

TAM'S SWEETS

WINNING HEARTS (AND SAVING TEETH) WITH SOFT BRITTLE



THE JOURNEY

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IDEATION & PLANNING



TAM TRUONG

Founder

Tam Truong is a self taught artisanal confectioner. By day she works as a county commercial real estate appraiser. After hours she unleashes her creativity and sweet tooth while also balancing being a mom to two young children. As a creative outlet, Tam started creating elaborate celebration cakes. She quickly set herself apart, drawing flavor inspiration from her Vietnamese roots, using less sweet exotic fruits and ingredients common in Vietnamese desserts.

“I love baking, but before social media it was something done alone at home. With social media and short videos bakers could share their work and inspire others,” says Truong. When Covid sent everyone in her office home, Tam found more time to bake, decorate, and post her creations online. A producer from The Food Network discovered Tam’s social media account and encouraged her to apply for an upcoming competition.

Tam says “I’m not professionally trained, I’m self taught, but two days before the deadline I decided to go for it. I was shocked to be chosen.”



Tam debuted her culinary skills on the second season of Food Network’s Great Chocolate Showdown. While on location filming, Tam had the opportunity to learn all about candy making including how to temper chocolate. When she returned home, her interest in candy making continued to grow, “I realized that while I enjoy cake making, it isn’t scalable. Not everyone can afford a custom cake, they take a long time to make and are typically for special occasions,” says Tam. Candy, on the other hand, is scaleable and can be more widely enjoyed as a special treat.



FORMULATION & DESIGN

After deciding she wanted to pursue candy making over cake making, Tam began experimenting with one of her favorite, hard to get delicacies: soft brittle. Traditional brittles can be hard on the teeth, but with soft brittle you get the same rich flavor and crunch without risking a trip to the dentist. She loves the flaky and buttery nature of this treat and felt that she could improve on the versions she had tried by producing her own nut butters as a base. Inspired by the knowledge she gained competing on The Food Network Tam recalls, “I thought I should just try to make this candy because I love it and it is really hard to find.” In addition to making her own nut butters from scratch, Tam figured out a way to make the recipe completely plant based and gluten free, opening this treat up to a whole new market of treat seekers.

Tam started out making soft brittle in her home kitchen and testing sales at local shows. “I made 500 bags in 2.5 days for a local show. I ran out of brittle on the first day and had to go home and work all night to make more bags for the second day”. Tam quickly realized her soft brittle was a hit!



After a couple of sell-out shows, Tam decided to get serious about her candy business. In 2022 Tam enrolled in a food business program, Getting Your Recipe to Market, to help figure out how to commercialize her product for retail shelves. While she had strong branding and a winning product, Tam needed help developing a compliant label, honing in on COGs, understanding distribution, designing a sales sheet and establishing her wholesale pricing.



EDUCATION, AWARDS & GRANTS

The Getting Your Recipe to Market (GYRM) program was great because it gave Tam different perspectives on building a food business. “I got to talk to other businesses and retailers. I wanted to learn the good, the bad, and the ugly of this business and not just the superficial success.” You can learn a lot from others’ mistakes,” says Tam.

In 2023, Tam participated in a Oregon Entrepreneurial Network (OEN) program. “I put a business plan together and presented to a panel, which included buyers from Albertsons. They scored all of the participants and I won second place and a check for \$1,500,” recalls Truong fondly.



The money was great, but Tam says the largest benefit was meeting other entrepreneurs and hearing their stories, many of which resonated with her own journey.

Tam says the contacts she made from GYRM and OEN have been invaluable, “When I panic, I reach out to them and they calm me down. Networking and mentorship is so important. I love to meet other entrepreneurs in different places in their business journeys.”

In 2023, Tam received a grant from the NWRM Regional Food Business Center to participate in an incubator program at the Fancy Food Show in Las Vegas. It was a great experience and really helped her to solidify her retail strategy. Before attending this show she thought she needed to get her brittle in a lot of stores to be successful, but as she has grown and learned more about the buying habits of her customers, this strategy has shifted.



RETAIL STRATEGY

Most grocers launched their relationship with Tam's Sweets by carrying her soft brittle for the holiday season as part of their holiday gifting program. After strong holiday sales, many of these stores gave Tam's Sweets a permanent place on their shelves. Tam spent most of her weekends over the next year traveling throughout the state and demoing at local retailers. After a year of being on all of these shelves with average velocity, a light bulb went off. Tam realized that contrary to her original retail strategy, "the grocery store wasn't necessarily the best place for my brittle." Unless she was there handing out samples, her brittle sat on the store shelves for longer stretches before making it into customer's baskets. When she was present velocity was great, but after a year of traveling around Oregon doing demos Tam recognized this wasn't the best use of her time. "Shoppers loved the brittle when they tried it, but I couldn't be at all the stores all the time. And if I'm not there it doesn't move," says Tam.

