

# CHATHAM COURIER

## Women's drive helps canning company thrive

By Lisa D. Connell  
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NEW LEBANON — As the vegetables harvested from farmland nurtured outside the Shaker Mountain Canning Co. change from one season to the next, what remains the same is the purposeful drive of every person involved in the 1-year-old enterprise.

It's the people, not just what is locally grown or food that is produced on site, that makes this company thrive. The story of the Shaker Mountain Canning Co. is about taking a chance and being ready for the excitement that comes with trying out a new venture. It's about knowing what skills and abilities each person brings to the table and how best to apply those skills to the whole venture.

Finding the right people and retaining them can actually be much more of a challenge than the idea for the business itself.

"It's hard to identify them and even if you do, how do you recruit them?" asked Bruce Bachenheimer, clinical professor of management at New York's Pace University.

Attracting, recruiting, training, retraining and delegating — all of these factors are key to an entrepreneurial venture, Bachenheimer said during a telephone interview.

"It's about people and innovation and truly growing the business," he said.

Particularly for women entrepreneurs, many such strengths are inborn. Collaboration and constant schedule changes, particularly around family, are all familiar.

Fellow New Lebanon entrepreneur Fiona Lally mirrors the professor's thoughts that start-up companies often are found today beyond major metropolitan areas, such as New York City, Boston or the vaunted Research Triangle — Durham, Raleigh and Chapel Hill in North Carolina.

Lally is the founder of the Lebanon Valley Business Association.

"I think that New Lebanon and towns like it are entrepreneur magnets, and we at LVBA see the growth of at-home businesses as one of the major growth engines for towns like ours," she wrote in an email. "In five to 10 years we will really see this come to pass."

Vegetables continue to sprout from the land encircling the farm outside the two-story brown building with the glass French door entrance at 786 Route 20, not far from the American Legion Hall.

Inside, it's a feast for the senses. Bunches of basil give off their distinctive and welcoming scent. The steady sound of knives hitting cutting boards with care and purpose as multicolored peppers are sliced into strips.

Steam rises from a 30-quart stainless steel pot, a yellow thermometer poking above its rim.

It's not quite 10 a.m., but General Manager Sue Cassidy has already logged nearly three hours on the day.

Kitchen staff colleagues Justine Metzler and Laura Dus stand on opposite sides of Cassidy.

The three employees inside the 3,000-square-foot kitchen work without speaking to one another. They don't need to; they harmoniously chop, dice and scoop vegetables grown merely yards from where they stand. Each one of the trio remains focused on her task.

Kristen Greer Woolery, founder and director of Shaker Mountain Canning, enters the kitchen about 40 minutes later. As with all the women working in the kitchen, she exudes an air of quiet determination, confidence and resolve.

That's one of Greer Woolery's strengths. Seated at the cream-colored wooden kitchen table near the entrance of the co-packing and canning facility, the Kentucky native's strong points are in finance and non-profit public administration. She is a food activist and is a board member of New York City-based Just Food. She knew where her strengths lay.

"I'm more of a businessperson and not a chef," she said.

Greer Woolery found her professional cook and operations manager in Cassidy, owner of Shaker Mountain Barbeque.

“I knew that she was it,” she said of Cassidy. Farming, gardening, cooking — all are Cassidy’s bailiwicks.

On a recent morning, Cassidy was preparing to jar 72 units of tomato sauce for a client. The order was due the next day. Every ounce of sauce in the jar is made from scratch, fresh from the garden outside the kitchen facility.

“She hired us to co-pack for her, do her recipe according to her specifications and jar it for her,” Cassidy said.

“When you have a restaurant, you’re basically married to it,” she added. “I enjoy what I do. I love to cook.”

The company’s women are at different points in their life. That is another feature, a strong point, about women entrepreneurs. Some women are returning to the job market after solely working at home raising a family for 18 or 20 years. Many women throughout their lifetimes do both — work inside and outside the home. Other younger women, as with Generations X and the Millennials, seize the opportunity to latch on to a project their Baby Boomer parents could or dared not.

“My whole life is about food and babysitters,” Greer Woolery said.

The pale blonde Greer Woolery commutes between New Lebanon and New York City, minding her two young daughters and the canning company.

For dark wavy haired Layla Aguilar, sales and markets manager, coming to Shaker Mountain Canning meant trusting herself to make a cross-country journey. From the agricultural community of California to a New England startup some 3,000 miles away, She brought her industry knowledge and persuasive skills to a new territory. Her time is divided in thirds: equal parts on the farm, in the kitchen and on the road at farmers markets, selling and building relationships with buyers.

“I enjoy that my job is to make friends with people,” Aguilar said.

Cassidy oversees the production of all things Shaker Mountain Canning: from co-packing — products made in the kitchen and sold under private label using an existing recipe or creating one to suit the client — to the canned fruits and vegetables, sauces preserves, fruit butters and dehydrated treats sold under its Farm Down The Road label. Through social media, such as Facebook and an informative, graphically pleasing website, the Internet buzz around Shaker Mountain continues to grow.

Co-farm managers Jenny Parker and Lauren Bonn are behind the scenes. Parker’s work on sustainable farms in other areas of the country brings knowledge of best agricultural practices to the New Lebanon site. Parker and Greer Woolery knew each other from the city. Parker has played a key role in expanding the farm’s offerings.

Being an entrepreneur takes courage and yes, guts. Particularly during a challenging economic cycle. Lally knows what it is like to ride that wave.

“It takes a tolerance for uncertainty and an ability to embrace and run ahead of risk,” Lally wrote in an email. “When I started my first company 20 years ago, I got a lot of questions from people about how I could tolerate the lack of a pay check, the possibility that the rug could always be pulled out from under my feet. I don’t get those questions anymore and I think it’s because the work environment is perceived to be unsafe for everyone now, not just for entrepreneurs.

“But the difference is that an entrepreneur may have just the same financial needs and realities as everyone else, but they are driven, regardless, to bring something to life in their own way. They believe in it, they see that it can work, it’s just a matter of time until they cut loose and try it.

“And they keep believing in it. I am working on a new product that I’ve been building for seven years and it continues to need more investment and effort with every step we take forward. Kristen has been moving heaven and earth first to get Shaker Mountain Canning up and running and then to figure out how to keep it growing and staffed and viable and fulfilling her vision of a relevant food company,” Lally concluded.

Shaker Mountain Canning Co. marked its first birthday on Aug. 9. Cassidy said to her colleagues seated around the table that a tree should be planted, a fruit tree. Indeed, a fruit tree that continues to blossom and grow. Cassidy and Greer Woolery noted the amount of knowledge they have gained since that first year. Key, said Greer Woolery, is learning what their clients wanted.

This has been “an adventure and a learning experience. We all like a challenge,” said Greer Woolery. “I’m sure my husband thinks I’m a little nuts, but he knew that before this project.”

For more information on Shaker Mountain Canning, visit [www.shakermtn.com](http://www.shakermtn.com), where you also can learn more about the winter CSA the farm will be offering, or call (518) 794-JARS (5277).