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MARCH / APRIL 2023
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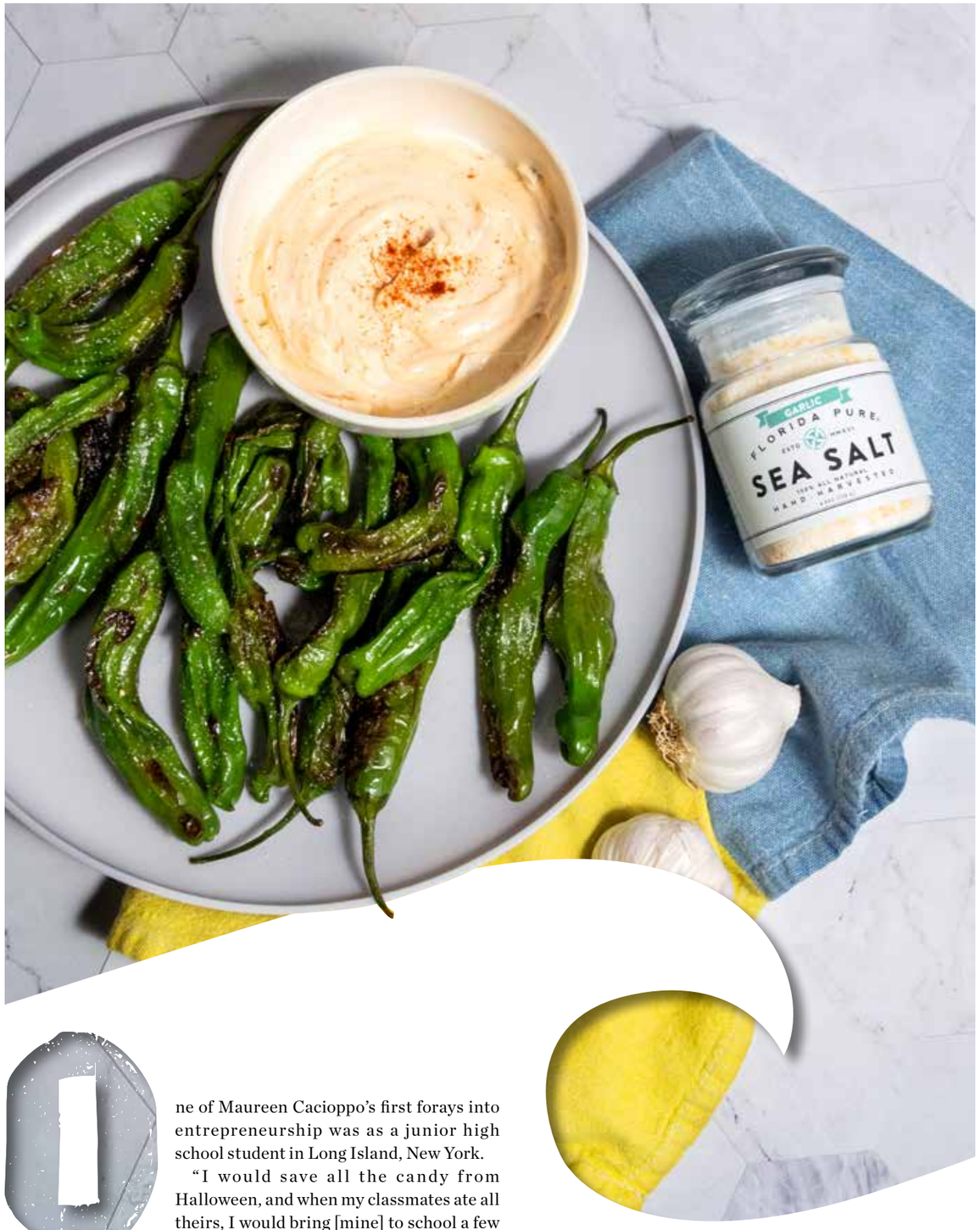
MAUREEN CACIOPPO FINDS SWEET SUCCESS WITH FLORIDA PURE SEA SALT.

BY **SUSAN B. BARNES**



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF FLORIDA PURE SEA SALT

One of Maureen Cacioppo's first forays into entrepreneurship was as a junior high school student in Long Island, New York.

