

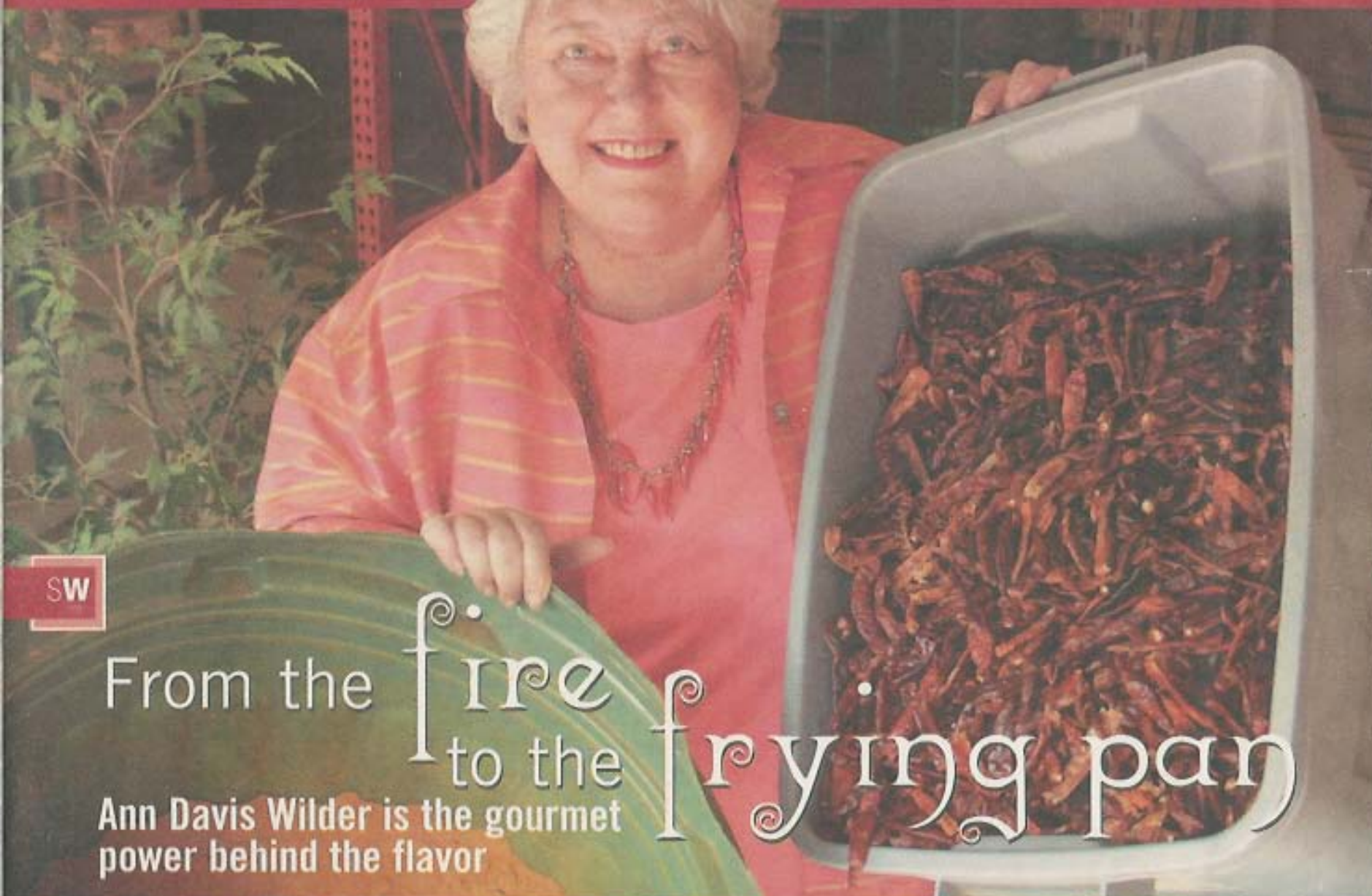
# Smart **Woman**

m a g a z i n e

September 2003

*because smart is beautiful*

Special Edition



SW

From the fire  
to the frying pan

Ann Davis Wilder is the gourmet power behind the flavor



A CEO for all seasons

# Ann Davis Wilder

knows good taste

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Behind the non-stop traffic and hectic business of Reisterstown Road, barely skirting the Baltimore City and county line, resides Ann Davis Wilder. Experimenting and reviewing what culinary experts and food lovers throughout the nation might develop as the next trend in gourmet foods, Wilder's inviting Southern drawl and vivacious excitement for her company, Vanns Spices LTD, is alluring. Perhaps, it's the many aromas that bellow from her hundreds of bins allowing you to escape to the furthest points of the earth where a distant culture appears to have traveled from the equator and beyond directly to you. Well, it has traveled the road of ancient spice seekers, only it's Wilder who has made the journey for your tasting pleasure.

It is no wonder that Vanns Spice LTD continues to grow and thrive as the world embraces its many spices, blends, beans, rice and grains because Wilder has been doing this for years. Quietly but purposefully, she has carved out a business of prestige, satisfaction and quality that appears to be untouchable in a town which is home to one of the largest known spice companies. "What idiot would start a spice company in McCormick's lap," Wilder projects with a smile from ear to ear. "It is so stupid. Of course, I didn't have any idea that it would go like this." She adds, "I was doing it for myself and there were people who said to me I could sell this, such as Mr. Graul of Graul's Market and a little spice shop down at the harbor. And it sold." Such was the case with Wilder's unique blend herbs de Provence which in three months sold more than any other product in Wegmans grocery store in 2002.

Wilder, always aware that McCormick looms in her backyard, has created her very own niche in the spice arena. She explains, "I'm not sure they didn't realize it, but they are a big company and the largest spice house in the world. They can't have something that doesn't sell a lot. Before McCormick can add a spice to their repertoire, it has to hit mainstream. For instance, pink peppercorns - they have been around since '81 and this year McCormick is buying them for the first time." Wilder isn't too concerned about McCormick as she reveals, "I have the chefs, restaurants and only the best stores in the world. If they thought I was a problem they would have done something about me, but they haven't, yet."

