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# Entrepreneurship by Scratch

by TOM CONNOR  
photographs by MELANI LUST

Fairfielder **Michelle Jaffee** Whips Up a Sweet & Simple Business



Michelle Jaffee started Sweet & Simple, her line of homemade cookies, two years ago in the roomy Colonial she shares with her husband and three children in the Greenfield Hill section of Fairfield. The goods—large, chewy chocolate chip, oatmeal molasses and a half-dozen other varieties—first turned up on counters at Oscar's Deli and the Wash and Wax Car Wash in Westport and can now be found from Fairfield to Stamford.

But the product's origins—and Jaffee's—couldn't be farther from coastal Fairfield County.

The youngest child of California hippies, Michelle grew up in the seventies in a hand-built cabin high above the Pacific in Big Sur, the sparsely populated, wildly beautiful stretch of mountainous coastline between San Simeon and Carmel.

Although it lacked electricity and a phone line, the little house had a wood-burning stove her mother used to bake bread, cookies, cakes and pies from recipes her own mother had handed down. Michelle helped make sugar cookies at Christmas, and when she was six, she baked her first solo project: a carrot cake.

Coming east after high school, she interned on Capitol Hill and studied English literature at George Washington University before moving to Manhattan, where she met her future husband. When the couple moved to Fairfield in 1998 and began raising a family, memories of baking with her mother came wafting back.

"Baking was something fun to do with my own kids, and really relaxing," she says, "but it was also continuing a family tradition of being together and baking in the kitchen."

It wasn't until two years ago, however, when Michelle gave herself a six-month amateur baking class at the French Culinary Institute in New York as a birthday present, that she realized her sweet spot. "I found out that that's what I really wanted to do," she says. "I'd come home and I couldn't wait to go back the next week. I was baking so much that friends would say, 'Why are you bringing baked goods? It's nobody's birthday, it's not a special occasion.' And once in a while someone would say, 'You should sell these.' People say this to be nice, but you start to think, Maybe I could."

At first all she had in mind was producing a few batches of cupcakes and cookies at home with her children, then selling them at the Greenfield Hill farmers' market.

What she quickly discovered, however, was that food can't be sold at farmers'

**left** Cupcakes with confetti frosting; oatmeal, cranberry and white chocolate cookies; sugar cookies with yellow and white sprinkles **right** Pure sunshine—Michelle Jaffee with one perfect cupcake.

markets, or anywhere else in Connecticut, without a Health Department permit. “And if you’re going to get a permit, then you need a commercial kitchen,” she says. “And then you may as well have a logo, you may as well have packaging, you may as well apply for a trademark. It starts to take on its own life.”

With the help of a friend, graphic artist Anne Spencer, Michelle came up with the logo for the packaging: clear bags tied with yellow ribbons. “I wanted every package to look like a gift,” she says. The labels—“Sweet & Simple: Baked with Love” alongside an illustration of a daisy—echo both a California hippie sensibility and the warmth of traditional family baking.

Through other friends Michelle found Anne Watkins, whose Kitchen Co-op in Bridgeport offers space to food entrepreneurs. And when Sweet & Simple outgrew that space, Michelle moved to Ambrosia Bakery in Milford, where she rents a big commercial walk-in rack oven. She spends more than forty hours a week ordering, baking, cleaning and delivering her product to retail outlets in the family station wagon.

One of her favorite stops is Oscar’s Deli on Main Street, whose owners welcomed Michelle early on. “They both have been so supportive,” she says.

The frequency of the deliveries is due to the cookies’ popularity but also their two-week shelf life. And that’s because Michelle uses butter, and lots of it, for a moister, chewier cookie. “I thought about changing the recipes and using ingredients



**“I bake from memory—I think that’s why I like traditional flavors and recipes.”**

that would give the cookies a longer shelf life,” she recalls, “but then they’d be like anyone else’s.”

This summer Sweet & Simple cookies became available in all of the Fairway Markets, including the one in nearby Stamford. And come fall, Michelle hopes to sell her products online and expand her retail territory through a copacker who will take her recipes, bake the goods, pack them and help deliver them.

Michelle Jaffee’s ultimate dream? A cookbook of her mother’s and her grandmother’s recipes.

“I bake from memory—I think that’s why I like traditional flavors and recipes—and this business is tied up with my childhood, and baking with my mother and watching my grandmother bake,” she says. “They’re at the heart of everything. A cookbook will bring all this full circle.”

More at [sweetandsimple.info](http://sweetandsimple.info).

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