"I would save all the candy from Halloween, and when my classmates ate all theirs, I would bring [mine] to school a few weeks later and sell it to them. They were used to having candy and sugar, and once they ran out, there was no more supply—except me," Cacioppo shares with an infectious laugh.

> "DIVERSITY FUELS INNOVATION AND DRIVES US FORWARD EVERY DAY. AS AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE, OUR EMPLOYEES ARE PROFESSIONALS WHO ARE COMFORTABLE BEING THEIR PURE, AUTHENTIC SELVES AT WORK, AND WE WOULDN'T WANT IT ANY OTHER WAY."

When Cacioppo moved to Florida 13 years ago, she combined two of her passions by working in nonprofit outdoor education and navigating the state's natural waterways and coastlines. About eight years ago, she became curious about making salt, and a hobby began.

"I started in my backyard with a crab boil pot and a burner and experimented with solar evaporation on glass pans. I started really teaching myself high school chemistry and nerding out on the history of salt and the whole process from start to finish," recalls Cacioppo, adding that she took notes and ruined several pots along the way.

"I made some really terrible salts, but it was so fascinating to me—the process and enjoying the learning and failing and seeing if I could actually come up with something that was safe and tasty," she adds.

Eventually, Cacioppo's experimentation paid off and she realized she was no longer making terrible salt.

"I started making something consistent and briny and delicious and using it at home," she says, adding that she gradually started gifting her homemade salts to family and friends.

This backyard hobby eventually became Florida Pure Sea Salt.

FROM HOBBY TO FULL-FLEDGED BUSINESS

Just how did Cacioppo's hobby salt making become the St. Petersburg, Florida-based Florida Pure Sea Salt, a full-time business complete with staff and corporate clients that launched seven years ago?

"I was leaving the state of Florida a lot for work, and we couldn't move on with our family goals. At that point, we decided that we needed to either redefine our family goals, or I could change jobs so I would be home more," Cacioppo explains. "We started talking about what the next phase of our lives might look like. That's when I thought, *Hmm, maybe there is a potential to make this into a business and make a little bit of money.*"

When she decided to embark on this new venture, Cacioppo knew that she wanted to incorporate her love of outdoor education and "build it into the business somehow." She also wanted to weave in her love of simple, quality ingredients—a passion she developed from her grandparents, who would carefully pick and prepare ingredients from their garden.

"Everything was cooked low and slow, and you could taste the love that went into every dish," Cacioppo says, adding that no matter how busy her childhood home was, everyone gathered around the table nightly for dinner to reconnect with each other.

That desire for connection and simplicity became her business's foundation.

"We put together a great, solid team, knowing that we were going to be affecting our environment and the community, and wanting to make sure we are effective in the most positive way," she explains.

That started with celebrating what makes each person unique.

"Diversity and inclusion are part of our foundational principles that guide how we build our team and continue to grow our company," Cacioppo explains. "Diversity fuels innovation and drives us forward every day. As an inclusive workplace, our employees are professionals who are comfortable being their pure, authentic selves at work, and we wouldn't want it any other way."

STARTING WITH A SIMPLE INGREDIENT

An early decision that has served Cacioppo well is the focus on simple, clean and local ingredients, with an emphasis on quality water. Her salts are small-batch and free of any bleach, anti-clumping agents or other chemicals.

"[Natural] salt has one ingredient, so if you get bad water, you get bad salt," she explains. "We're constantly doing things to make sure our efforts aren't wasted, because ours is a very long and caring process."

In addition to testing, filtering and boiling the salt water, which is pulled directly from the Gulf of Mexico, Cacioppo accesses the expertise of material scientists and organizations that serve as watchdogs for Florida's waterways. The result: clean finishing salts.

She also partners with small-batch makers around the world to source salts that complement those available from Florida Pure Sea Salt.

"As a company people can rely on for really good salt, we started diversifying our offerings a few years ago. We can only create one type of salt here [in Florida] because we have one type of water," she says. "For example, sea salt from Cyprus has different minerality, so it can create huge flakes. Or, red Hawaiian sea salt has a lot of red clay in it after it evaporates, so the minerals are really rich on the back end and almost make the salt a little bit bitter. They have all those beautiful minerals in sea salt that our bodies need. And now we have a lot of options from different parts of the world."

