

A Taste for Tortillas

* Tammy Young's Tampa company is stacked with success.

An army of freshly baked, brown-spotted white disks emerges from the oven, gliding on a conveyor belt. And Tammy Young can't keep her hands to herself. She plucks one off the belt, flipping the hot flour tortilla back and forth between her hands. Rolls it, takes a bite, and inhales as the tortilla melts in her mouth.

A smile immediately follows.

"Oh!" she exclaims, a slight drawl giving away her southern roots. "I just LUUV these torteeeyas!"

As president and CEO of La Bonita Ole, Inc. – which was just named Tortilla Manufacturer of the Year by *Snack Food and Wholesale Bakery* magazine – Young not only makes her

living off tortillas, she really does breathe and eat them.

Young has a new 40,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Tampa, and a demeanor as warm as her oven-baked products. She seems in awe as her eyes roam the facility, a result of 15 years of persistence, hard knocks and passion.

"I thought, 'One day, I'm going to be president of a national major corporation. Or, I want to be founder and CEO of my own company.' See what happens?" And then, a two-hand toss, "Ta da!"

Her story is the kind you'd expect to see on "Oprah" or "The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch."

Young devastated her parents when she dropped out of Western Kentucky University (biology major) after her first year. "I wanted the world to be my classroom," she says.

She landed in the food distribution business, filling vending machines with Tom's potato chips at mom-and-pop grocery stores. Unglamorous, yes, but "that was the beginning of

my lovefest with food," she says. Potato chips led to salads which led to pork, and eventually a job with Armour Foods that brought her to Tampa.

Being a Kentucky girl at heart ("I'm a Kentucky hillbilly! Grew up on beans and cornbread!"), she also enjoyed the history and culture of horseracing. A pal she met at Churchill Downs made tortillas in Detroit. Fernando Gutierrez had moved his parents' tortilla business from Monterrey, Mexico to the states.

One taste of his tortillas and Young's taste buds flipped from cornbread to corn tortillas. "They just tasted so homemade, just like a grandmother would make. So yummy! They melted in your mouth," she says.

Thus it was Young left Armour Foods and poured all her pesos into tortillas. She

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“Many times I had people say to me, ‘We just thought there was no way you’d be able to compete with those big boys.’”

emptied her 401(k) to start La Bonita Ole (translation: the pretty one bravo) in her living room. The year: 1992.

Gutierrez co-packaged the tortillas in Michigan for Young, who sold and marketed them from Tampa. Without money available for slotting – the fee paid to retailers for shelf space – she relied on the contacts she’d developed during her distribution days. Albertson’s signed on first, and so did a few Kroger divisions. La Bonita Ole made \$86,000 in its first year.

During the first six years of the company’s existence, Young estimated her salary ranged between \$0 to \$33,000. On the brink of bankruptcy several times, she remains astounded at what she calls the “blessings” of others who pulled her through.

In 1996, facing a Christmas season without being able to make payroll, her high school class funded her company through a private stock offering. In 1998 she sold her Pebble Creek home and used the profits to keep the company afloat.

Then in 2000, a personal blow to her family: Her mother was diagnosed with a rare leukemia-type disease. Local doctors gave Young’s mother no hope. But Young used the same drive she uses in business to find a solution.

The treatment she found required a caretaker and a move to Seattle. Young packed up her laptop, printer and fax machine and ran the company from an apartment near the Seattle hospital while her mother was treated. That year,

La Bonita Ole reached the \$2 million mark and added three new Kroger divisions. Seven years later, Young’s mother is still around to eat her fill of tortillas. “She’s a walking miracle!” Young says.

Today La Bonita Ole’s Tam-x-icos tortillas and Wrap-itz wraps are sold in 28 states at stores including Publix and all Kroger divisions. Tijuana Flats, whose South Tampa location used to be La Bonita Ole’s neighbor, is now a customer. The chain serves Tam-x-icos corn tortillas in its restaurants.

La Bonita Ole moved from sales and distribution to full-blown manufacturing in March 2007, just celebrating its first anniversary in its new Columbus Drive digs. Young and ten employees moved from a 3,000-square-foot space above the Tijuana Flats on Platt Street in Tampa to the enormous purple manufacturing facility on Columbus Drive. Forty-five new employees joined them.

Thirty-two varieties of tortillas and wraps roll off of the conveyor belts, including whole wheat with ten added grains (voted one of the 100 Best Packaged Foods for Women by *Women’s Health* magazine) and flavors such as sun-dried tomato.

Innovation comes as much from technology as from taste. For example, Young bypassed the commonly used dried powders to flavor and color food products, instead finding a technology that fermented vegetables, peppers and spices to create a liquid product to flavor and color her tortillas.

“The sun-dried tomato (tortilla) didn’t look like strawberry Kool-Aid. It looked like a red roasted tomato. It retains the aroma, freshness and taste,” Young says.

Young’s newest product, a salad shell, will debut at Publix. She describes it as a flour tortilla in a bag with a cardboard form that can be used in the oven. Bake the tortilla and form on a cookie sheet – healthier than frying, Young says – and fill the crispy result.

The tortilla industry rakes in \$6 billion a year in the United States. Young projects La Bonita Ole will snap up \$20 million of that in 2008. She anticipates introducing 10 to 18 new products before the end of this year and adding 95 new employees. Managing that growth, she says, will be her biggest challenge.

Transforming a company that initially focused on sales and marketing, and now manufacturing, brings new concerns – controlling raw material costs, forecasting commodities, improving plant efficiencies and developing quality control programs. Then, there’s the financial side of the juggling act – from a \$13,000 initial investment to \$6.5 million in sales the company earned last year.

In 2006, the Florida Small Business Development Center honored Young with its Financial Health Award, created after judges expressed how impressed they were with Young and her company.

“I’m excited about growing. Extremely excited about it,” she says. “I just want to make sure we handle the growth properly and at the proper pace to continue our success.” ■



TAMMY YOUNG’S FAVORITE BOOK: “The Pushcart War.” Set in New York City in 1986, she says it’s a fictional story about peddlers who banded together to stop truckers with 18-wheelers from running over their carts. The peddlers defeated the truckers by sticking needles in peas, spreading them across the streets, and flattening their tires.

The underdog triumphed.

“Many times I had people say to me, ‘We just thought there was no way you’d be able to compete with those big boys,’” Young recalls.

Fifteen years, a 40,000-square-foot manufacturing facility and 55 employees later. Did she use peas?

“We shot a lot of needled peas, lemme tell you! In a nice way, though,” she laughs. “Always in a nice way.”