

From a Hobby to a Thriving Business

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Photo courtesy of Randy Kopke

We love Backyard Brine's Inventive Flavors

Years ago, before pickles had even become a “thing,” Marisa had the pleasure of joining her friend Lucy Norris at the very first Lower East Side Pickle Day. Lucy is the author of the sadly now out-of-print book *Pickled*, and was signing books at the fair. It was Marisa’s introduction to all things briny and she’s never looked back. This Sunday, October 14th, we’ll be back on Orchard Street for Pickle Day and we’ll be heading straight to the Backyard Brine table. These handmade artisan pickles from the North Fork of Long Island are a current favorite, not only for their superior and inventive flavors, but also for owners Randy and Cori Kopke’s “keep it local” approach to their rapidly expanding business.

Here’s the dish. It really did all start in their backyard. Randy and Cori Kopke are avid gardeners who both love to cook. Every summer, there would be a surplus of vegetables, so they started pickling. At first, “It was just for fun,” Cori says. “We’d make them for family and friends. We started with the seasoning packets that you get at the grocery store, until I looked at the back of the packet one day and thought ‘oh my god.’ It was filled with chemicals and stuff I couldn’t pronounce. Randy and I decided we were going to make our pickles with everything fresh out of our garden, our fresh herbs, and that’s how our recipes were born.”

Five years ago, Cori's brother got married out at Montauk and the Kopkes offered to make jars of pickles as favors for the wedding. They did three different jars: Dill Death Do Us Part, We Go Together Like Bread and Butter, and Relish the Moment. "We had never done anything more than 12 Ball jars in our kitchen before," Cori laughs. "And we needed something like 200 jars for the wedding. We didn't have enough cucumbers in the garden, so I had to go to the grocery store up the road and order a big bushel of kirbys from the produce manager." When Cori went to pick up the cukes, the manager asked, "What are you doing with all of these?" She told him and he replied, "I would love to sell your pickles here."

At the time, Randy was a contractor doing tile, brick, and stonework, while Cori did freelance accounting and taught dance at night. The recession had hit them hard: Randy's new construction work dried up and many of Cori's start-up clients were closing their doors. "We were both kind of dissatisfied with where we were, so it was perfect timing for something new," Cori says.

"We made the pickles for the wedding and everyone loved them and started ordering them," she continues, "So we were like, okay, game on. But we didn't know anything about getting our pickles from the kitchen to the shelf, we didn't know anything about nutritional labels or UPCs or scheduled processes that we needed. We made an appointment with the Stony Brook Business Incubator in Calverton. They basically gave us a book and we followed it page by page and nine months later we were on the shelf at that grocery store."

That was in March 2016, and their business has really taken off. As Randy tells us, Backyard Brine is now sold in ten states at 500 to 600 retail locations and in lots of restaurants through their food service line. And they do it all in-house, with a crew of seven. Nothing is co-packed. "We were lucky enough to build our own facility one and a half years into the business," he says, "Two miles down the road from our house."

Most of what goes into the jars is local, too: the cucumbers, the dill, the peppers. They had purchased all their produce from Lyle Wells, the eleventh-generation North Fork farmer who sadly passed away in an accident earlier this year. But coincidentally, they were able to negotiate with the purchasers of six acres right behind their house and now all the pickles literally will be grown in the backyard once again.

Two of the original flavors—Dill Death To Us Part (a garlic dill) and We Go Together Like... Bread and Butter—headline the product list, along with Rowdy Pepper Belly (a habanero dill), Everything (a bread and butter with everything bagel seasoning), Sweet Heat (a jalapeno bread and butter), and Pumpernickel Ry-Ry (an unusual mix of brown sugar and organic molasses with extra caraway seeds), as well as a pair of smoked varieties: Jalapeno Dill (with smoked jalapenos) and BBQ Betty Lou's (with smoked jalapenos and a maple syrup and brown sugar brine).

We asked where these unusual flavors came from and, as Randy describes it, again from the backyard. "I smoke a lot of southern barbecue, I do a lot of pit smoking on our smokers, brisket, pulled pork. In the beginning, when we were barely even a business and still kind of fooling around, a friend joked to mesomething like, 'you should smoke pickles.' So I said, 'let's try it!' We went outside with a couple of beers and I lit up the smoker and a day later we had smoked pickles. We really nailed it on the first try and got the recipes right that night. Barbecue Betty Lou is named after our sweet black lab mix, who passed away last December, and the Smokey Sienna is named after our chocolate lab."

Cori takes over the description of the others: "Randy and I both have different flavor profiles that we enjoy, so Randy's in charge of the salty dill spicy recipes and I just love a sweet bread and butter, so I was in charge of making all the bread and butter recipes and I used actual bread as the inspiration. We have an Everything, because that's our favorite bagel, and then the Pumpernickel Ry Ry is my favorite bread. I just love the molasses and the crushed caraway. It was another one where we just decided to try it. I mean it could have been horrendous, but it came out just amazing. It has this really cool cult following—it's a hard sell on the shelf at first because people see a brown pickle brine, but when we do tastings and samplings of it, I get calls—where's

the pump rye?”

In addition to pickles, they sell their brines to restaurants for use as marinades, cocktails, salad dressings, mignonettes for oysters—as Cori says, “there’s so many things you can do and since we’re a higher end product at a higher price point, we try to make it so that they can use every single ounce of brine in that bucket.”

And for all their success, you can still find Backyard Brine at select farmers markets, for which they do a range of lacto-fermented products: cucumber pickles, cauliflower, Brusselsprouts, nuts, and quail eggs, and well as seasonal tastings and small batch products like sauces and other condiments. Seek them out at Sag Harbor Farmers Market on Saturday mornings, and the Union Square Greenmarket and the Rockefeller Center Greenmarket on Wednesdays.

“We started out in the farmers markets and it reminds us of our roots,” Cori says. “It allows us to try out new recipes and keep the creative juices flowing. We interact with the customers and it’s a lot of fun.” She notes that they also do small-batch barbecue sauces and other “fun little side projects” like Thanksgiving Turkey Brine for their friends Feisty Acres, who raise certified organic game birds on the North Fork and have a CSA.

As Cori says, “We just try to use our life and things that we enjoy as our inspiration in everything from the names to our recipes. If we stay true to us then we know we’re on the right path.”

And yes, they still do weddings.

You’ll find Backyard Brine on the shelves of major chains such as Whole Foods and King Kullen, and well as gourmet and supermarkets throughout the northeast, or order directly online from backyardbrine.com. Follow them on Instagram or sign up for their newsletter and you’ll be in the know for where to get special seasonal products.