LISTENING AND LEARNING FROM OTHERS

When developing her business plan early on, Cacioppo accessed resources through the Small Business Association and became involved with The Greenhouse in St. Petersburg, a local organization that "provides business owners and entrepreneurs with the education, resources and assistance needed to thrive in the local economy," according to its website.

"The Greenhouse was big, for sure," Cacioppo says. "Tapping into the wealth of knowledge of local business people and family and friends and learning from them."

Over the years, she also participated in the USA Women Entrepreneurship Cooperative (USAWEC), a five-month initiative through The Center For Global Enterprise, which she calls "an incredible experience." Cacioppo says she is fortunate to have connected with so many female business owners through both The Greenhouse and USAWEC. "Especially the female business owners in the area," she says. "They're so willing to share their stories and what they've learned. It's been really wonderful."

When she launched Florida Pure Sea Salt in 2016, Cacioppo engaged people at farmers and makers markets, teaching them about pure, natural salt and its benefits so "they could make better decisions for themselves about what they're putting into their bodies." She also welcomed feedback and suggestions from her customers on anything from packaging to flavors. The flavors maple bacon, habanero and garlic (now a bestseller), among others, are direct results of customer feedback.

"I also went to one of the best restaurants in Tampa. They had just received their first James Beard nomination, and I wanted their feedback. I wanted to go to the best," Cacioppo says of meeting the team behind Rooster & The Till. "We sat down and they were really curious about what we were doing. They source locally, and they're curious people about food and how people connect with it. They had not heard of anyone local making sea salt and had a couple of suggestions."

One of those suggestions was to make a larger flake to use as a finishing salt. Cacioppo took the suggestions to heart and went back to her cutting board. A week later, they met again, and the Rooster & The Till team ordered two pounds of salt.

"They've been our customers ever since, and as they've grown, they buy more salt from us," Cacioppo says. "It's been a wonderful partnership."

In addition to Rooster & The Till, Cacioppo has collaborated with other independent restaurants and makers, and her salts are used by a chocolatier, a brewery, a coffeehouse and even a tequila brand.

Cacioppo also approached a local specialty shop early on and asked what it would take to get on the store's shelves. That's when she learned about sell sheets and UPC codes.

"I went home and Googled 'What the heck is a sell sheet,' and 'What the heck is a UPC code,'" she recalls with another laugh. "I returned a week later and he [the shopkeeper] tried the salts, and there was an instant connection. He gave us a lot of shelf space and carried multiple salts. It was a great first lesson on how to get on store shelves."

Outside of markets, specialty shops and collaborations with independent restaurants and makers, Florida Pure Sea Salt can be found in Publix Super Markets and Whole Foods Markets throughout Florida and south Georgia and across the country at The Fresh Market. The complete line of salts is available on the company website and can be shipped throughout the U.S.

LOOKING TO THE HORIZON

That's not to say Cacioppo's resting on her laurels. Rather, she is working to expand Florida Pure Sea Salt's reach into the Midwest and the Northeast and is setting her sights on more of a presence nationwide. She and her team are also aiming to expand into more health and wellness food markets.

Staying true to her passion for outdoor education, Cacioppo is also growing her business on the production side in a way that will provide more community outreach opportunities.

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"We are expanding to include a solar evaporation process for educational purposes [as well as some production]," she says. "We're teaming up with a farm in Tampa and will use the solar platform to teach and connect people with their food."

She adds that the teaching opportunity will also provide the platform to talk about the history of salt in Florida and the importance of being stewards of the Earth, not to mention scientific teaching moments.

The solid foundation that Cacioppo established in her first year of business not only set her up for success but also helped her get through the pandemic when farmers and makers markets were shuttered.

"The decisions we made in year one have gotten us to where we are now, nearly seven years later," she says. "We have a team to support, and we're supporting their families. I'm never taking that lightly."

Cacioppo is as grateful today for the support of her customers and community as she was the day she sold her first jar of "delicious, healthy, simple salt."

"It's taken off because it's an awesome product," she says. "You can put it on the rims of your cocktails, use it as a finishing salt or in the cooking process.

"The most humbling thing, from the first day it happened to me still to this day, is it's so incredible when people choose to share our hard work with their family and friends. When they put it on their dinner tables, for their families and their kids to use," Cacioppo continues. "This is what it's been about: connecting with our food sources, connecting with people. And I think it is so unbelievably beautiful when people choose to perpetuate that vision that I had very early on." ◆

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