

Yes, That's Really Ice Cream

FORMER PASTRY CHEF'S FUN, ARTISTIC CREATIONS PROVE A WELCOME CAREER CHANGE **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

The upside-down bucket on the chicken's head in her Life Raft Treats packaging is just one of the creative touches by Cynthia Wong, who "got tired of working more than 70 hours a week for someone else."

ACCORDING TO Cynthia Wong, inventor of Life Raft Treats®, her innovation "celebrates the ice cream truck goodies of yesteryear by reinventing them with humor and artisan techniques."

Wong, of Charleston—a six-time James Beard Foundation Award semifinalist for Outstanding Pastry Chef—created a business with novelty ice cream treats shaped like ramen bowls, fried chicken, hot dogs and oysters.

The vegan varieties are delicious. And who doesn't love ice cream?

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Why Life Raft Treats, and how did you get there?

Cynthia Wong (CW): I grew up on the Gulf Coast in Alabama. I wanted to be a pastry chef for as long as I could remember. Then, I did it.

I like to joke that I'm the only person I know who had the bad luck of becoming what they wanted to be when they were little! I loved a lot of things about my career choice, but ultimately the cons outweighed the pros in the restaurant industry—especially for a lady with kids.

I got tired of working more than 70 hours a week for someone else. So, I built myself a little Life Raft (the ice cream business), got on it and paddled away!

EGT: What about being a six-time James Beard Foundation Award semifinalist for Outstanding Pastry Chef? And have you ever had your own restaurant or bakery?

CW: It was definitely not expected but greatly appreciated. I was fortunate to not have it eat my psyche.

I never got caught up in winning; I was just happy to have this stamp of approval that I could use to negotiate a higher salary, get a better job—and when I opened Life Raft Treats, it helped me be taken seriously. The nominations gave consumers a reference of quality, I suppose.

I have not owned my own restaurant or bakery, and I do not think I ever could have. My friends who own restaurants and bakeries are a different breed altogether. I do not have that capacity!

Life Raft Treats sells direct to consumer and wholesale, but we do not have a shop front. I do not have any retail experience, so as a small company, for now we are sticking to what we know.



“I feel frequently that the business has had nine lives. Not sure which life we are on right now!” —CYNTHIA WONG

EGT: When did you create the Life Raft Treats business? Was that a difficult process?

CW: In 2018, I knew I was burned out of restaurants completely and irrevocably. I had always loved ice cream and was very inspired by the La Martinière ice cream business in France.

My husband said, “What’s stopping you from pursuing this ice cream thing?” And the answer was, “Well, nothing, really!”

I was not going back to restaurants, and pastry chef jobs were dying off and not coming back. So, I went for it. It wasn’t that difficult getting started, probably because the Charleston community was so enthusiastic and supportive. I was very lucky,

EGT: What food safety laws are in place for this type of food product? Do you require any special inspections or licenses, and do you have any physical stores? Where is your factory?

CW: We are regulated by the South Carolina Department of Agriculture and the Food & Drug Administration. We do have special FDA inspections, and we are licensed for our ice cream truck/retail sales as well as for wholesaling.

We do not have any physical stores. Our factory is in north Charleston.

EGT: Have you had any start-up or ongoing business challenges?

CW: We’ve had all of them! Really, though, we have been very fortunate, and I feel frequently that the business has had nine lives. Not sure which life we are on right now!

EGT: Please share your recent “Shark Tank” experience. Did you make a deal?

CW: “Shark Tank” (Season 16, Episode 2) was an absolute lark, and although we did not get a

deal it was a fun if surreal experience. I was happy and proud and grateful we got to tell our story.

EGT: Who designs your various products?

CW: I do! I just want people to laugh and enjoy themselves for a few minutes when they have our treats.

EGT: What, if any, are the challenges for shipping frozen products?

CW: There are so many! There’s UPS, who will not take responsibility for any mishandling or late shipments that are their fault. We have to eat the cost of reshipping products that they deliver late.

We have to ship overnight, and it’s very expensive. We ship with dry ice, which is also very expensive and requires special handling. The packaging materials have more than doubled in cost in the past few years.

EGT: How many typical varieties are you offering? What is the retail pricing?

CW: We have five main kinds of treats: nine-piece buckets of Not Fried Chicken®, \$45; 36-piece platters of ice cream nuggets, \$50; six-packs of dairy free peach bombes, \$36; 17-piece ice cream seafood platters, \$75; and platters of five ice cream hot dogs, \$45.

These are the retail prices for local pickup in Charleston. The prices for shipping are a little more than double, as Goldbelly—the third-party shipping portal/platform we are a part of—takes their cut, and then there’s the cost of overnight shipping, dry ice and packaging.





Life Raft Treats peach bombs are dairy and gluten free.

EGT: Tell us about your dairy-free and gluten-free options.

CW: Our peach bombs are dairy and gluten free. They are peach sorbet made from South Carolina peaches, sprayed with Valrhona Almond inspiration (a dairy-free almond and cocoa butter coating) that we tint. The process we use to coat the peaches results in the peaches having a fuzzy appearance, just like peaches!

EGT: Where are you selling?

CW: We sell through our website for Charleston pickup, we ship through Goldbelly, and we are in 500 retail locations across the country—including some Whole Foods Markets, Mariano’s, Roundy’s, Central Market, DashMart and Fresh Direct.

EGT: Do you have any advice for novice inventors of food products?

CW: Start small and as lean as possible. You don’t need to spend a bunch of money on marketing for a minute.

Give away as much product as you can; when you are starting off, you need to get your food in as many mouths as possible.

Most important, remember that comparison is the thief of joy. Do not look at what other people have accomplished and try to measure yourself against them.

EGT: What’s up next for Life Raft Treats?

CW: We are working to find a co-manufacturer so we can get more Not Fried Chicken on shelves out there! 🍗

Details: lifterafttreats.com, hello@lifterafttreats.com

Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 (edietolchin.com/portfolio). She is the author of several books, including “Secrets of Successful Women Inventors” (<https://a.co/d/fAGlvZJ>) and “Secrets of Successful Inventing” (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).



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