

COVER STORY

by Raylene Frankhauser Nickel



Sonja Stromswold
launched *Sonja's Old-Fashioned Delicacies* in 2005, using the Internet to market her product.

PHOTOS BY J.C. BALCOM

Visit a virtual bakeshop

With just a click of your computer mouse, you can visit Sonja Stromswold's virtual bakeshop. From a commercial kitchen on her farm home near Mohall, Stromswold operates Sonja's Old-Fashioned Delicacies. Her Web site—www.sonjabakeshop.com—gives visitors virtual access to an online bakeshop showcasing the diverse candies and baked goods from which you can choose.

There are old-fashioned sugar cookies, peanut butter cookies and those feather-light sandbakkels just like your Scandinavian neighbor used to make. The list of baked goods and candies also includes krumkake, fattigmand, biscotti, short-breads, cheesecakes, caramels and a concoction called Extreme Nut Candy—just to name a few!

You can order right from the Web site, or pick up the phone and give Stromswold a call. Either way, your baked goods will be prepared, carefully packaged, and then shipped right to your door. The Web site tells which items are too delicate for shipping, and these must be picked up in person at Stromswold's commercial kitchen.

The business is a natural fit for Stromswold, who's been baking since she was a teenager. Sonja's Old-Fashioned Delicacies, which she and her husband, Mark Stromswold, launched in 2005, spins off from her natural aptitudes and from her previous experience running a local bakeshop. Stromswold's home-based business stems, too, from her desire to employ herself right within her own



Found on Sonja's Old-Fashioned Delicacies' Web site (www.sonjabakeshop.com) is a very convenient system to order your favorite candies or baked goods.

community.

"We like living where we live, and we'd like to stay," she says. "We like working for ourselves. I've had jobs working for others, but I've always enjoyed being my own boss."

Stromswold's mother, Judy Duerre, may have inspired her daughter's entrepreneurialism. Duerre launched and operated a local greenhouse during Stromswold's teenage years. You might say it was her mother who planted the seed that was to become Sonja's Old-Fashioned Delicacies.

Stromswold tells how it all began: "Right out of college, I traveled to New Zealand, and by the time I got back, I really needed extra cash. Mom suggested that I bake some things and take them to local bake sales."

To her amazement, Stromswold discovered that people would actually pay for cookies. "I found a demand and decided to fill it," she says.

So, in 1989, hardly a year out of college, she started a bakeshop in Mohall, building a customer base as she taught herself how to get consistent results from large batches of cookie dough and caramel-candy mix. "It was a steep learning curve!" she recalls.

She ran her bakeshop for eight years. During that time, she married Mark. Then in 1997, she decided to close her business, and both she and Mark worked at jobs in the Mohall area.

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Sonja Stromswold, left, got her entrepreneurial spirit from her mother, Judy Duerre, who started a family greenhouse. Judy currently helps out at the bakeshop wherever she's needed.



The equipment in **Sonja Stromswold's** bakery is industrial strength and includes two large convection ovens, which cut baking time

by 20-30 percent and a six-burner, commercial stove.

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But a funny thing kept happening to Stromswold, as she went about her daily activities in her home community. "Even as long as six years after closing my bakeshop," she says, "people would come up to me and ask, 'Would you be able to make me just a dozen sandbakkels?' After hearing so many previous customers ask for baked goods, we knew there was a demand. That's one of the reasons we decided to get back into baking."

That's how, in 2005, Sonja's Old-Fashioned Delicacies came to be. Now, Stromswold borrows from old family recipes to create the seven varieties of Scandinavian cookies that are her specialty.

Yet just as popular among her customers are the home-style cookies she bakes, the biscotti, the British shortbreads, the special dessert cakes and tarts, fruitcakes, and specialty cookies like macaroons and Viennese butter cookies. And then of course, there are the caramels and other candies from which to choose.

Local customers form a solid client base, and because Stromswold offers shipping services, these customers frequently place orders to be sent out of state to friends, children and other relatives. Of course, the Web site also generates orders from across the nation.

Besides offering baked goods, Stromswold caters lo-

cal lunches and meals. She also manages her mother's greenhouse, which is now located on the Stromswolds' farmstead. Stromswold serves her greenhouse customers special lunches, teas and dinners at the Flower House Garden Center.

"Our lunches include soups, panini—which are grilled sandwiches—and fresh salads," she says. "We also serve desserts daily, such as cheesecakes and tarts."

During the holiday season, when the bakeshop is flooded with orders, she employs one person full time and two or three for part-time help in the evenings.

Mark lends a hand, too, when he is able to take time away from his work as a landman for a North Dakota oil company. "When we first started, Mark made a lot of the Scandinavian cookies," Stromswold says. "He's very good at it!"

While repeat customers fanning out from local clientele form the foundation of her trade, Stromswold sees nationwide demand as the vehicle of growth that will put her business on solid financial footing. "We need to get the world to know what we're doing," she says.

Of course, her Web site is the tool intended to accomplish that. But simply having a Web site is no ticket to instant success, she says. After having her site profession-

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Sonja Stromswold, right, and her assistant, Andrea Savelkoul, Lansford, work several hours a day when the bakeshop is busy.

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ally designed, she continues to work at learning how to market the site and develop the most effective links.

The Pride of Dakota program has been a helpful marketing tool, and Stromswold attends all of the Pride of Dakota trade shows.

Starting the business required, of course, investing in a commercial kitchen and in the designing of a Web site. With some Internet research and a lot of phone calls, the Stromswolds found a wealth of sources poised to provide assistance ranging from help with business planning to the provision of low-interest loans.

These helping agencies included the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), the Souris Basin Planning Council, the Mohall City Sales Tax Fund, the Renville Job Development Authority and the Mohall Improvement Committee.

"We have also received a lot of help from our local electric cooperative, North Central Electric Cooperative," Stromswold says. "North Central offers a low-interest revolving loan to co-op members who are starting businesses that fit their program.

"We encourage anyone interested in starting up a new business to check with their local governments and with the SBDC in their area to find out what forms of assistance might be available," she adds.

With the startup phase of her business now behind her, Stromswold looks forward to years of growth, as word of mouth and the Internet open a larger window on the world.

"Our business is still in the growth phase," she says, "but I believe that in the long run, it's going to be a very good thing. Often, in our rural communities, it seems like there may not be many opportunities. So, sometimes we just have to make opportunities for ourselves!" ■



The candies are all made-from-scratch recipes, boiled to proper temperature and poured into cookie sheets for cooling. Sonja has several of her own recipes marketed on the Internet.

Raylene Frankhauser Nickel writes from her farm home near Kief, where she raises beef cattle with her husband, John Nickel.