

Web Site a 'Labor of Love'

WVGOURMETFOODS.COM
FEATURES PRODUCTS
FROM 12 OF STATE'S
FINEST FOOD VENDORS

By PAM KASEY

pkasey@statejournal.com

Where do you go when you need a fix of your favorite West Virginia gourmet food product? You could drive to **Tamarack** or, if you're lucky, a local shop may carry it. Or you can order directly from the producer through **WVGourmetFoods.com**.

Of course, it wasn't always that way. West Virginia native **Carla**

Santee and her now-fiance **Tim Ford** came up with the idea in 2001 to help the state's gourmet foods vendors with an online showcase for their products.

"At the time, there was nothing out there like that," explained Santee, whose base is in Fairmont. "I said, 'You guys don't have Web sites. Would you be interested in being part of this?'"

It was a good fit



Santee



Ford

for the pair. Santee, a professional photographer, takes care of the content, while Ford, a multimedia specialist with Web design experience, creates and maintains the site.

Gourmet Central in Romney and **Blue Smoke Salsa** in Ansted were first to try it out.

Now in its third year, **WVGourmetFoods.com** has 12 of the state's top gourmet food vendors. All but two are at **Tamarack**, but the site is open to old and new vendors of any size, Santee said, as long as they're approved by the state **Department of Agriculture** and produce and package their product within the state.

Orders to **WVGourmetFoods.com** pass through the site to the vendors and Santee receives a copy.

Early on, she said, there was an



order every week or two. Now orders come through every day. Not just from West Virginia, either — they come from other states and even other countries. Total user sessions on the site in February came to nearly 11,000.

Santee and Ford work flexibly around vendors, so ordering procedures vary from one to another. **Gourmet Central**, for example, operates an e-commerce shopping cart, while **Rosario's Gourmet**

Italian Sausage Mix requests an e-mailed or snail-mailed order form.

Rosario's signed up early on, and owner **Donna Lopez** said about 90 percent of her orders come through **WVGourmetFoods.com**.

"We did make our own Web site, **Rosarios.com**, and never got a hit, never got anything at all going — and it was over \$600," Lopez said.

With **WVGourmetFoods.com**,

WEBlinks

Order from these West Virginia gourmet foods vendors through **WVGourmetFoods.com**:

- Appalachian Mountain Specialty Foods
- Blue Smoke Salsa
- Dark Hollow Foods
- Edee's Candies
- Gourmet Central
- The Home Place
- MANNA — Food for the Soul
- Mountain Lake Hydroponic Herbs
- Red Roof Farm
- Rosario's Gourmet Italian Sausage Mix
- Stef Chef
- Thistledeew Farm

"We pay \$100 a year. We found out that we could charge less for our products and still come out the same," she added. "I can e-mail them that I need a change and it's done in no time, and I check it out before they put it on. It couldn't be any better."

Santee and Ford set their \$100 fee at the beginning to cover technical costs — server space, Internet service and software updates — and they've kept it the same ever since.

"What kind of advertising can you get for that?" Santee said. "But somebody's got to do something for those little guys out there. I don't believe in 300 percent markup. I just want the money to go directly to them."

Santee described the site as a labor of love. She estimates they spend about four hours a week, more when first creating a vendor's pages.

"We try to gear each vendor's pages toward the product and the feel," she said.

After that, she said, it mostly takes care of itself except for updates.

At some point, the two may consider a sliding scale so vendors who get more orders through the site pay a bit more, while the site stays affordable for smaller companies.

"I'm grateful for the people we have," Santee said. "I would be interested in helping more people make their way onto the Internet the easy way — not paying someone \$500 to design their Web page."