

The care package that became a company

By Anna Dubrovsky
Photos by Heather Mull

Stephanie Santoso was a 20-something advertising professional in New York City, but her mother still sent care packages from Wexford: hand-knit scarves in winter, T-shirts in summer and baked goods all year round. The meringue cookies were Stephanie's favorite. When she brought them to her office, coworkers snapped them up and sang her mother's praises.

"I hadn't seen a cookie quite like that, which I thought was unusual, given that New York has a ton of baked goods and gourmet shops," Stephanie recalls. "I thought: 'This could be really interesting. This could be a really marketable product.'"

Last summer, Stephanie hitched her wagon to the airy confections. She packed her bags, left New York and moved in with her parents. The care packages have given rise to a company, Amandari Co., that sells cookies and savory snacks in seven states and online.

Amandari's Cupola Cookies come in three flavors: chocolate cashew, chai pistachio and espresso walnut. Stephanie's college friends and her mother's walking and lunching buddies served as taste testers. The cookies look like traditional meringues but have less sugar. They're made with organic evaporated cane juice rather than refined sugar, and they're free of preservatives.

Sugar gives meringues their stiffness and shape, so cutting it was tricky business. Stephanie and her mother, Theresa, experimented with a variety of stand-ins before settling on a combination of garbanzo bean flour and xanthan gum, a thickener frequently used in gluten-free baking.

The company's name is derived from the Sanskrit word "aman," meaning "peace," and reflects its mission. "We made the decision to specialize in really healthy, all-natural baked goods," Stephanie says. "I feel like there's a niche for our cookies, especially with people being more careful with what they eat."

This year, the Santosos added a savory line called Cupola Clouds. The bite-sized snacks come in two flavors: Parmesan pink peppercorn and smoked Gouda. Each box includes suggested wine pairings.

Their shared love of food and cooking dates back to Stephanie's childhood. She had an Easy-Bake Oven and a knack for cookie-making – when she didn't mistake salt for sugar. She and her mother watched cooking shows together. After Stephanie went away to college, they exchanged recipes by e-mail and talked about their favorite Food Network chefs by phone. When Stephanie met "Molto Mario" host Mario Batali in New York, she sent her mother a photo.

Their commitment to healthy cooking is more recent. Theresa grew up in Indonesia. She learned to cook like her Chinese ancestors and the Dutch, who occupied Indonesia for some 350 years. She baked cheesy casseroles, buttery cakes, fruity roll tarts, and flaky puff pastries. She made a mean croissant. Stephanie was born after Theresa immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1980s and married. "Food is abundant in America, so I can bake anything," Theresa says. "I baked a lot without thinking of all the health concerns, and very soon we gained weight." Several years ago, her husband developed high blood pressure. That's when Theresa overhauled her culinary habits.

Stephanie's parents didn't immediately embrace her idea of a Pittsburgh-based baked-goods company. "I had a good, steady job in New York with benefits, so they were a little apprehensive about my moving back to start something that isn't necessarily a guaranteed success," says Stephanie, now 25. They came around. "She is a very determined person," Theresa says of her daughter.

Stephanie sank most of her savings into the venture, and her mother contributed an equal amount. With the help of consultants from the University of Pittsburgh's Small Business Development Center, the duo crafted a business plan, secured necessary permits and insurance policies, and drafted a list of potential retailers. Their first retail customer was The Coffee Tree Roasters, a Pittsburgh-bred chain founded by a father-and-son team.

Today, Cupolas are available at about 30 retail locations and through eBay. The Santosos also sell their treats at the Sewickley Farmers' Market. "That's had a big impact on the way I view food and what I eat now," Stephanie says. Talking to farmers



gave her a new appreciation for local, naturally grown foods – and for Pittsburgh.

"You might look at Pittsburgh and think it's not as diverse as New York, but that's not necessarily true. We're surrounded by so much farmland. It's easier to lead a healthier lifestyle here in Pittsburgh and also to be more connected to your food. When you're in New York, you do have that option of eating whatever you want, whether you're talking about fruits or vegetables or ethnic cuisine, but you don't necessarily have a very close relationship with the food."

"Coming back here was a really good decision," she adds.

Stephanie and Theresa Santoso make major business decisions on Saturday mornings, when they hold their weekly "status meetings." But it's not unusual for work matters to find their way to the dinner table. "Our personal lives and work kind of bleed together," Stephanie says. "But that's okay, because we really love what we're doing."

To learn more about Amandari, visit www.amandarico.com.

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