

Catherine T. Clark



Catherine T. Clark started baking her Brownberry bread in her kitchen oven. A \$7,000 loan turned her bread-baking abilities into a business. The risk paid off. Brownberry Ovens, Inc. became a multimillion dollar business. The company's story eventually

graced the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*.

Brownberry Ovens began in 1946. Mrs. Clark and her husband, Russell Clark, took out a \$7,000 mortgage on their home in the Milwaukee area and then bought an oven, a mixer, a delivery truck and a grocery store to use as a bakery.

Mrs. Clark coined the name Brownberry Ovens because the fresh loaves came out of the oven "brown as berry." The success of the business depended on consumers liking the taste of the bread made from a traditional family recipe of freshly milled wheat.

Mr. Clark, a 1927 graduate of Harvard, described the original bread in an article called "The Brownberry Bread of Catherine Clark" that appeared in the summer 1954 issue of the Harvard Business School Bulletin.

"It was made from a recipe utilizing coarse-ground wheat meal, milled in the shop the very day it was baked up into bread," he wrote. "This process allowed the use of the valuable wheat germ, which does not react well to storage, and further contributed to a flavor that cannot be found outside the fresh-milling process.

"The method of grinding was of the greatest importance, not only

to produce a particular type of granulation, but in order to release the wheat grain intact. Mrs. Clark subscribes to the theory that the pulverizing or macerating of the germ that results from fine-grinding of whole wheat flours dissipates its value through loss of the volatile oils.”

Mrs. Clark at first supplied a



Catherine Clark called her company Brownberry Ovens because the whole wheat bread, such as the bread she is examining in the photo, came out of the oven “brown as berry”.

few grocery stores in Milwaukee and one grocer in Oconomowoc, Wis. On Saturdays, she and her husband traveled to neighboring towns. Packing freshly baked Brownberry bread, a jar of butter and a breadboard, they handed out samples to passersby.

Mr. Clark, in the Harvard Business School Bulletin, wrote, “At

the end of the first year, I was surprised and happy to find that the infant corporation had a net profit of \$86.”

Profits grew. The line expanded to include other varieties of bread and recipes were adapted for large-scale operation. Sales more than doubled every year. In 1954, the company built a new \$400,000 plant in Oconomowoc.

The story of Brownberry Ovens was told on the front page of the Aug. 17, 1969, issue of *The Wall Street Journal* in an article titled “Road to Riches.” By that time Mrs. Clark was president, founder and co-owner of a company that made nearly \$4 million in sales

for the year ended June 30, 1969. In the article, Mrs. Clark recalled the concept behind the creation of her bread.

“We decided it would be useless to try to sell a product that looked and tasted like something already on the market,” she said. “We figured we had to be original and different — and then convince the public this difference was something they needed.

“Our bread is different in appearance, texture and taste. This was our sales pitch and it worked.”

The market for that bread

expanded geographically in 1972 when Mrs. Clark merged Brownberry with the Peavey Co. in Minneapolis. The next year, Brownberry Ovens was distributing from within a 350-mile radius of its Oconomowoc bakery when it announced plans to more than double its production capacity thanks to the purchase of a 52,000-square-foot plant in Twinsburg, Ohio, according to a story in the May 29, 1973, issue of *Milling & Baking News*.

The suburban Cleveland plant allowed Brownberry Ovens to extend marketing of fresh baked products into Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia. Croutons, crouton-based dessert mixes, stuffing and crumbs were other items offered by Brownberry Ovens.

Mrs. Clark died in 1986 at age 79, but her Brownberry bread still may be found on retail shelves. George Weston Bakeries, Inc., Totowa, N.J., sells sliced bread, buns and rolls, stuffing, croutons and bagels under the Brownberry brand.

“Times may have changed but Brownberry’s Natural recipe has not; it only got better,” George Weston Bakeries proclaims. “Brownberry Natural breads have no artificial additives or preservatives. And, the original flavor and texture of Brownberry can be found in a variety of delicious products all baked according to the founder’s original recipe in the slow, old-fashioned way — one batch at a time.”