

## RELISHING SUCCESS

### A JAM-PACKED WAY OF LIFE

BY CHARMIAN CHRISTIE



On a quiet side road just outside Aberfoyle, Ontario, stands an unassuming aluminum-sided building where Marilyn Rootham develops and produces award-winning jams, savoury and sweet condiments and sauces, salad dressings, preserved local fruits – and edible body paint.

Marilyn Rootham never dreamed that Rootham Gourmet Preserves, the company she started in her home more than twenty-five years ago, would become one of Ontario's most successful preserves companies. The former pediatric dietician planned to stay home after the birth of her first child in the early 1980s. "Like all mothers, I wanted to be the best mother ever," she says, "but I was getting bored after six months. I had this garden and an abundance of produce, and I started creating relishes."

She was soon making more than her friends and family could use, so her sister-in-law, Gini Hay, sold the excess preserves in her Gravenhurst gift shop. Rootham covered the jars in forest-green-coloured cloth. Her mother hand-calligraphed the labels, and her husband delivered the goods.

"The reaction was immediate," Rootham says. Through word of mouth, she found herself being invited to crafts fairs and specialty food stores across the province. By the mid-'80s, she and her family had converted a building on their Aberfoyle property into a preserving kitchen and hired their first employee, Cathy Smith, who has been with the company ever since.

From the beginning, Rootham has used local produce whenever possible, and enjoys using interesting ingredients in unusual combinations, like Apricot Ginger Date Chutney or

Onion Roasted Garlic Jelly. She introduced Ontarians to red pepper jelly in 1983. "I was at the San Francisco show and every booth had it. But when I came home and made it, nobody knew what it was." She obviously struck a chord: Tangy Red Pepper Jelly captured first prize in the Vegetarian/Vegetable-Based category at the Canadian Fine Food Show in 2000, and is her top-selling product today.

Regardless of the inspiration, when Rootham experiments with new combinations, she lets the ingredients guide her, sometimes with unexpected results. "I was trying to do a peach salsa once," she relates, "and we just couldn't get it together. And now it's our Black Pepper Lime Chutney."

Being ahead of the curve doesn't always pay off. Rootham sold only two dozen jars of Meyer lemon marmalade before it was quietly retired. Her quince jam suffered a similar fate, despite numerous customer requests for it since. "I found a local grower, developed the jam and ... nothing. Where were all those customers then?" she asks, with a laugh.

Despite the quince failure, the word "no" is not part of Rootham's vocabulary. When a client asked if she could make edible body paint, she didn't hesitate. "We knew someone had made it out west and we had seen it in the States, so we thought, sure, we can make it." Along with a specially designed label, Rootham re-branded her Irresistible Chocolate Sauce as Choco-Lick.

Thanks to her enthusiastic palate and open approach, Rootham's business and reputation continue to expand. A fire in 2001

that completely destroyed their preserving kitchen was not enough to dampen Rootham's drive: She brought in trailers and continued manufacturing. While building a new, 4,800 square-foot production facility, Rootham reevaluated the business. Private label sales had been displacing the Rootham name and she wanted to get that aspect of the business under control. Today, having retained only a half-dozen private label customers – including Holt Renfrew and Langdon Hall – the majority of their products are sold under the Rootham name.

Despite expanded facilities, Rootham insists on making small batches (two to four hundred at a time) in open kettles, preserving the flavour that might get lost with larger batches. She also ensures the company maintains control of every phase of production. They pour, cap and label each bottle by hand. Many small companies co-pack or rely on distributors; Rootham's is the smallest federally inspected company to perform everything from production to packaging to shipping.

Rootham doesn't farm out the marketing, either. Instead, she listens to her customers. Venues like Toronto's One of a Kind Show bring 150,000 people and their opinions to Rootham's booth. "That's my market. Instead of hiring an expensive marketing company, I just keep my eyes and ears open." Listening to customers led to a revamping of the label. Rootham explains that "people didn't know our name. They looked for the green and gold label." Although they kept the same colour scheme, the new version has the Rootham name featured more prominently.

Beneath the new label, the quality remains. "We aren't a price point company; we're a quality point company," Rootham remarks, adding, "We don't use dried ingredients. When cantaloupe is in season in Ontario, we get a couple of pallets and freeze it ourselves for the whole year, because you can't get it later. So if we run out, we run out."

With a new label, new products and extensive revisions planned for their website, Rootham is ready for the next stage. "I'm very well-known in Ontario, so the next step would be to expand west. And then it would be smart to go south to the U.S.," she says, musing, "Unless something else comes along." Which could mean anything.

Rootham Gourmet Preserves are available at specialty food and gift shops across the province, or online at [www.roothamsgourmet.com](http://www.roothamsgourmet.com). □

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