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Car dealer, wife, friends take food online

Smith Preferred offers specialty Northwest-made products, currently adding wines

By Jeanne Gustafson

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Debbie Smith, left, and Jenny Terrell say Smith Preferred sells a variety of Northwest gourmet finds and offers recipes.

—Staff photo by Jeanne Gustafson

interesting culinary finds.

"We both like to cook. We are always collecting different types of salsas, we are always going and finding the great oils and vinegars," she says. "Ken likes the cooking—and the eating, too."

Building on the cookbook idea, Ken Smith, president and CEO of Dave Smith Motors, suggested starting a Web site to sell some of the local ingredients and foods that could be used to prepare the meals in the cookbook, and over the course of some shared country gourmet dinners, their longtime friends, the Terrells, agreed to participate in the endeavor.

Around December, the couples decided to take a real run at developing a Web site while Debbie continued working on the cookbook.

The Smiths live near Kellogg. Brett Terrell operates his own commercial real estate company, Motion Realty LLC, which has offices in Spokane and Coeur d'Alene. Jenny Terrell, who is a former director of sales and marketing for a Spokane-area bank and previously worked for Avista Corp., in Spokane, grew up on a farm in Eastern Washington. They now handle the company's database and vendor relations from their Post Falls home, while staff members from Dave Smith Motors provide administrative support, Jenney Terrell says.

So far, the food company offers products from 16 vendors, and expects to add about four additional vendors each month, Terrell says. She says the quality of the products and ensuring that the vendors have the means to produce enough to meet customer demand is of primary importance when choosing which products to sell on the Web site.

"We've really vetted our vendors," she says. "We've visited their facilities and found out where their ingredients come from." She says

From cars and trucks to mortgages—and now gourmet foods—one never knows what the Dave Smith family will sell online next. The newest venture is a company inspired by Dave Smith Motors CEO Ken Smith's wife, Debbie, who also is the front woman for the new business, an online gourmet food distributor named Smith Preferred LLC.

The Smiths and their business partners, Brett and Jenny Terrell, launched Smith Preferred at the beginning of July. The Web-based company, headquartered at Dave Smith Motors, in Kellogg, Idaho, sells a range of products for foodies seeking Northwest-made ingredients for what Debbie Smith calls "country gourmet" meals.

Debbie Smith, who says she has loved cooking since she was a child, had begun planning to write a cookbook to share some of her favorite recipes when the idea for Smith Preferred emerged.

She says she and her husband share a passion for

that currently, for example, the honey that Smith Preferred offers is very popular because although honey can't be labeled organic, the brand they sell is collected in the pristine Cascade mountain range.

Smith Preferred Foods distributes a variety of Northwest products, including brands such as Buckeye Beans, Dilettante Chocolates, and Coeur d'Alene Olive Oil Co.

Products currently available on the Web site include an eclectic mix of spice pepper jellies and salsas, country-style baking mixes, chocolates and chocolate sauces, almond stuffed olives, soup mixes, and specialty coffees, cocoas, and teas. The company is beginning to add a collection of wines for sale via the Web site, and plans to expand its spice selections in the near future, Brett Terrell says. He says that ultimately, Smith Preferred would like to offer a full spectrum of wines and additional products such as gourmet mustards and barbecue sauces.

Most of the products are shipped via a Seattle-based distributor, he says, though the Terrells ship a few things from their Post Falls-area home.

Debbie Smith plans to provide a recipe a month for the Web site to tie into the planned cookbook, such as orange chicken and a strawberry tart that will be featured for August. The recipes will use fresh local ingredients as well as products sold through the Web site, at www.SmithPreferred.com.

Right now, Smith says, "I'm picking sour and sweet cherries, so I'm working on a recipe to incorporate those seasonally different things."

She is still compiling the cookbook and hopes to publish it later this fall.

The partners decline to disclose the startup costs of the business or its sales so far, but say they've been able to take advantage of the fact that Dave Smith Motors, which has made its mark as a largely Internet-based auto dealership, already has a strong infrastructure and support staff to help the venture get up and running smoothly. The Terrells say that the only additional costs incurred to start the business have been for Web design of the online shopping cart.

The Web site has had slow traffic so far, Terrell says, adding that the company's goal is to ramp up slowly so it's not overwhelmed. Since its launch in July, the company has sent a targeted e-mail marketing campaign to Dave Smith Motors customers in the Northwest, but Terrell says the Smith Preferred Web site appears to be driving as much traffic to the auto dealership site as the auto site is driving to the food site.

Because of its ties with Dave Smith Motors—the Web site has a link directly from Dave Smith's Web site—it can take advantage of significant overhead savings, including offering a very low shipping rate for customers due to the national shipping relationships Dave Smith Motors already has developed.

The Web site's shopping function has been designed by a Spokane company called Design Spike, and it's set up in such a way that the Terrells can add additional products to the database themselves. Support for the operation, including accounts payable and verifying monthly statements, is handled through the corporate office of Dave Smith Motors, in Kellogg, Jenny Terrell says.

The two couples have long enjoyed eating gourmet meals together, though Jenny Terrell says she and Brett have most often been the recipients of Debbie Smith's culinary labors rather than the other way around. Debbie Smith prepares and preserves fruit that the Smiths grow in an orchard on their property near Kellogg, Idaho. Ken Smith, meanwhile, collects his own honey there.

Smith says the Northwest's abundance of fresh foods and gourmet finds inspire her recipes.

Jenny Terrell says that though the partners see a lot of potential for the business, it's primarily a way to express their shared passion for fine foods and their Northwest roots.

"From Ken and Debbie's perspective this is all about having fun. The auto business is all about business," Jenny Terrell says.

Contact Jeanne Gustafson at (509) 344-1264 or via e-mail at jeanneg@spokanejournal.com.