

Marblehead chef cooks up move to Lynn

PHOTO BY PAULA MULLER

Jeni Wheeler, with a display of some of the foods that she will offer at her new business in Lynn.

BY GAYLA CAWLEY

LYNN — **Jeni Wheeler** is planning to make **Lynn** healthier.

Wheeler, a Lynn native, is temporarily living in **Marblehead** after selling her **Boston** home. She had been commuting from Boston to **Warren, Rhode Island**, where she had shared kitchen space at **Hope & Main** for her start-up wholesale food business, **Jeni's Joy**.

Her brand, that specializes in **gluten-free** soups and other foods, was launched last fall. Wheeler spent months in Rhode Island doing testing, where she decided that a purely, gluten-free kitchen is what she wanted. While there, she also had a retail shop, where people would come and pick up her products, which were mostly sold frozen.

"I focus on the integrity of the quality of the ingredients," Wheeler said. Her soups and egg bakes are the most popular, she said, with her chicken soup remaining the top seller. For her chicken soup, she has 12 vegetables in it, including some that are pureed, which adds to the flavor. All of her meats are organic. She tries to source all of her ingredients locally and organically.

Her **egg bakes**, or **breakfast bakes**, have no added preservatives, another key to most of her foods. They include some shredded organic potato, a homemade spice mixture, an array of vegetables, a homemade egg combination and cheese. Others are dairy-free but all are organic. While intended as a breakfast food, Wheeler said customers say they enjoy them with their salads at lunch.

Her other foods include spaghetti sauce, which also includes a dozen vegetables and gluten-free lasagna and meatballs. After leaving Hope & Main, a nonprofit which helps start-ups, Wheeler chose Lynn for her future kitchen. It will operate as a research and development center. Additional products will also come from the kitchen.

Her background in Lynn is also strong as her grandmother, **Linda Benson** was the first woman to run for mayor of the city and was the first female councilor-at-large. She said that same grandmother had a huge garden when she was growing up. She said her love of food and cooking comes from growing up, cooking and growing fruits and vegetables with her.

Wheeler was also a champion swimmer while a student, with some of her records still standing at **Lynn English High School**. Her first business in Lynn was **Jeni Wheeler Swim College**, which started at **Lynn Vocational Technical Institute**, but folded when she ran into zoning issues.

Wheeler has been working with the **Economic Development & Industrial Corp. of Lynn** and **SCORE**,

a group of retired executives that volunteer to help start-ups, transition to Lynn. She wouldn't say when her kitchen would open, but said it would be soon.

"There's going to be a big announcement soon," she said. "I'm very excited." Her plan is to sell most of her products wholesale through cafes and grocery stores within a year. She might also have a store, where customers can order food online and pick it up at the kitchen or have it delivered. However, she isn't sure if she would open a storefront. Some of her products will go to a co-packer, an established food company that processes and packages the product, to be produced and distributed on a larger scale. But her soups will remain small batch, because of the vast amount of ingredients.

Wheeler is also helped by her own background in business. She has **MBA in entrepreneurship from Babson College**, where she remains involved as an alumni. She intended to look into building a wellness center, but got sidetracked by a technology start-up.

Eventually, she focused on a gluten-free food brand. Her sister is highly gluten-sensitive, which served as an inspiration, and her father lost a lot of weight and saw his health improve after going gluten-free. Wheeler said she also wants people to know that gluten-free can still be tasty. She said our society is one where faster and bigger is better. Very few people cook and processed food tend to be less expensive and not as healthy. Although she didn't grow up gluten-free, she said she did not eat processed foods. "Gluten-free can be delicious and nutritious," Wheeler said. "My food brand is based on healthier eating and nutritional value. I don't use any preservatives. It's just a higher quality food. The start and end of any food brand is taste." *Gayla Cawley can be reached at gcawley@itemlive.com.*

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