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Beachy Cream: Building an Organic Ice Cream Empire

Organic ice cream sandwiches, savvy marketing and organic growth took Beachy Cream from farmers market cart to the brink of national grocery distribution.



Six years after beginning with an ice cream sandwich cart at a farmer's market, Ann Ryan has grown organic dairy dessert company [Beachy Cream](#) into a burgeoning enterprise including 10 employees, a stand-alone store in Santa Monica, California, and product distribution deals with 55 retailers. It started when Ryan, following careers in film, financial services and real estate, decided to see if anyone would pay money for ice cream sandwiches like the ones she made in her kitchen using a family recipe for molasses spice cookies and all-natural ingredients.

"I started experimenting with ice cream because I wanted to do some other business," she says. "I had fond memories of ice cream from childhood but I wanted to do it a different way. I wanted to use organic ingredients because that's important to me. And I wanted to improve on ice cream. Being creamy and sweet wasn't enough. I wanted it to pack a punch of concentrated flavor."

To give her creations punch without compromising her organic vision, Ryan cooks up her own seasonings from scratch. For instance, instead of mixing purchased banana flavoring into their Roasted Banana ice cream, they buy organic bananas and roast them until nearly caramelized. "For our Fresh Mint Brownie Chunk, we buy fresh mint from farmer's markets and make our own syrup," she says. "It's really a different experience compared with what you find in most other ice creams."

Initial forays with carts at farmers markets revealed customers were drawn to the robust tastes of flavors including Key Lime Cowabunga, Strawberry Surfer Girl and her signature Ginger Wipeout. Ryan soon expanded to catering parties and events and opened the retail store in 2012.



Ryan claims her personal previous business experience proved more valuable than handed-down family recipes. "What I learned was that it doesn't matter how good the product you are selling is," she says. "If you don't know how to operate

a business efficiently, it will be difficult to succeed. To me, being efficient means using our resources in the best way possible so we don't waste anything. We don't waste time, we don't waste money, we don't waste materials."

The focus on efficiency kept Ryan expanding cautiously, adding capacity only as demand justified it. Until now, all the company's dairy desserts were made in small single batches in 500 square feet in the back of the Santa Monica store. But with the retail distribution agreements she has in hand, volume has grown enough that the company is preparing to open a 13,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in leased space in nearby Long Beach.

Building the Beachy Cream Brand

Ryan also knew better than to waste a good promotional concept. So when she came up with the idea for the Beachy Cream Girls, she ran with it. This bevy of photogenic servers, projecting a look drawn from the company's logo and reminiscent of World War II pinup posters, dish up frozen desserts from trays designed to resemble old-fashioned cigarette trays. The out-of-the-ordinary image has helped the company land widespread media coverage as well as catering gigs at high-profile events.

Now Beachy Cream appears to be poised for rapid expansion, but it didn't start that way. "It wasn't as if I went into business thinking I'm going to create a national ice cream brand," Ryan says. "It evolved slowly."



Having arrived at the brink of national distribution, Ryan is moving more rapidly now, building her team at the same time she expands manufacturing capacity. "Our most recent team member to come on board is our CFO," she says. "He has decades of experience working for Fortune 500 companies like PepsiCo. He's bringing in operational and financial experience on a much higher level. This is the right time to be doing that."

Ryan's caution extended to refusing opportunities that she felt the company's couldn't handle yet. For instance, when a major West Coast grocery chain called out of the blue with a request to stock Beachy Cream products, she turned them down, at least for now. "That was extraordinary," she recalls. "Normally you have to go to them. But we weren't ready, so I had to say, 'Thank you very much. We'll get back to you in a couple of months.'"

Beachy Cream's expansion has been paid for by investors, an SBA-backed bank loan and, so far, reinvesting all profits. "In terms of profit, we've invested everything back into the company," Ryan says. "We wanted to grow the infrastructure so we had a really strong base to operate on. We'll look at taking something out of it later on."

Overcoming Challenges

Looking back, Ryan claims the biggest challenge came early when they had to meet health regulations for manufacturing, packaging and labeling ice cream. "We currently have seven different health-related licenses," she says. "All these things continue to be challenges as we grow. Our latest challenge has been having enough space to manufacture enough ice cream to meet demand."

That new manufacturing facility is critical to Beachy Cream's future, as Ryan has chosen to focus on wholesale distribution rather than trying to grow by adding new retail storefronts. To get her in the door, she's working with a grocery broker and distributors and plans to eventually put together a sales team.

Ryan intends to keep the Beachy Cream Girls for their appealing retro image, and the Beachy Cream outlets as places to try out new flavors. "That's the face of our company," she says. "Later on, maybe we'll franchise. Who knows? But we don't want to divert too much attention from our primary goal, which is to expand into as many wholesale accounts as possible."