Originally from Columbia, South Carolina, Wilder's home is never far from her thoughts. "I look back on my southern roots, of course," she says with loving nostalgia. "In fact, back when I first

came to Baltimore in the seventies, I served grits as an entree for a dinner party. Now, of course, everybody serves grits. My guests did look at me strangely sometimes, but being polite they would eat it. They found that they loved it, and knew they came to the right house for dinner."

Wilder's love for the culinary arts began at an early age. Not only did she have the benefit of her cook, Carolyn, she had a father whose spirit for adventure was instilled in her own being. "He would ask for things that were unique and take me out to eat in restaurants where they had different types of food. Let me tell you, I adored that man. If he could eat something so could I."

An inherited quest for adventure has never left Wilder's side. In fact, Vanns was a venture that started much later in Wilder's life rather than earlier. "I think that if I had been younger, prettier and more energetic I might have grown faster." She laughs heartedly. "On the other hand, when I was younger I didn't have the smarts or gumption to do it. I needed the maturity. It was an advantage to start as an older person because by the time I started this business my children were grown, and I wasn't torn about being here and not taking care of children."

Wilder's creativity, the most important ingredient to the success of Vanns, is as much a part of her business as anything else she does for her award-winning spice company. Her founding principles of freshness and quality are her signature. "Everybody loves the freshness which seems to be what everyone says. In fact, Peter Timmins at the Greenbrier prefers us to ship him spices even though it is a pain for him rather than go to a distributor because

he wants to get things as quickly as he can. He doesn't want cinnamon sitting on a shelf somewhere in a warehouse," says Wilder.

