



air-natural



# Making Something Good

by Holly Head  
hhead@h3-media.com  
photos by Noel Martin  
graphics2@h3-media.com

During one of her morning jogs about a year-and-a-half ago, Tylerite and mother of two Leigh Vickery had an idea. She wanted to start her own food company; by no means a small idea – but not impossible, either. In high school Vickery had toiled away in restaurants, working in the kitchen to learn from the cooks. She has a background in public relations and marketing, a degree in English, writing and psychology, and has always loved to cook. “I just all of a sudden could connect the dots of what I was supposed to be doing,” said Vickery. She also had another idea for her culinary venture, “I can use the money for something bigger ... then everything is covered that makes me happy.” That is how Leigh Oliver’s – Vickery’s now successful food line of all-natural white quesos began. She went home after her run and told her ideas to her husband, Ron, who backed her completely. “He said, ‘Okay. Let’s do it! Let’s go for it!’”

Leigh has always had a love of cooking. She was raised in Columbus, Mississippi where she says cooking was a way for family and friends to show their love for one another. As a child she remembers cooking with both her grandmothers, which the company Leigh Oliver’s is named after. “I wanted to name the company after that kind of heritage.”

Her idea to start the food line of all-natural food products with white quesos was a truly entrepreneurial moment. “I was just making it at home and realized, I wonder why you can’t buy this? I wonder why you can’t get a good white queso?” She went with the less-common, white queso both to be different and to have a product that would stand out from any others. “I was trying to make something more pure. All natural, no colors ... nothing artificial, no preservatives.” She said a smooth white cheese is something people are not expecting to see. Vickery started playing with several recipes, testing them with friends, family and neighbors, and received



promising feedback. Taking the next step, she began to meet with people in the grocery business and with marketing and advertising people to get a poll of their opinions. They all loved it. "Then, I went to Whole Foods and Central Market and literally just took samples with me," remembers Leigh. "And they said, 'We love this! We need this! This does not exist. You go back and figure out how to do this large scale and we'll talk to you again.'"

It was then that Leigh became quite serious about the products – and their future. She had her manufacturer in Austin produce several white quesos because, "I knew enough about the market to know that to enter the market strongly, you can't just come in with one thing. It would just get lost, and so I knew that I needed to come in with at least three."

First she developed a mild white queso, flavored with fresh green chiles, "Which is the bestseller, because anybody can eat it," she commented. Then, a hot queso with jalapeños was added. Next, a spinach queso was included, modeled after one Leigh makes at home. She met with Whole Foods to see what they thought about the chiles and jalapeños. "It was collaboration, and

they loved the spinach one. Nobody, obviously, had done that before." Leigh continued to test and perfect the three quesos, "And it just evolved. My friends and family, oh my goodness, have eaten so much queso in the last year!" she laughed.

Once she came up with the final products, the next challenge was to figure out how the one-pound recipes she made at home would be translated into 500-pound batches at the manufacturer. A process that Leigh says is tricky because it completely changes the chemistry of the queso. Leigh credits her Austin-based manufacturer with helping her create a quality product. "From a manufacturing standpoint, they helped me take it to the next level." She also said in this process, she learned it is important to outsource things you are not good at. "Find the best people you can at what they can do, and hire them."

Choosing the right jar for the quesos and the design of the Leigh Oliver's label was also a very involved process. The modern-shaped jar, which is microwaveable and recyclable, was a purposeful choice. She did research and strolled grocery store aisles looking at jars and buying ones she liked. Then, she

investigated how much the jars cost and if she could afford that particular jar. The label and logo were also purposefully designed to represent the brand and sell the product. "I have a friend in town who does graphic design and she helped me ... she just let me sit by her computer and I would go, 'No, not that!'" They came up with sample logos and Leigh would take them home to show her husband and their friends to see which ones they liked. The possible logo choices were narrowed down, and later, a picture of Leigh was added to the jar so buyers would be able to identify with the creator of the product. Leigh laughed and said, "Now when I'm in stores ... people say, 'You're her!'"

The first test of the product packaging was conducted in Whole Foods on Preston Road in Plano. Leigh said she and Ron traveled into the store incognito with an empty jar and the newly designed label on it in Leigh's purse. They wanted to see what it looked like on a shelf next to the other products. "We were in the specialty department and a worker named Ned, who is now our friend, came up ... and all he said was, 'May I help you?' or something (harmless) like that. But it startled me so badly because I knew I was up to no good." After Ned cracked a joke, he asked Leigh why they were looking at the queso jars, and she told him how she was trying to start her own company. "Ned said, 'Cool! Come on, pull it out! Stick it on the shelves!'" Leigh said, "He made this big to-do, scooted everything out of the way and put mine up there and said, 'It looks awesome! We need this white queso! Here's who you call in Austin. This is who would buy it from you. Go for it!'" Leigh called the man Ned referred them to, and he wanted Leigh and her husband to meet with him in Austin and talk. "And so we did ... and he bought it!"

