

COUPLE TURN SNACKS INTO A LIVELIHOOD

A homemade mix is their recipe for a startup business

SMALL BUSINESS Q&A

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Urszula Lulewicz, 59, president-owner of TerraNut Inc. in West Babylon, grew up on a farm in Poland, where she learned from the age of 4 to work hard and with a mission. Her husband and company co-owner, Eduardo Vivaldi Bifulco, 64, was a professional cyclist with Brazil's national team from 1978-84 who kept up his energy — and that of his teammates — with homemade snacks of nuts, flaxseed and oats.

"At his young age, he knew to perform, you have to stick to healthy lifestyle. If you want to achieve something, you have to take care of yourself," said Lulewicz, of Lindenhurst.

The couple met in the United States in 2006, and each gained entrepreneurial experience. Bifulco owned a bagel shop in West Babylon for 10 years. Lulewicz started a cleaning business in 2014. Bifulco was looking to move on when a former cycling teammate asked in 2011 if he could provide his snack to his fellow riders.

"That gave us the idea that we could make convenient snacks not only for athletes, but for every person with a busy lifestyle who is on the move all day long," said Lulewicz.

They started TerraNut the following year — *terra* from the Latin word for earth and nuts because that was their first product.

"Our passion for well-being and a desire to offer some guilt-free snacks that are nutrient dense led us to the inception of TerraNut," Lulewicz said. "Our vision is to have snacks that taste good and are also going to contribute to a healthier, happier lifestyle for our customers."

This interview has been edited for space and clarity.



Urszula Lulewicz, president and owner of TerraNut Inc., with the cold-press machine devised by her husband, company co-owner Eduardo Vivaldi Bifulco, to create healthy nut-based snacks.

AT A GLANCE

TerraNut Inc.,
West Babylon

What is does:
Manufactures and sells healthy snacks.

Leadership:
President-owner Urszula Lulewicz; co-founder, Eduardo Vivaldi Bifulco

Annual Sales:
Approximately \$1 million

Employees: Three

How did you grow the company?

Our first snack in 2012 was Nut Punch. We put six different nuts together with oats and flaxseed, which is very nutrient dense. It's a bite-size portion that is 92 calories, 4 grams of protein and 0.6 ounces. Every year since then we've added something new. We have eight products now, four different nut snacks, three different pop-

corns and Nana Bites, which are dry banana with nothing added but lemon juice.

What's the most popular?

PNut Punch is our bestseller. Our products are all natural, gluten-free, GMO-free and vegan. We use a unique cold press machine that Ed created. With the cold press method, under high pressure, the oil from the nuts is a binder for the ingredients. It has a 5-ton pressure and is very automated; every hour 1,000 pieces are coming out.

How did your upbringing influence business development?

A farmer is a special breed of people — their love for their land. My dad was working because it was his mission, and we worked together as a family. In college in Poland, I studied economics and business management. I was very good with math and numbers. So when I met Ed, he said, are you good

with numbers? I am good with ideas. We definitely can do something together.

What was your start in business?

When I came to the USA in 1993 with my first husband and three kids, to support the family I started housecleaning. In 2014 I started my own cleaning company, which in 2016 became We Clean LI Inc. I have someone who manages it while I concentrate on TerraNut, which I call my youngest baby.

How much did you spend to start the business?

We put all our savings on the line. We spent about \$250,000 to rent the space and purchase the machines.

What is your biggest challenge, and how are you meeting it?

The biggest challenge at this moment is the salespeople and marketing, because we get so many emails and phone calls

with feedback saying we love your product. We just have to figure out how to get a bigger audience and how to be in every household because a lot of people don't know we exist. We applied to FreshDirect's Rising Industry Producers and Entrepreneurs Program, and we were selected to participate. I'm hoping they can help us get more customers.

What's the best thing about running your own business?

The freedom to work with your passion.

How do you get your customers?

On Long Island, we do many fairs and farmers markets. And we have subscribers on our website who get our newsletter and discounts. We have loyal customers; 50% or 60% of our online orders are from returning customers. We're also in stores in many states. The biggest buyers are on the East Coast, from Massachusetts to Florida, and then in California. One of the biggest stores that carries us is in Florida, Rollin' Oats. We're growing slowly and organically, but not the speed I want.

How many hours a week do you work?

I wish I started this business 20 years ago when I had more energy. I work at least six hours a day to 10 or even 12, but I try to keep weekends for myself unless we have big shows, when I feel it's important to be there.

What do you hope your business looks like in five years?

I want to get to as many customers as I can because I want to introduce them to TerraNut. My goal is just keep growing.

What advice do you have for somebody who might be thinking of starting their own business?

The most important is to follow your passion because that's going to give you the strength with the ups and downs of business. Be wise with how you spend your money. Take care of your customers, and network so you can share and ask questions about how to do something. And follow the rules and regulations.