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From office to baking oven **Tina Traster**

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For her 40th birthday in 2004, Debbie Bonner gave herself a birthday present: permission to leave a cushy corporate marketing job to become a professional baker. After years of making pies, cobblers and cakes for friends, family and Harlem community groups, Ms. Bonner finally scraped together financing to create Debbie's Soulful Sweets.

It has been a slow, uphill climb. But this African-American, who grew up in the South Bronx, has a strong support network of other women who have helped her along the way. Ms. Bonner says that being black has been a neutral factor in her success, but adds, "If I were Italian, I might have a harder time selling red velvet cake."

The baker, who produces about a dozen cakes a day in rented commercial space, has found a demand for Southern-style sweets from corporate headquarters to farmers' markets. Web site sales are also picking up. Her Really Red Velvet, Gran'ma's Coconut Pineapple and Ma's Hummingbird cakes cost \$35. Individual-size fried-apple pies and bread pudding, and sage sausage-cheddar cheese buttermilk biscuits, are \$1 to \$3.50.

"It was not easy to walk away from a steady paycheck," says Ms. Bonner, who has one full-time employee and uses several part-timers during holidays. Revenues were \$95,000 last year.

HITS—The right contacts

Getting rejected by a handful of banks led Ms. Bonner to Project Enterprise, a microlender in Harlem. Borrowing \$5,000 helped jump-start the operation with equipment, her Web site, and silk-screened promotional tote bags.

Project Enterprise also opened doors. "They put me in touch with corporate contacts like NBC, Bear Stearns and WBLS, a black-owned radio station." Selling at the Harlem Green Market every Tuesday from July through November has given Ms. Bonner visibility and helped her build a clientele without a retail storefront.

MISSES—Conversion problems

Ms. Bonner was perplexed when she moved to a professional kitchen and her recipes weren't right. "I just thought if I scaled everything up, the baked goods would taste the same," she says. "They were awful." Ms. Bonner spent \$2,000 to hire a professional scaler—a food scientist who converts home recipes to commercial formulas.

"I was afraid to let someone see the recipes because they had been closely held family secrets, but this woman saved my company," Ms. Bonner says.

When Debbie's Soulful Sweets launched in late 2004, Ms. Bonner was selling only about 15 cakes a month. Then she got 250 orders the week before Thanksgiving 2005. "I underestimated the effectiveness of all those business cards I'd been handing out," Ms. Bonner says. Rounding up family members and working three days without a break, she filled the orders. ♦

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