

A Cottage Industry

Stefanie Samara Hamblen

BY CAROLINE LEWIS

There were jars everywhere, on the countertops, spilling onto the floor in the living room, on the kitchen table and piled in the closet. Jars filled with sweet and strange flavor combinations of jam, jelly, preserve, butter and marmalade; all products of the Illegal Jam Company.

The woman behind the Illegal Jam Company presented by Hogtown HomeGrown is Stefanie Samara Hamblen, a foodie-entrepreneur and locavore icon in Gainesville. She began making jams and jellies as a response to buying in bulk and as a way to preserve produce. Her habit-turned-obsession quickly amassed a surplus of jam.

"It's a little bit ridiculous," said her husband, Jeffrey Hamblen.

"It started as a joke," Stefanie Hamblen said. "But then it became legal [to sell] and the name was too good to change."

In July, the Florida Legislature passed the Cottage Food Law, making it legal to sell certain homemade items that are considered not potentially hazardous, at farmers markets or out of the home. All products must be labeled: "Made in a cottage food operation that is not subject to Florida's food safety regulations."

Examples of the items that can be sold are breads, cakes, cookies, candies, jams, jellies and fruit pies. Annual sales may not exceed \$15,000. Orders online, by mail and to wholesalers are prohibited.

Before, Hamblen would give away her creations as gifts. Her husband's favorite, fig jam, would be saved for him to eat over ice cream.

By October she has sold about \$400 of products such as prickly pear jam, mango butter and grapefruit brulée.

But things were not always falling into place for her.

"I was wallowing for eight months," she said. "I wanted to know what I could do well."

In January of 2006, after being fired from her jobs working at a church and a bookstore, at the age of 49, Hamblen decided to turn her talents into professions.

"I can cook and I can raise kids," she said.

She posted an ad as a nanny in



PHOTOS BY CAROLINE LEWIS

At the Citizen's Co-op's Sunday Tailgate Market, held in the courtyard behind the co-op every Sunday, Stefanie Hamblen demonstrates how to make an herbed eggplant pasta bake.

Hamblen chops parsley in her home to prepare a taboulleh dinner, a traditional Middle-Eastern dish made with cracked wheat, tomatoes, parsley, green onions and olive oil.

The Independent Florida Alligator, sat down one October night and wrote the first issue of Hogtown HomeGrown.

The newsletter hit its fifth year of circulation in November and has printed 60 issues, 329 tried-and-tasted recipes and has a distribution of 3,000 copies.

Her strong focus on food started after writing that first issue.

Each month includes a list of what is in season, ads for local businesses and restaurants, and food-related topics written like notes found in a cookbook passed among friends.

Somewhere in-between using her degrees in Theater, English and Political Science, reading "Larousse Gastronomique," watching "The Galloping Gourmet," idealizing Alice

Waters, raising three sons, and maintaining a network with the old hippies of Gainesville, Hamblen became something more than just a writer to the North Florida region.

"She's created a bigger family of connections with food bodies in the community," said Erika Henderson, a business associate and co-owner of Henderson and Daughter Plants and Produce. "She's an exciting person to be around."

Henderson sells citrus at the Highway 441 farmers market and advertises in Hogtown HomeGrown.

Hamblen's father taught her how to write. Her mother and grandmother showed her how to cook. And she has seen "Julie and Julia" at least three times.

"I nearly cried the whole way through the first time," she said.

"[Julia Child] discovered herself through food later in life, like me."

In the September issue of Hogtown HomeGrown, titled, "Can your children cook," Hamblen gives examples of Liam and Leah, the 4- and 2-year-old children for whom she is a nanny.

They can help in the kitchen and love going to the farmers market. Liam was so proud of his cookie recipe that he passed out copies of the newsletter himself.

"She kept the kids on a schedule," Jeffrey Hamblen said. "She takes the time to explain things."

But writing the newsletter and being a nanny are not the only cookie jars she has her hands in. Hamblen also instructs sponsored cooking classes, writes for Gainesville Magazine, represented



PHOTO BY CAROLINE LEWIS

Hamblen moved to Gainesville in 1979 when it was a town that she describes as "half hippie and half redneck." She worked in Hogtown Granary Co-op, from which she drew the name for the newsletter.

the U.S. last fall at a conference in Italy for Slow Food International and is on the executive board of Blue Oven Kitchens, a kitchen incubator project.

In view of her collective efforts to educate the community, Hamblen was nominated for the first annual Spirit of Gainesville Award for entrepreneurship, awarded by The Gainesville Sun in November.

Since the start of Hogtown HomeGrown, her husband has noticed a change in her habits.

"She's much more politically

active in community," he said.

Hamblen believes in eating locally for its nutritional, community and environmental benefits. At the cooking classes and demonstrations, she provides weekly menu suggestions and guides people who are less informed or intimidated by eating locally and seasonally.

There was seriousness in her eyes as she held an imaginary utensil in her hand.

"You get to vote with your fork three times a day," she said. "I don't know why people don't understand that power."

Hamblin is committed to food education and her fellow

community members.

"After an event she's the one who remembers to bring the champagne," said Val Leitner, president of Blue Oven Kitchens.

"Not everyone would react to a forty pound bag of sour oranges the way Stefanie did," Leitner said.

Hamblen made quite a few batches of marmalade with the oranges, though the jars have been contained to just one tabletop in the corner of her living room.

She does most of her writing on her porch, among scattered toys, a kitchen-utensil wind chime, surrounded by big trees.

And outside her front door there are two signs. One that says "Locally Grown Produce" and another that says "Farmers Market: Open seven-days-a-week." ■

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