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SPOTLIGHT

Back in town: Owatonna-based gluten-free business, products return as Mama Stoen's

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The Stoen family of Owatonna behind a new gluten-free baking mixes business that are now in 21 stores in Minnesota and Iowa. From right: Cameron, Christine, Gage, Jami and Gracie. (Ashley Stewart/People's Press)



OWATONNA — Christine and Jami Stoen of Owatonna are making a comeback.

The former owners of Simply Stoen's — a handmade, gluten-free baking mixes business with Melissa and Brandon Stoen that dissolved in 2015 — have returned to area grocery stores with a new name, new product and new packaging.

"We gave everything a facelift," Christine Stoen said.

Simply Stoen's was started as a trial-and-error at-home bakery after Christine Stoen and her daughter, Gracie, were diagnosed with celiac disease in August 2009.

The disease is an autoimmune disorder where the consumption of gluten — a protein found in wheat, rye and barley — damages the lining of the small intestine, preventing proper absorption of nutrients.

"I was trying all of the food and a lot of it was really dry, and I didn't like it," she said. "I just remember crying in the grocery store because I just wanted regular food again, so I started creating stuff in the kitchen, and I finally came up with a recipe that worked and tasted like regular food."

That's when Christine Stoen and her sister-in-law Melissa Stoen started working together to mix and bag banana bread, waffle, cookie and cake mixes to be distributed to four stores, including Hy-Vees in Owatonna and Rochester and a location in Lanesboro.

"We were doing everything by hand," Christine Stoen said. "It was fun, but it was a lot of work."

After a few months of stocking products at those stores, it became too much.

"We just grew too big too fast," Jami Stoen said. "So we decided to take a breather."

But the products' absence didn't go unnoticed. By July, the Stoens had received emails and Facebook messages from individuals who were still interested in the product.

"That set the tone for us doing this again," Jami Stoen said.

Christine Stoen spent months reconfiguring recipes to accommodate other allergies and sensitivities in addition to gluten — something the Stoens received feedback on while part of Simply Stoen's.

"You'd be amazed at the different allergies people have," she said.

Now, all of Mama Stoen's — the new name of the business — products are certified gluten-free, nut-free, dairy-free, soy-free, egg-free and non-GMO, as well as contain no preservatives, artificial flavors, synthetic colors, MSG or trans-fats.

Plus, there are more mixes to choose from.

Christine Stoen has created recipes for pizza crust, chocolate cake, cookies, cornbread, bread, banana bread, carrot cake, brownies and pancakes or waffles.

"We just based it on a lot of things people were wanting," she said, noting she's currently working on an angel food cake recipe.

While Christine Stoen was working the recipes, the couple spent months designing the products' boxes, which include mix directions, recipes and nutritional information.

"Before it was just on bags with a sticker, so we just printed off the sticker," Christine Stoen said. "With these, we had to go through and get everything on there. You had to make sure it was regulated by the state with all the licenses and you had to make sure everything on the side was all true."

Unlike the former business, Mama Stoen's product is packaged in North Carolina.

"It takes some of the heat off of us," Jami Stoen said.

But it also has allowed the products, which started appearing in stores like the Owatonna Hy-Vee on Feb. 1, to stock the shelves of more than 20 grocery stores and co-ops in Minnesota and Iowa.

"There's no way we could've been in the stores we are now and doing it all by hand," Christine Stoen said. "We had to get help with that."

The Stoens said after a month, they've already sold 6,000 products, which is more than they were able to sell with Simply Stoen's.

"It's progressed real quickly," Jami Stoen said.

In fact, the Stoens are already ordering products to restock the shelves and appearing in new grocery stores and co-ops daily.

And the couple joined by their children Cameron, Gage and Gracie, are visiting expos and other events throughout the Midwest, including one in Illinois in May, and online to expand the business.

“My goal is I want to be able to help people, help them enjoy food again,” Christine Stoen said.

According to the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness, it’s estimated one in 133 Americans has celiac disease.

For more information about Mama Stoen’s or to purchase the product, visit www.mamastoens.com and like the Mama Stoen’s Facebook page.

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