Leigh Oliver's white quesos started distribution in the beginning of February 2008 through Whole Foods Market and Central Market. "I now have distributors all over, and they sell to people and I don't even know where they're selling," said Vickery. Other stores that carry the quesos are Sweet Gourmet in Tyler and Rice Epicurean Markets, located in Houston. She also said that recently, a distribution agreement has been reached for the Whole Foods Rocky Mountain region, and Whole Foods Midwest will be the next region to carry the product, once the distribution negotiations are finalized. "It's hard for me to keep up. Whole Foods for sure is my biggest customer."

Another important facet of the company is the idea that Leigh had for the profits. Originally, her plan was to keep half of the profits and to donate the other half. Leigh says the 50 percent may fluctuate, depending on the size of the company. A portion of Leigh Oliver's profits made at Whole Foods goes to the Whole Planet Foundation, which Leigh explained focuses on micro-enterprise. "A lot of times, it's women in Third World countries who ... with \$300 I can give to this woman in Mexico who is able to go buy what she needs to start her little business. And all of a sudden, she is supporting her family." Another organization that Leigh and her family are involved with is the Boys & Girls Clubs of East Texas. Vickery said her family has a river philosophy. "A river has to have a source flowing in and flowing out to be strong ...

we apply that to us. We have a lot coming in. We are very thankful for it," said Leigh. "For a lot of these people here (Boys & Girls Clubs), \$5 to pay your dues is a lot."

For Leigh, one of the fun aspects of having her own business, she says, is she can do whatever she wants. This includes where the profits from the company go. "I think people always confuse generosity with some sort of sacrifice you're making, and it's not ... giving is not a sacrifice. You just do it." Leigh referred to her business concept as "profitable with a conscience," a model often referred to as "conscious capitalism." She said people have mentioned to her that it is a smart marketing angle; she remarked that donating portions of the profits is not an angle. "Never have I used that to close a deal, never," said Leigh. She wants the product to stand on its own. "It's business. It has to taste good and sell well, and they don't really care what you do with the profits."

So far, Leigh says they have sold thousands and thousands of jars of white queso. In addition to the three original products, Leigh Oliver's is also coming out with a line of all-natural pimento cheeses. "There are four kinds. There's a smoked Gouda, a jalapeño, a low fat (skinny) and a then a regular (Southern)." Vickery says the jar will read "It's the paste that holds the South together." The green light to start the pimento cheese phase of Leigh Oliver's was a battle for her that has involved overcoming mayonnaise prices. Leigh said they were ready to start the pimento cheeses, and then the price of mayonnaise shot up. As a small business, forces outside of Vickery's

control were controlling her. However, she was able to work out a deal with Whole Foods. "They're letting me come in and buy from their volume. I have to use this very specific mayonnaise to meet their stringent requirements," she said. "I can't believe people are very kind and they want you to succeed and they want to help you."

Vickery is also going to be featured in an upcoming issue of Cooking with Paula Deen magazine. An acquaintance of Vickery's in Tyler helped her contact the magazine's publishing company. She sent them some queso and told them the story. "Then they wrote back, and I'm going to be (featured as a) 'Woman of Note,'" said Leigh. "I opened it and thought, 'Oh my gosh!' I thought it was just going to be like, 'Buy the queso!'" The multi-page story is set to run in the spring issue of the magazine and the photos have already been shot. Leigh met with Paula's "people," but said she would eventually like to meet Paula. "I would love to do something like a show!" She laughed, "Don't tell my husband that. He'll go, 'No stop! Enough!'"

Her brand of white queso has also been featured in The Dallas Morning News, the Tyler Morning Telegraph and The Commercial Dispatch in Columbus, Mississippi. She speculates part of the product's appeal is that there is nothing else like it. "I just got lucky with several of the bigger cities (that) have written stuff about it. I didn't know it was even coming out. So I was happy about that."

Another aspect of Leigh Oliver's involves pitching the product and the company to buyers across the United

