

# Sweet Success

Rebecca Scarberry found her future in handmade caramels

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PHOTOS BY *Todd Ponath*



Rebecca Scarberry has a right forearm that could smash aces on a tennis court.

It's a forearm that, on any day of the week, is stuck inside a 5-gallon stainless steel stock pot swooping around a gorgeous, gooey mass of caramel. Scarberry stirs each batch for one hour. That's one full hour—a minute less seems incomprehensible to her. It's the only way to reach that perfect, soft consistency. So she stands there at the stove, arm elbow-deep in the pot, hand choked up on a handle of a long spoon, stirring. The spoon never emerges from the pot. Not once.

All of this is done at a four-burner stove inside a 175-year-old house in Pewaukee. The house, located off Oakton Avenue, was used for awhile as a café but is now mostly vacant. Scarberry rents out solely the kitchen space. From here, she cooks up her all-organic, gourmet caramels she sells under the label *Becky's Blissful Bakery*.

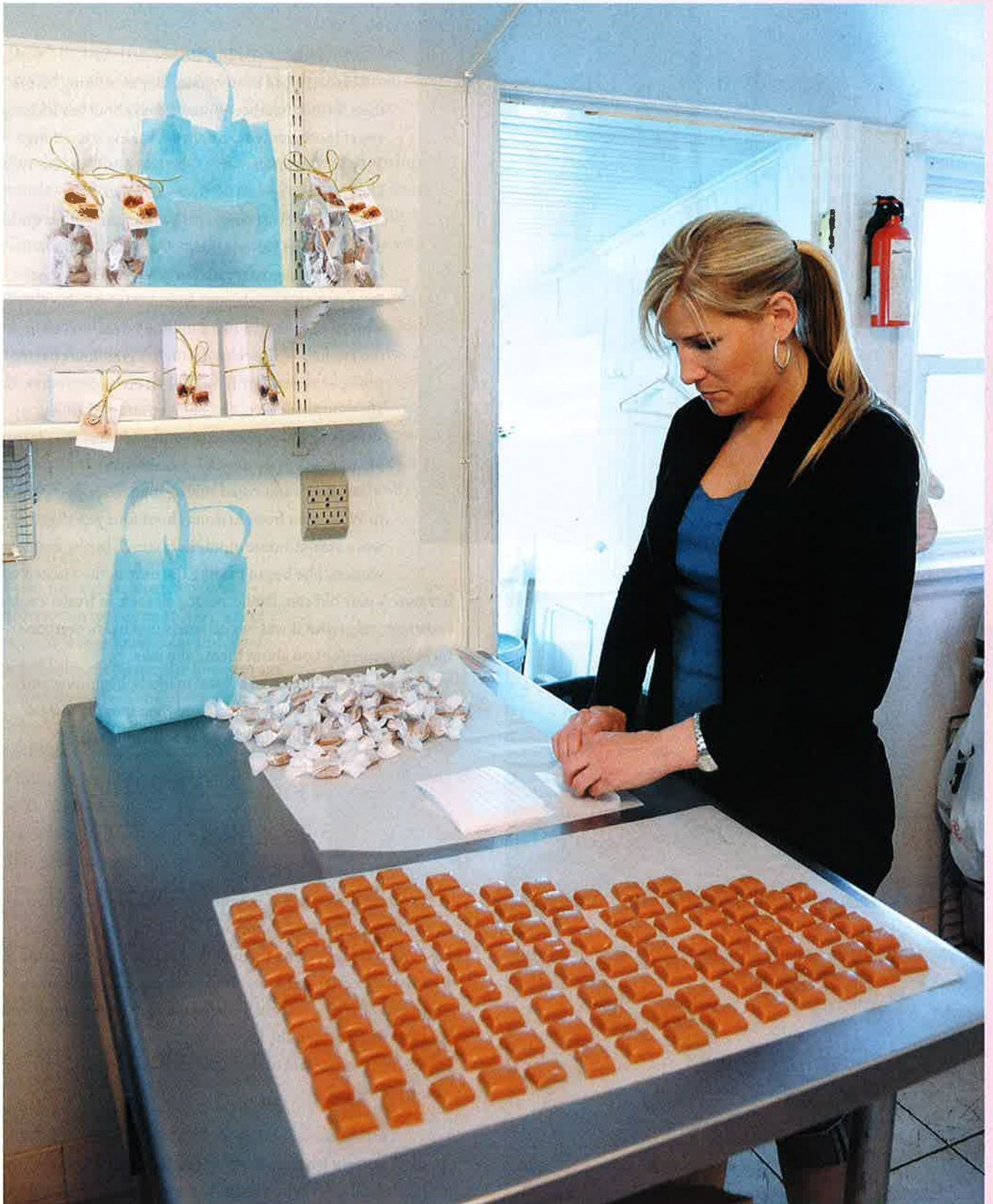
The kitchen is cramped, still having the essentials: a refrigerator, a microwave, a dishwasher. Scarberry doesn't need much space, though. She is generally stationed at the stove, at the front-right burner, to be exact, stirring. Her caramel is never left unattended.

