

# Dallas-Fort Worth

CHERYL HALL

## Cookie creator couldn't let NM dream crumble

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Bloch, tabletop buyer for NM Direct. "Not to mention, they are delicious."

Bloch expects to sell 200 12-cookie tins for \$50, plus shipping, by the Dec. 18 cutoff for Christmas delivery. But since the shortbreads aren't holiday themed, Neiman's will accept orders after that, she says. "We are also working on special ones for Valentine's Day that are super cute."

Bob Beaudine, author of the business best-seller *The Power of Who*, has been a friend of Nelson's since their days at Southern Methodist University. He's not surprised that she scratched and scraped her way into The Book.

"Becky's always had an entrepreneurial flare," Beaudine says. "Once she starts an idea, she never gives up."

Nelson's saga started in 2003, when she was inspired by the Barefoot Contessa, Ina Garten. She emailed Garten for tips about opening a gourmet shop.

To her surprise, Garten immediately responded. Her big advice: Get broad experience in the food service business.

Nelson was a stay-at-home mom with three kids, so she took up part-time work as a barista at a coffee shop in Argyle, and worked at a hamburger grill and for a caterer that supplied lunches at Bell Helicopter.

In 2006, Nelson was on her

way to yoga class when her husband called and asked her to come to his office. She was blindsided when he said he wanted a divorce.

She thought her dream of owning a business had disintegrated along with her marriage. "I knew my finances were going to be limited, and I had to figure out a way to support myself."

Nelson went to work for Central Market as a foodie, walking the aisles and doing sampling. "I was 50 years old and being told when I could go to the bathroom, clocking in and clocking out, and micromanaged — I wasn't smiling enough."

After a series of nonrewarding jobs, Nelson decided to go for it. "The thing that came to my mind was: 'There will never be a better time. If it doesn't work, at least I can say I tried.'"

She launched Le Gourmet Valet in early 2012, curating specialty foods and treats for home delivery.

### Light bulb moment

Nelson got the idea and the name after her friend and sorority sister Jil Katz was mugged in the parking lot of Whole Foods Market in Preston Forest Shopping Center.

"Jil said she was going to hire a personal valet to do her shopping because she was so scared," Nelson recalls. "Afterward, I was walking my dog and it just clicked. What if there was somebody who was a gourmet valet

who brought you good food?" She quickly expanded into catering, which is now the bulk of her business.

Later that year, she developed her shortbread cookie — a modified version of the Barefoot Contessa's — as her signature treat.

### Trader Joe's

Nelson almost took her eye off the prize in early 2013, when a buyer from Trader Joe's came calling.

Nelson, who was working mostly out of her home, met the buyer at the kitchen of Midway Christian Church, which she sometimes leased for big orders, hoping he wouldn't know just how small she was.

Apparently he didn't, because he offered her a deal to put her cookies in Trader Joe's throughout Texas. "I'm thinking, 'Whatever it takes, I'm going to do this,'" Nelson recalls.

But her mentor, Jerry White, director of SMU's Caruth Institute for Entrepreneurship, cautioned her against it, saying if she went with Trader Joe's, she'd never get into Neiman's.

He pointed out that her margins were going to be thinner than her cookies.

"And that was that," Nelson says. "That gave me the oomph to really go after Neiman's."

After the Trader Joe's experience, Nelson realized she needed a commercial kitchen to be taken seriously.

She found affordable space, a 360-square-foot kitchen and



Photos by Rose Baca/Staff Photographer

Becky Nelson, owner of Le Gourmet Valet, got some early advice from Ina Garten, better known as the Barefoot Contessa, as she began to pursue her dream. Then came obstacles, including a divorce she didn't see coming and the sudden death of her artisan baker.



Nelson developed her shortbread cookie with the goal of it landing in The Book, Neiman Marcus' direct-sales catalog.

150-square-foot pantry, at Westminster Presbyterian Church and moved in a year ago.

"I was already on Plan D and didn't have any other options," she says. "It's a good fit."

Her first Neiman's shipment Oct. 1 was bittersweet. Her artisan baker, Lisa Staffelbach, who had been instrumental in perfecting the cookie, died the

week before at age 45 from a pulmonary embolism.

Nelson now has just one full-time employee and six seasonal workers.

Fortunately for Nelson, Staffelbach left a detailed blueprint of everything she did, down to how long it takes to roll the dough.

"Sales have been steady and

manageable," Nelson says. "I am thankful since we had to completely regroup after losing Lisa."

Nelson expects the company's total sales to be about \$450,000 next year, with cookies accounting for about 15 percent of that.

The NM stamp of approval is definitely opening doors.

Nelson ran the cookies, which are 3/4-inches high and 2 inches in diameter, through nutrition testing but decided to keep the results to herself.

"It even shocked me," she says. "But what I love about the cookie is it's low in sugar. That is on our label."

Ingredients are listed with butter at the lead, Nelson says. "If you really want to know additional information, we can provide it."

Twitter: @CherylHall\_DMN

## Institute for Women Conductors gets \$500,000 grant

The Dallas Opera has landed a three-year, \$500,000 grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to support the new Linda and Mitch Hart Institute for Women Conductors.

The initiative aims to narrow the gender gap in leading U.S. operas, where 95 percent of the conductors are men.

The first conference for female conductors begins Saturday and runs through Dec. 6. Attendees include six institute fellows plus four American observers selected out of 100-plus applicants

### PHILANTHROPY



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from 27 nations. The program includes a showcase concert Dec. 5 that's expected to attract industry influencers to the Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House.

There is no comparable program for talented young female conductors seeking entry to the world's top opera

companies, a spokeswoman said.

In addition, the Dallas Opera's 2015-16 season got off to a strong start last month with two fundraisers that racked up more than \$500,000 and the world premiere of *Great Scott*.

The First Sight luncheon featured five original fashion ensembles, each inspired by one of the season's shows. The designers who crafted them were locals Elizabeth Anyaa, Michael Faircloth, Geoffrey Henning and Nha Khanh plus Edo Popken, a Swiss designer who operates a store in the Design District.

The First Night formal dinner was held the following evening, before the opening of *Great Scott*.

Major donors included: \$25,000: Deutsche Asset & Wealth Management, Hall Arts, Ambassador Kathryn Walt Hall and Craig Hall, Gene and Jerry Jones, The Eugene McDermott Foundation, Lynn and Presley Mock, Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger, NorthPark Center, and Ellen and Don Winspear.

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