

Sweet Success

Rebecca Scarberry found her future in handmade caramels

by *Andy Schatzneider*

PHOTOS BY *Todd Ponath*



Rebecca Scarberry has a right forearm that could smush toes on a tennis court.

It's a forearm that, on any day of the week, is stuck inside a 5-gallon stainless steel stock pot swooping around a gorgeous, gooey mass of caramel. Scarberry stirs each batch for one hour. That's one full hour—a minute less seems incomprehensible to her. It's the only way to reach that perfect, soft consistency. So she stands there at the stove, arm elbow-deep in the pot, hand choked up on a handle of a long spoon, stirring. The spoon never emerges from the pot. Not once.

All of this is done at a four-burner stove inside a 175-year-old house in Pawtucket. The house, located off Oakton Avenue, was used for awhile as a café but is now mostly vacant. Scarberry rents out solely the kitchen space. From here, she cooks up her all-organic, gourmet caramels she sells under the label *Becky's Blissful Bakery*.

The kitchen is cramped, still having the essentials: a refrigerator, a microwave, a dishwasher. Scarberry doesn't need much space, though. She is generally stationed at the stove, at the front right burner, to be exact, stirring. Her caramel is never left unattended.

It's quiet in the kitchen, too, no television or radio. But there's a window right next to the stove. It isn't much of a view: a low-hanging branch, a patch of grass, the dead end of a neighbor's garage.

"At least I have a window," Scarberry says brightly, while stirring, motioning with her head at the late-spring sunshine spilling in and making the pot shine like a mirror.

This is the humble appreciation of someone who survived a divorce and a job layoff. Both happened to Scarberry. Both were finalized in the same week, just before Christmas two years ago.

"That was when I finally jumped off the fence, so to speak," says Scarberry, 34, her stirring quickening a bit, a little more purposeful. It was a Friday afternoon, and she was about a half hour into a batch. She looked up, smiling. "That was when I decided I was going to make caramels full time."



COOKING UP AN IDEA

Scarberry had been making her treats long before then. In fact, Scarberry, unabashed about her lifelong sweet tooth, remembers always baking something. "As a kid," says Scarberry, who was raised on the West Coast, "I was known as 'Becky Crocker.'"

She wiled away days with her grandma—her queen of baking—in Nevada, helping as a flour sifter in the kitchen. Scarberry recalls her grandma "sifting her flour three times, always." A grandma, she also notes, who "always looked like a million bucks—even in the kitchen." (This, along with her grandma's baking process, seemed to have rubbed off on Scarberry. That afternoon, she wasn't in a flour-dusted apron but a sweeter set, blue jean capris and pink sandals. Her long blond hair was held back by sunglasses).

Scarberry embraced baking even more upon moving to Wisconsin from Arizona about four years ago. She was a stay-at-home mom then, struck by the dullness of winters. She began passing the time in the kitchen with

her now 5-year-old son, Paulie, baking all sorts of treats: cookies, brownies, cakes. But it was her caramels that made everyone melt. "People went on about them," she says.

She began peddling them at local markets, beginning with Pewaukee's Good Harvest Market and then moving toward Milwaukee, even setting up a kiosk at Southridge Mall.

As a kid, I was known as 'Becky Crocker.'

Her caramels increased in popularity. She rented kitchen space at a Waukesha chocolate shop and began making more. She created a website, selling them at Becky'sDeliciousBakery.com. She returned to school, got a degree in business management and began working as an executive assistant at an architectural firm. All the while, though, she kept baking.

In 2008, she was laid off from the day job. "I still had my caramels," she says.

RIGHT RECIPE

Ask Scarberry what exactly she is so furiously stirring in that pot, and she'll say, "What, like my recipe?!" You shrink back in apology, as if caught stealing Wonka's Everlasting Gobstopper from Slugworth. She'll say, however, that her caramels are gluten-free, made from 100-percent natural ingredients. All cooked, she said, over just a breath of low heat.