It's quiet in the kitchen, too, no television or radio. But there's a window right next to the stove. It isn't much of a view: a low-hanging branch, a patch of grass, the dead end of a neighbor's garage.

"At least I have a window," Scarberry says brightly, while stirring, motioning with her head at the late-spring sunshine spilling in and making the pot shine like a mirror.

This is the humble appreciation of someone who survived a divorce and a job layoff. Both happened to Scarberry. Both were finalized in the same week, just before Christmas two years ago.

"That was when I finally jumped off the fence, so to speak," says Scarberry, 34, her stirring quickening a bit, a little more purposeful. It was a Friday afternoon, and she was about a half hour into a batch. She looked up, smiling. "That was when I decided I was going to make caramels full time."



**ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT** *Rebecca Scarberry capitalized on her sweet tooth, turning a delicious hobby into a full-time occupation. Becky's Blissful Bakery sells handmade caramels and caramel sauce.*

## COOKING UP AN IDEA

Scarberry had been making her treats long before then. In fact, Scarberry, unabashed about her lifelong sweet tooth, remembers always baking something. “As a kid,” says Scarberry, who was raised on the West Coast, “I was known as ‘Becky Crocker.’”

She wiled away days with her grandma—her queen of baking—in Nevada, helping as a flour sifter in the kitchen. Scarberry recalls her grandma “sifting her flour three times, always.” A grandma, she also notes, who “always looked like a million bucks—even in the kitchen.” (This, along with her grandma’s baking prowess, seemed to have rubbed off on Scarberry. That afternoon, she wasn’t in a flour-dusted apron but a sweater set, blue jean capris and pink sandals. Her long blond hair was held back by sunglasses).

Scarberry embraced baking even more upon moving to Wisconsin from Arizona about four years ago. She was a stay-at-home mom then, struck by the dullness of winters. She began passing the time in the kitchen with her now 5-year-old son, Paulie, baking all sorts of treats: cookies, brownies, cakes. But it was her caramels that made everyone melt. “People went on about them,” she says.

She began peddling them at local markets, beginning with Pewaukee’s Good Harvest Market and then moving toward Milwaukee, even setting up a kiosk at Southridge Mall.

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Her caramels increased in popularity. She rented kitchen space at a Waukesha chocolate shop and began making more. She created a website, selling them at [BeckysBlissfulBakery.com](http://BeckysBlissfulBakery.com). She returned to school, got a degree in business management and began working as an executive assistant at an architectural firm. All the while, though, she kept baking.

In 2008, she was laid off from the day job. “I still had my caramels,” she says.

## RIGHT RECIPE

Ask Scarberry what exactly she is so furiously stirring in that pot, and she’ll say, “What, like my recipe!?!” You shrink back in apology, as if caught sneaking Wonka’s Everlasting Gobstopper to Slugworth. She’ll say, however, that her caramels are gluten free, made from 100-percent natural ingredients. All cooked, she said, over just a breath of low heat.



There's no high-fructose corn syrup, generally overused in candy, either, she says. She uses brown rice syrup instead, a key to getting that proper creamy texture. "It's absolutely perfect," she says.

She's been hitting more farmers markets lately, too, giving the caramels out—as any pusher with an addictive product does—for free. "I sell what I sample," Scarberry says. "If I put out vanilla with sea salt, I'll sell them all. If I put out dark chocolate with pecans, I'll sell out of those."

Scarberry has a story of when first starting to sell her caramels—then only as single, individually wrapped candies for about a dollar apiece. She was on a flight seated next to the CEO of a major soft drink company. The exec sampled while chatting, asking how much they cost as they landed. He looked down at the pile of wrappers in front of him, mouth full, embarrassed. "I think I owe you over \$25," he said. (The exec, she notes, still keeps in touch, ordering caramels in bulk, which he mostly gives away as gifts).

## GUILTY PLEASURES

From her regular stove top batch, Scarberry can make about 200 pieces, which she'll then hand wrap and divide into little elegant boxes. She hopes to get a kettle sometime—one of these couple-hundred-pound mixers that hold enough ingredients to make about 12,000 pieces at a time. Those, she says, cost about \$7,000. "So," she says, "I'll be stirring by hand awhile."

She gets a kick hearing about how customers eat her caramels. Like the ladies who buy her dark chocolate and sea salt solely to drink with red wine. Or how customers enjoy her caramel sauce, which she also sells. "One guy uses it for tilapia sauce, with onions and mushrooms," she says. Most though, she says, eat it straight from the jar with a spoon. "In one sitting," Scarberry says, also pleading guilty to this.

Scarberry plans to open her own kitchen this summer, possibly in downtown Hartland. Then she can have a storefront, rent kitchen space to other bakers, and maybe hire on a few employees so she can go pitch her product. She's excited at the idea. There's no looking back, she says, just forward.

Keep stirring, keep creating. Like the caramel pillow she's been thinking about—a shortbread cookie with a caramel center. They'll be unlike the dry shortbreads you're used to, Scarberry says. "You're going to take a bite, and you're going to get a little surprise." 🍪



**SLOW HAND** Each batch of caramels is cooked for a full hour, stirred constantly, over low heat. Once cooled, they are cut, hand-wrapped and packaged for sale.