

In a Jam and Loving It

Starting a business "very intimidating"

Fort Bragg, CA - Rebecca "Becky" Ahmadi has held a variety of jobs in her life, from restroom attendant and bowling alley manager to a forest service researcher and hydrologist. But she admits the toughest job she's had is being her own boss and starting a business.

Ahmadi is the owner of Pacific Preserves, a jam and jelly company she started in early 2010 with the help of the Mendocino Women's Business Center. Ahmadi is also the jam and jelly maker, the head of sales and the chief marketing officer for Pacific Preserves. She does everything, from buying fresh fruit from local farmers to mashing it by hand before using the correct combination of fruit, pectin, acid and sugar to produce a variety of tasty products she sells at local farmer's markets.

Ahmadi is not an overnight success story. In fact, her business is not successful, at least not yet. She's been researching and working with jams for more than four years after going to a number of farmer's markets and not seeing homemade jams for sale.

"We have a pretty active healthy food movement up here and though being a stay-home mom was fulfilling (Ahmadi has a two-year old child), it was time to do something else," she said. "I made some jams that people really liked, so I decided to try and cash in on that."

Ahmadi was referred to Heather Gurewitz, director of the Mendocino Women's Business Center (WBCs) in Fort Bragg. WBCs are supported by the U.S. Small Business Administration nationwide.

"We talked about the process of starting a new business and what she needed to do," said Gurewitz. "I explained feasibility studies and their purpose. We talked about her connections, her sources of product materials and her business goals."

Ahmadi, born in Missouri and raised in Flagstaff, Az., has a degree in marine science from the University of San Diego.

"I've never taken any formal business classes but the information I received from Heather Gurewitz was really relevant and educational," said Ahmadi. "She really got me focused and motivated."

Gurewitz told Ahmadi to concentrate on the cost of ingredients and to do more research on jams and sugars. She also helped Ahmadi with marketing tips, label designs, logistics and permits.

"Starting a business is very intimidating," noted Ahmadi. "Putting a price on your own product, dealing with vendors, licensing agencies and getting customers, too. You really have to love what you're doing. Otherwise, you can get burned out."

Ahmadi sells her Pacific Preserves products mainly at the Fort Bragg and Boonville farmer's markets, as well as local food festivals. Her biggest seller is a carrot cake jam. Other jams include fresh peach, apricot, spiced plum, port and pear. A lemon ginger



Pacific Preserve's Becky Ahmadi: Mendocino WBC client.

marmalade also serves as a nice side for fish dishes. Some customers use the jams and jellies with cheese, pastries and ice cream toppings. The homemade jams, produced at a rented commercial kitchen in Fort Bragg, range in size from four ounces up to 16 ounces and cost \$5 to \$11.

"I really like being in business and I think I'm a good salesperson," said Ahmadi. "I like talking to customers and getting to know the farmers. When you promote a local product in a small community, you get to know people and develop a loyal following."

She continues to see Gurewitz for business advice. "Heather's been the driving force for me and continues to keep me on track and focused," said Ahmadi. "My husband is also very happy for me. He sees me stressed out sometimes but both he and Heather know I need to do this to succeed."