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Ewing couple hit the big time with 'Road Kill Barbecue Sauce'

By Walter Littrell

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Along with the products she and her husband Jim market from their Machine Branch home in western Lee County, Lois Appleby displays the couple's award-winning barbecue sauce and the trophy it received earlier this month for Best New Product at the Virginia Food and Beverage Expo in Richmond. Photo by Walter Littrell.



EWING — When you see the name of their product, you know immediately that Jim and Lois Appleby have a great sense of humor they've managed to turn into a profitable business.

During the Virginia Food & Beverage Expo in Richmond on May 14, the hot variety of their Road Kill Barbecue Sauce won the prestigious Best New Product Award over more than 100 exhibitors participating.

When asked by Agriculture & Forestry Secretary Robert S. Bloxom where exactly their hometown of Ewing was, Lois "Julie B" Appleby put her tongue firmly in her cheek and responded, "it's 30 minutes from nowhere." But after taking the top honors at the state-sponsored show, held at the Greater Richmond Convention Center, the couple now hope everyone knows where to find Ewing, Virginia.

The couple said Road Kill Barbecue Sauce came about after years of so many friends continuing to tell Jim that his recipe was so good, he should consider bottling and selling it.

Lois said recently that after they retired at the beginning of 2003, they decided to listen to their friends and give it a try because they "needed something to do."

The couple cooked up their various types of sauces, marketed as being so good they "make raccoon taste almost as good as possum," in a 50-gallon kettle in their kitchen and stored the product in their garage until they got it to the market. Back then, said Lois, the market involved taking their products to various festivals, where they always sold out everything they brought.

The sauce comes in the award-winning hot variety, a smoke and spice flavor, original and Gor-May flavor.

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By July 2005, their sales had reached a point that they could no longer produce the product in the kitchen of their home, so with the help of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, they learned of a co-packer right in their own back yard — The Relish Barn in Rose Hill — and business really took off.

In September, they picked up their first "big" order of 240 bottles of barbecue sauce with a bit of trepidation, wondering how in the world were they going to sell that many bottles. But the product sold, and the couple continued working with the state, and the following month Road Kill Barbecue Sauce was accepted as one of the "Virginia's Finest Products," a program that was created to identify top quality Virginia food and agricultural products.

Lois admits the name of the sauce goes a long way to helping sell it, but it sometimes raises an eyebrow. When someone questions it, Jim calmly explains there is no need to worry because their ingredients "are picked up fresh every morning."

Two years ago, Lois got in on the action and started producing her own line of old-fashioned relishes, which range from hot and mild chow chow to sweet and Vidalia onion relish. The Julie B recipes come from either Lois or from her mother and even her grandmother, so they do have the authentic old-fashioned taste. The family business also offers two types of meat rubs — appropriately named Raccoon Rub. One is for use on chicken and fish, while the other is for beef or pork. Yet they can also be used to season vegetables, salads and other dishes.

The Applebys' business plan called for the company to take the next step in 2008, and that step amounted to finding ways to get their products into grocery stores and specialty food stores. When the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services mailed a bulletin for registration in its May 12-13 Educational Conference and the May 14 Food & Beverage Expo, they quickly decided that was the way to find the solutions they had been seeking. More than 1,000 registered food buyers walked and talked and tasted during the all-day event.

When it was announced the sauce had won the Best New Product Award, "we just couldn't believe it could happen to us," said Lois. "We were one of 100 participants, and when they called Road Kill Barbecue Sauce, I just couldn't believe it. This was the first expo we'd been to, so naturally it was quite an honor for us."

The couple like to keep a healthy amount of humor about their business and now offer Road Kill T-shirts along with a novelty pack of 2-ounce bottles of sauce with such mouth-watering names as "Outta Luck Duck," "Dumb Deer," "P♦♦ of Possum," "Raccoon Spread," "Squashed Squirrel," "Armadillo On The Half Shell," "Gross Ground Hog," and "Rigor Mortis Tortoise." As might be expected, they even offer an "Eat more possum" bumper sticker that does double duty as an advertisement for their product.

A look at their Web site shows their customers are able to take the humor in stride.

One such customer in Indiana has left a note stating, "We found your "Road Kill BBQ Sauce" a delightful addition to our roadkill cookouts. As seniors, we are dependent on finding a sufficient supply of roadside cuisine. A valuable tip is to pick up the fare that rests just off the road, preferably on grass, which can be rolled up around the carcass for an additional flavor additive. Ideally, you will find one lying in wild mustard!"

The couple proclaim via their Web site that "Road Kill BBQ Sauce is a delicious tasting sauce that goes great with a wide variety of foods. Besides helping to make your favorite barbecue taste soooooo good, try our sauce on pork and beef roasts — steak — hamburgers — hot dogs — meat balls — even on an egg omelet! No kidding. It's egg-cellent!! You can also use Road Kill BBQ Sauce instead of catsup when making a meat loaf or baked beans. Delicious Barbeque!"

Road Kill Barbecue Sauce and Julie B's Old Fashion Relishes are currently being sold in the IGA Markets in Jonesville and Rose Hill, The Neighborhood Market in Ewing, Montgomery's Grocery in Ewing, The All About Virginia & More Store in Norfolk, Jones Produce Co. in Cana, Purple Feet Specialty Store in Galax, The Made in Virginia Store in Fredericksburg, plus various sites in Tennessee, Florida and even North Dakota.

For more information visit www.roadkillbbqsauce.com.



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