailers to take your product on because they know it's made by a qualified facility that's clean; it's got food safety, quality," Rootham-Roberts said.

One of the co-packing clients is the Elora Brewing Company.

"We were having a hard time keeping up with our ketchup production," said chef Ben Sachse. "In the summer we go through so much of it and we're open full day, seven days a week, and have very limited space.

"Therefore we were having a hard time finding even an hour where we could get a 16-litre pot on that stove to make enough ketchup to last us a couple more days."

Someone Sachse knows suggested Rootham Gourmet Preserves.

He said having Rootham prepare and bottle the house-made ketchup is more cost effective than if the Elora Brewing Company were to continue doing it on its own. The recipe was tweaked to make larger quantities that will taste just like the original recipe.

"Once we have what we like, then from there on I just have to call them and order the stuff and pick it up the week after," Sachse said.

Rootham will fill five-litre pails as well as retail bottles.

"They're a family-run company; that's key, that's huge," Sachse said. "It's pretty easy to deal with them in a chaotic fashion.

PHOTOS: JAIME MYSLIK



WILL ROOTHAM-ROBERTS

"Everything that we do in this business, that we do in the restaurant industry, works on kind of an ordered chaos."

Sachse said the flexibility of being able to pick up an order outside of normal business hours is also very beneficial to the Elora Brewing Company.

"It works for us because it works with our whole idea of being a community-based business and being community supported," Sachse said.

"Working with someone so close ... and I don't have to pay for delivery costs because I can just pick it up myself, so proximity is definitely a big one."

He said using a professional bottling company is also good for the Elora Brewing Company's insurance.

Sachse also said Rootham can bottle three or four times the amount of ketchup at the perfect temperature and under the ideal conditions, compared to what the brewery could do at its own facility.

"I wish I had known about this co-bottling idea long before," Sachse said. "It's opened up this whole new area of where you don't need to be the expert on something."

When co-packing, Rootham-Roberts said he is always honest with clients.

"I want to work on products that I can see being successful on the marketplace and so I evaluate them based on that," he said.

"If you think you can be successful and I think I can work with you, then it's like I see potential in your business then I'll take you on and help steer you down the path."

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>
> - BEN SACHSE, CHEF, ELORA BREWING COMPANY

Rootham-Roberts won't take someone on as a client if he doesn't think they will make any money. He wants his clients happy and to build good relationships, he said.

"Sometimes it can be a bit of a heartbreaker to be the person who has to tell somebody that, but I think it's better to be honest with them up front than it is to take their money and watch them struggle, send them down a path of ... failure," Rootham-Roberts said.

"So that's sort of what we've come to now because we're not really looking at growing too much more, so we're being even more selective about what we bring in now."

Being loyal to longtime customers is also important to Rootham. Some of their wholesalers have been with the company since the beginning - more than 30 years.

Now, the Rootham label is sold to about 200 retailers, from high-end grocery stores to specialty cheese shops to delis.

Rootham-Roberts says he tries to keep the Rootham label for specialty stores and will occasionally create private label products for select larger grocery stores.

"That then protects our independent retailers," he said.

"We get a little bit more from them; they get more because it's something unique that they can't find at the grocery store but it also allows the consumer to have something because most of these ... are destination stores. (They) need to have unique items in order to protect their



market segment and attract consumers to come and visit them so this is one of those items."

Rootham Gourmet Preserves is also focused on using local products.

"We want to try to use as much farm products within 100 miles of this facility and that's what a lot of the bigger companies want now," Rootham said.

"They don't want stuff from China; they want to know where it's coming from. Consumers care about where it's coming from and it also keeps the dollars within the Ontario economy.

"If we can support local farms then that's farm money going back into rural economies and the dollar just keeps going round and round. So that's big for us."

Mother and son both have advice for future entrepreneurs.

"Don't be so set on your product," Rootham said. "Be able to evolve.

"If you get somewhere and see a little niche going off somewhere, be able to go on the road where you see there's a need rather than stick with your original idea that might not be working."

She added, "I never thought I was going to make preserves; that was the last thing I was going to do. I had a coffee shop at the market. So obviously I sort of ran with what ran and gave up the coffee shop."

Rootham-Roberts said it is key to ensure the product fits the profile of the marketplace.

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"It basically comes down to risk mitigation," he said.

"You don't want to invest too much too quickly in a nidea that's not 100 per cent proven.

"Because it is a competitive marketplace no matter where you're going into and you don't want to put your house or mortgage the family farm to get into the market before you jump in."

For more information about Rootham Gourmet Preserves visit www.roothamsgourmet.com.

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