After pitching to the OEN panel, Albertsons wanted to carry Tam's Sweets in their more than 200 locations in Oregon. Tam was flattered, but became anxious when she started visualizing her product sitting on all of those shelves. She would have to create an enormous demo program to support this many locations. After careful consideration, Tam realized that this was an opportunity she needed to decline. Fortunately the opportunity came at a point in her journey where she understood the complexity of the grocery landscape and the reasons it wasn't necessarily the right fit for her business at its current scale.

With all of the knowledge and experience Tam has gained, she has reframed her sales strategy and is now focused on holiday shows, farmers markets, and direct to consumer sales. Her current sales are about 50% direct to consumer with many of her holiday customers converting to regular e-commerce buyers.

In addition to her local grocery accounts, Tam's Sweets can be found at Powell's Book Store and three stores inside the Portland International Airport. "The airport is a great place for my product. People are often there looking for a treat and my brittle is a fun gift to bring home."



PRODUCTION AND GROWTH

Finding the right production space can feel like a balancing act. Not only do you need to find a physical space that works for your process, you also need to find a space that is available during the hours during which you are available to produce.

When Tam set out to look for a kitchen she visited quite a few and decided on one that had lots of space and availability. It was great for awhile, then the kitchen manager began adding more and more businesses and production time became difficult to schedule. Tam's breaking point came when a catering company moved into the space. Even though all of the sub-letters were working with food, it can be very tough for packaged food companies and catering companies to cohabitate as their methodologies and food safety requirements differ.

When Tam set out to search for a new kitchen she had a clearer idea of what she needed and found a

gluten free kitchen that produces baked goods Monday through Friday. Tam only produces on weekends, so it was a perfect fit. She loves her new space. Her new landlord charges rent by the hour, keeps the kitchen spotless and has plenty of storage space.

Tam's production process continues to get more and more efficient. She currently produces one day a week and can make over 400 bags in six hours all on her own. Her husband comes in to help make the nut butters which still serve as the base for her brittles, but the rest is all Tam.

While Tam finds the product development and marketing fun she has discovered it is only a small part of the business. Most of her time is spent doing administrative work, ordering supplies and participating in markets and events. She is currently evaluating which tasks make the most sense for her to continue doing and which she should outsource. She has already hired someone to help her do demos.

Tam has yet to give herself a salary, but she has included labor into her Cost of Goods and does plan to pay herself in the future. Like most new businesses in their early years, Tam currently puts all profits back into the business.

Tam and her husband have self financed her business. When she has saved up enough, she plans to purchase a big kettle. "This will be a game changer for scaling my production," says Tam.

Tam has considered co-packing and toured the facility of an East Coast candy co-packer. "I asked lots of questions," said Tam, "and quickly realized co-packing wasn't right for me and my product at this scale, but who knows, maybe in the future!"

2 YEARS
20,000 BAGS OF BRITTLE



TAM'S TIPS & RESOURCES



NETWORK

Know Your Customers

It's critical to gain an understanding of your customers' purchasing habits. You can only really do this by observing them through multiple channels. Go to trade shows and keep track of what they buy and during which time of year. Analyze your online sales and pay attention to who puts what in their cart when you demo at stores.

Know When to Say No

Every account is not equal. There are certain stores that will be a great fit for your product and others that won't. Be aware of which stores attract which customers and aim to align with the stores where your customers shop. Remember, not all products will sell just sitting on a retail shelf.

Ask Questions & Talk

Don't be afraid to ask other food entrepreneurs about their journey. Everyone has successes and set backs. Listen, share stories, take advantage of the steep learning curves of others. We're a community of food producers and it is important to share information with each other.

Learn from Mistakes

We're all going to make mistakes, don't miss the opportunity to learn from them. If you hear about a struggle someone is having, don't automatically assume you'll do better. Really analyze the problem and try to learn from it.

Clean Up!

Whether you're at a trade show, a demo or finishing up production in a shared kitchen, there is likely someone in your community coming in right behind you. Think about others, keep your station tidy, don't leave a big mess for someone else to clean up for you.

RESOURCE CORNER

Some of the key organizations and resources that led to our success!

FIC
OEN
GYRM
PNW F&B
FANCY FOOD



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PHOTO CREDITS

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