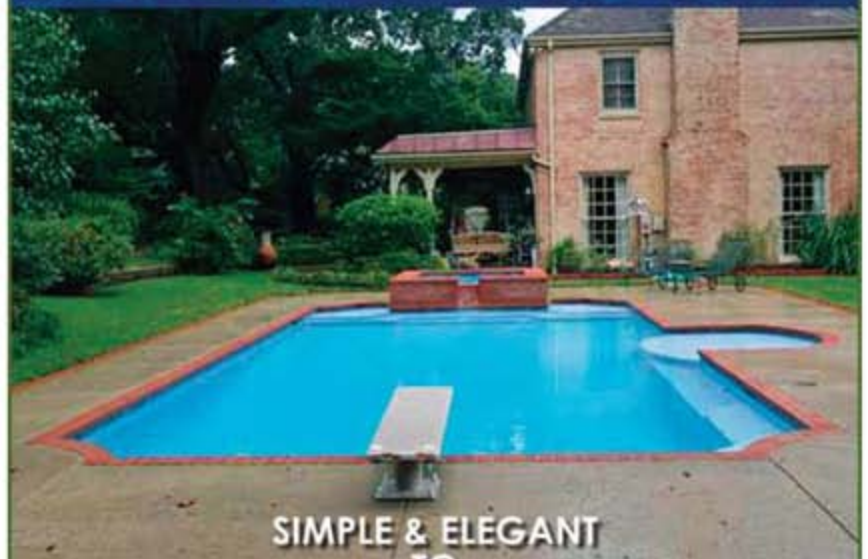


DREAM IT • DESIGN IT • BUILD IT



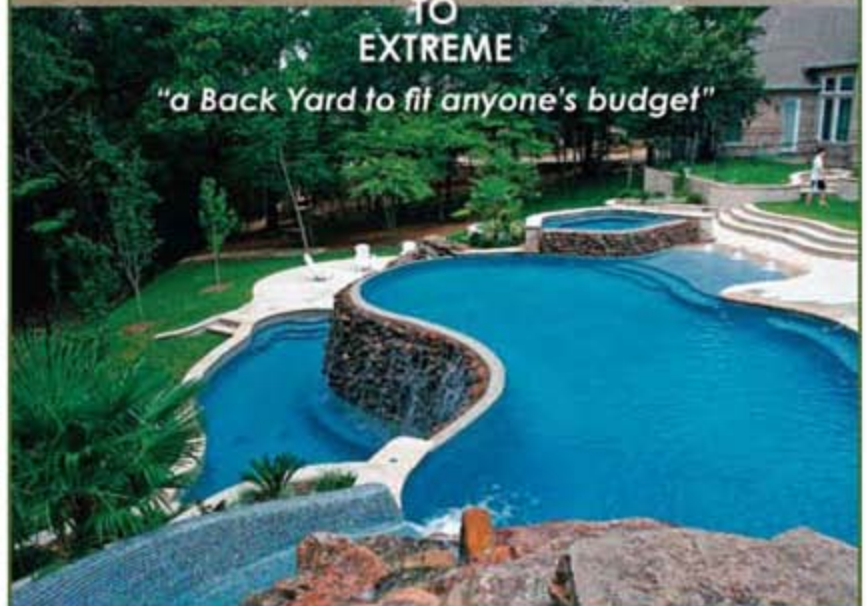
**BACK YARD**  
CONNECTION™  
*Pools Of Distinction*

**CUSTOM POOLS & SPAS • LANDSCAPING**  
**POOL HOUSES • CABANAS & PERGOLAS**



**SIMPLE & ELEGANT  
TO  
EXTREME**

*"a Back Yard to fit anyone's budget"*



**903.561.2140**

**CHAD & KELLY REED, OWNERS**  
12440 HWY 1555 #A2 • TYLER, TX 75703  
[www.backyardconnection.com](http://www.backyardconnection.com)

*Life gets better when you step outside*



States. Her pitching technique is to be honest with the buyers and to maintain good relationships with them. "The pitch is just simply being who I am ... and not trying to pretend to know everything, and not pretending to have some 'wheeler-dealer' personality that I don't." She explained most of the business deals are straightforward, and she has turned down bigger accounts because she felt they might compromise her brand. "If it ever got to the point where I felt like somebody wasn't being honest with me, I wouldn't do it," explained Leigh. "So the pitch is a very good product and they believe in what I'm doing and that, you know, they've all given me a shot."

Leigh recalled one particular presentation she had to give in Los Angeles. "I was petrified," she remembered. She had to fly to L.A. and give a promotional presentation to 60 buyers that purchased her products. Right before she left, she received an e-mail that it would need to be a PowerPoint presentation. "I don't know how to do a PowerPoint!" she said, and enlisted the help of her 9-year-old son, Smith, to put it together. "It was very groovy, it swirled, it made music ... and it was hilarious. (The buyers) laughed so hard! And they were good customers and bought a lot."

All of Leigh's family has been instrumental in the development of Leigh Oliver's. She met her husband, Ron, when she was in college at Baylor University and he was in his last year at Baylor Law School. They were married in 1993, and Leigh moved to Tyler. Ron helps Leigh with the business and accounting aspects of the company, and is also the chief professional officer for the Boys & Girls Clubs of East Texas. "He's my rock is what I always tell him," said Leigh. "He is very calm ... and balanced and stable." Her family also includes her two sons, Will and Smith.

One of the biggest challenges for Leigh is managing her business and personal life at the same time. "I think for any woman in business – I mean, it sounds like a cliché but – it really is a juggling act to keep everybody happy." She says there are definitely times when she has to leave her family to travel with the business and ponders, "Am I doing the right thing?" But despite any doubt about balance in her life, she is continually developing ideas to expand her company. Leigh plans to continue to build the Leigh Oliver's food line. "But then, I have a friend here in Tyler that we're talking pretty seriously about trying to find a place to open and do something here."

Leigh says one of the greatest joys she gets from her creations are the reactions from people that try the food. "I am doing what I feel like God has called me to do for sure, and I'm in the zone of where I need to be – and then knowing the benefit from it is not just going to help my little family."

One of the tag lines for Leigh Oliver's is, "Good for all mankind," which she said is a play on words. "It's also a play on using the money that we make from it and feeding (people), a basic need being met here and across the world." For Vickery, the whole experience has taught her to be more giving and to help others, and she says there are rewards for all her hard work. "Simply just, 'Did you like it?' And that makes me happy that you liked it and then, you know – doing something good." B