

Calamondin Crazy

Florida's latest flavor hits the international market

BY RENEE NOVELLE

It isn't every day that the world is introduced to a new flavor that's so unique, so delicious that it generates a media buzz and whips up an addiction frenzy. And yet that's exactly what Dr. Laurie Gutstein, owner of the virtual Calamondin Café, has done.

Sure, the calamondin orange may be nothing new to native Floridians. But when Gutstein introduced her spread of tasty recipes at the Fancy Food Show in late June, she was surprised by how many foodies were unfamiliar with the special fruit that serves as the base for all of her offerings. Out of approximately 1,200 tasters, including food professionals from all around the world, only 40 individuals even knew what a calamondin is. If their reaction was any indication, they won't quickly forget.

"We just had a fantastic response at the show," Gutstein excitedly declares as we stroll through her commercial kitchen. "This is a heritage fruit, and Florida needs to be proud."

What exactly makes the calamondin so intriguing? At first glance, it looks like a mini-orange with a sensitive, thin peel. But don't be fooled by appearances—this little fruit packs an explosive flavor. Sampling a bit of the signature jam, I was immediately awakened with a burst of citrusy sweetness that left me intrigued by its complexity. There are hints of other fruits there as well—pineapple, apricot, peach and maybe a little guava—all fused together with a perfectly tart punch. Truly, it's unlike anything else on the market, and it blends effortlessly to enhance dozens of everyday recipes, which Gutstein has been collecting and can name with ease.

After meeting Gutstein, who is just as bright, friendly and intriguing as the fruit she loves, I'm eager to learn what compelled this physician to revive such a delicate crop, propelling it to stardom. It all started with a chance encounter and off-the-cuff comment ...

Dr. Laurie Gutstein has parlayed her love of a small, delicate fruit into a thriving international business, the Calamondin Café.



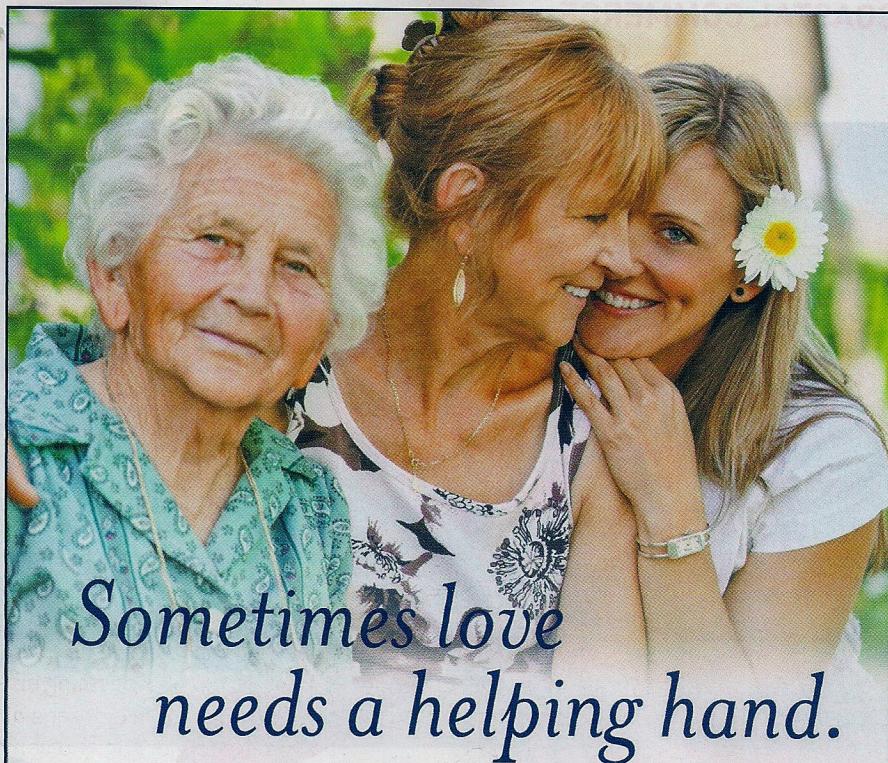
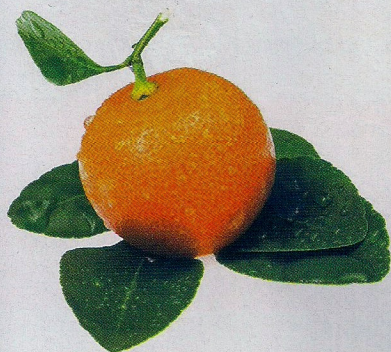
“WHEN I TASTED THAT FIRST JAM I KNEW I LOVED IT. I KNEW IT WOULD BE IN MY LIFE FOREVER.”

—LAURIE GUTSTEIN

According to legend, it was Gutstein's father who started the family tradition of making calamondin jam. Starting with a recipe he received from a local friend when he first moved to Southwest Florida, he tweaked it over the years to suit his own palate. “When I tasted that first jam I knew I loved it,” says Gutstein, smiling as she recalls that experience. “I knew it would be in my life forever.” I'm starting to understand exactly what she means.

