

8-20-10 It's Wholesale or It's No Sale

Have you ever dreamed of going big with your famously delicious cookies or your family secret spaghetti sauce? And maybe you were thinking about starting small at first; say, right from your own kitchen, selling to people and to restaurants and supermarkets in the area. Then, if all goes well, you'd consider renting or building that great commercial kitchen for production and packaging of your very special food product.

It will be easier to fulfill that dream with the cookies than it will with spaghetti sauce. The cookies are not considered a "potentially hazardous food" and your local board of health can permit your residential kitchen to sell them directly to consumers. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) has a nice little brochure on the topic. Your local board of health probably has a few printed out and it's right on the DPH website, called Residential Kitchens. The cookie and cake type business came about as an offshoot to farm stands. Farms, both large and small, were already selling produce and flowers. The people were buying zucchini for supper and they just might want to buy some zucchini bread, also. As long as the bread or cookie does not require refrigeration and is not a cream filled product, science supported the safety of making this kind of food in a clean kitchen and selling them directly to the consumer.

Even cookies at the farm stand should be labeled with the ingredients in descending order of weight and it should declare any allergens such as eggs or nuts. When the product is sold directly to the consumer, you are allowed to make that label yourself. You can easily print out copies on mailing labels and put that right on the wrapping.

The spaghetti sauce or pulled pork or canned products are all another story. Foods with enough water, at least 85 percent or enough acidity, 4.6 or above, spoil faster than the dry non-acidic food and, thus, they have the potential for spreading food-borne illnesses. These foods cannot be made in your own kitchen for a wholesale business. The licensing for wholesale food production happens at the State level and a lab will be paid to analyze exactly what comprises the food, including other dietary information such as nutrients, fat and salt content.

Knowing that these requirements are beyond the personal scope of many us foodies, the State does allow many other options for making and selling Peter's Sausage Stuffed Peppers or Grandma's Gravy. The DPH website includes numerous resources in addition to rules and regulations, including a link to the New England Food Entrepreneur website. There, you will find many ways to fulfill that dream of selling your great food. Or, you may decide that it is still too much work and cost but you sure would like to see that jar of sauce with your name on it. You can hire pre-licensed and inspected wholesale companies to produce your product and put

your label on it. Or, you can even purchase someone else's product and name it what you wish. That option allows you to expand your line of products by selling syrups or sauce or relish with your very own company or farm name without any of the fuss of the actual production. Maybe that's how Paul Newman's face and name arrived on so many products. I don't know if Paul Newman's food really has his "Own" but I know that this path of appearances is available to you, too.

So, if you ever see "non-potentially hazardous" food for sale at a local stand, you might see ingredients on a home-made label and you can always ask if their kitchen was inspected by the local board of health. If you see potentially hazardous food such as meat, sauces, gravies, relishes, stuffed peppers, or custards for sale at the package store or deli or charming country store and it does not have a label at all, other than a name, do two things. Or, rather, do one and don't do another. Don't buy the product. Do call your local board of health and the Food Protection Program at 617-983-6712 and report that you suspect a person is selling their food products to other businesses without being licensed as a wholesale business. You could save a life; maybe your own.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. She knows there are many good reasons for the Food Protection Program. You can tell her your food stories at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us