Her father eventually retired from jam-making, much to the dismay of his family and friends, but he passed the recipe and knowledge on to his daughter. Gutstein embraced her new role and began expanding her calamondin interests—a smooth coulis and a tea cake primarily. But it wasn't until she brought one of her now-famous cakes to a party, and received the encouragement of a good friend to pursue the opportunity, that she even considered turning her favorite hobby into a business. The friend told her, “You know, Laurie, there are ladies who would start retirement businesses on something like this,” Gutstein recalls, brushing off the comment and claiming she had plenty to do already. She took the suggestion to heart, however, and turned her hobby into what she calls “a hugely fun project.”

This “fun project” now has thousands of customers—spanning the entire North American continent and even parts of



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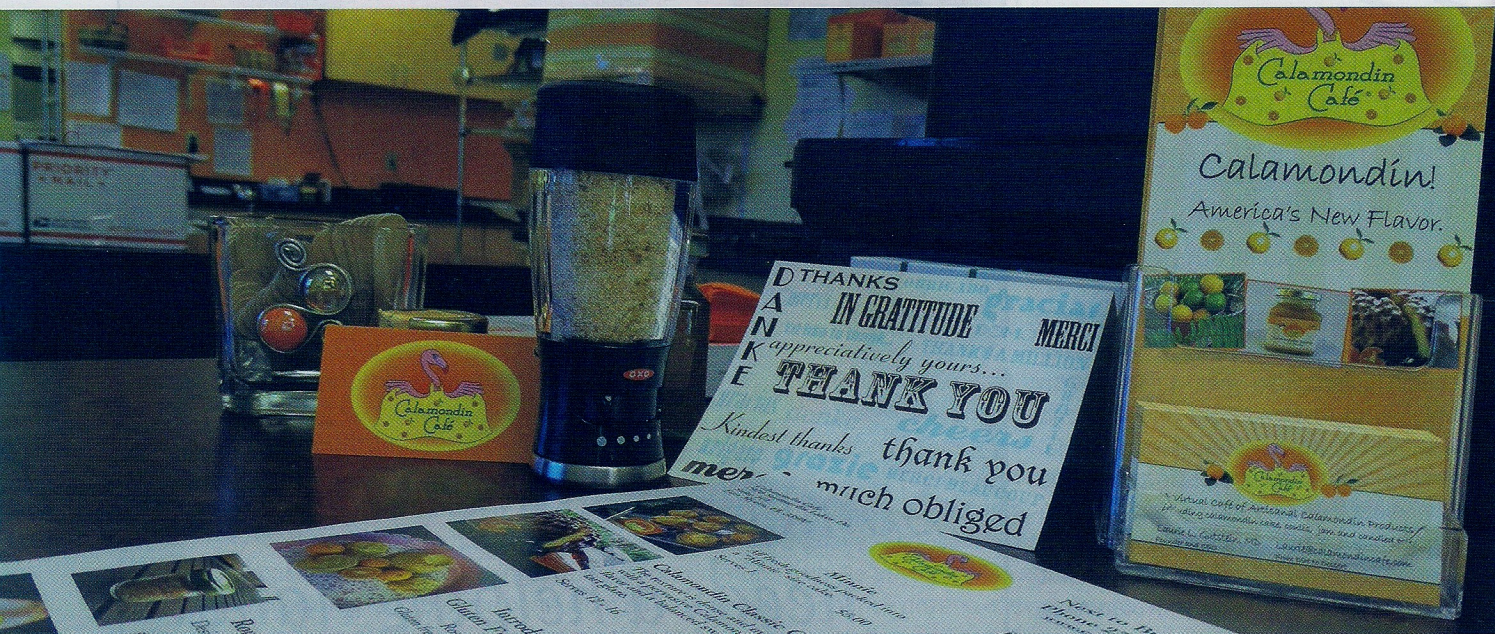
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Tasty coulis, tea cakes and jams are the mainstays of the virtual Calamondin Café, where staff includes Kevin Graham and Sandy McGraw, along with owner Laurie Gutstein.

Europe—who are devouring her products at a rapid rate. In fact, the café recently processed 522 pounds of the fruit to keep up with the demand.

The staff's favorite reaction so far? "When I find out that the [customers] hide it from their loved ones," laughs Sandy McGraw, an employee at the Café. "It's so good they don't want to share it."

Gutstein's grove is now the largest in Florida. Although at first her father wasn't sure what she would do with all the calamondin trees she was planting, the vastness of her vision quickly became apparent to him. As the business expands, she's adding an assortment of goods and gifts to its online store. Plans include ice cream, frosting, calamondin juice and puree, green tea, chocolate products, online recipe suggestions and possibly a cookbook.

Though she admits her products aren't exactly health foods, Gutstein is adamant about staying true to her roots as a physician. This includes using organic products wherever possible and insisting on a no-toxin environment, which means even the

company packaging is BPA- and aluminum-free. "As we grow, we may end up with an organic line and a non-organic line," she says.

Above all, Gutstein values customer interaction. The stories that really affect her are from those tasters who remember their mother's or grandmother's recipes after sampling Gutstein's. "When you can bring somebody's childhood back to them in a mouthful, that's a one-on-one touch experience that you don't forget." ¶

Renee Novelle is an author and journalist living in Southwest Florida.

IF YOU GO

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