Not only considered a Grand Dame of spices, "foodies" the world over keep Wilder in the know, making her one of the most unique trendsetters in food. "I have customers like Draggers on the West Coast. Every time a cookbook would come out with something such as 'Grains of Paradise' I would get this call from them- why don't I have 'Grains of Paradise?' My customers always keep me on my toes."

With little advertising and mostly by word of mouth, Vanns has grown solely on reputation. From Martha Stewart to the Discovery channel to winning the American Taste Award as well as being featured in cooking and culinary magazines around the country from *Food and Wine* to *Gourmet*, Wilder's spices are highly coveted by the finest chefs and culinary aficionados throughout the nation. "I entered the market in 1981, at the time nobody was doing seasoning mixes. Of course, there were many types of seasoning mixes you could buy in England or France and those were things that I put on the market first. Now, everybody is using seasoning mixes and people are coming up with new rubs everyday. Well, we've been doing rubs since back in the eighties," tells Wilder.

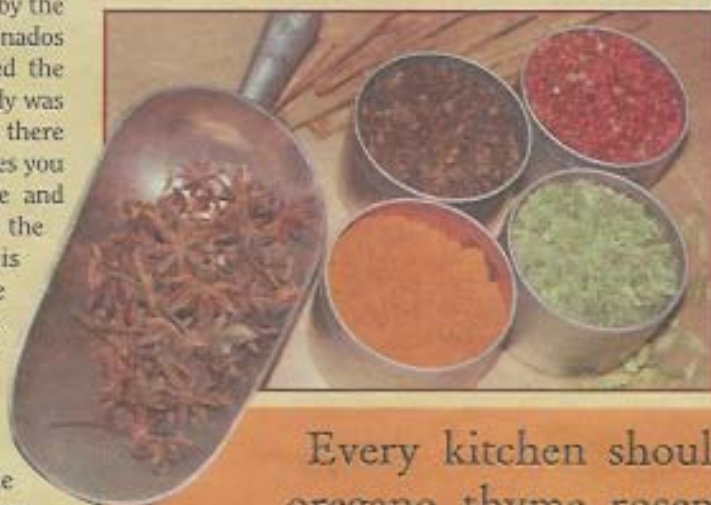
Like her tag line states, "Unique Blends for Busy Cooks" Vanns provides the most authentic and innovative ways to prepare food, where literally variety is the spice of life. Wilder reveals, "I have always been excited by the flavor of food when you add spices." She continues, "You talk to people, read, ask questions and learn." She begins, "For instance, take Berber. It absolutely fascinated me because it is essentially nomadic and is used by people as far west as Morocco and as far east as China, but always with nomadic people so it's always changing. It just interested me." Only recently has the Berber spice become popular, but Wilder has been marketing it for almost two years. She adds, "I think that everybody is getting to a place where they are looking for different things, fun things. When I run across something that is fun, I know there are people who are just going to love it. Such as Tonka beans, when you grate them you get a flavor similar to vanilla; they're from South America."

Wilder is not a stranger to cooking and has taken classes from the world renowned James Beard as well as other available opportunities. Always on top of what's new and possessing boundless passion for spices has led her to blending a new spice almost every week. "A chef will either call me about a new dish, or they will send me a recipe and often we will tweak it because our spices are more special than those that you can get off the shelf. They have to be changed such as, a Cayenne being too hot and we have to cool it

down," she explains. Discovery has been one of the most fascinating aspects to Wilder's business. Traveling at least once a year to find or acquire spices can range from one to several weeks at a time. Even today, she is still amazed on how the spice trade exists, which in some areas isn't much beyond the days of Marco Polo.

"It is still very primitive, shockingly primitive. When I go down to Grenada or to Indonesia, places like that, I expected it to be primitive, but not quite as primitive as they exist." She continues, "First, when I went out there I made little speeches to myself saying don't expect stainless steel vats or anything modern. I didn't expect to see them dry spices by throwing them on the ground. I felt that they would put it on paper, but that's ridiculous because they don't have paper. They put them on the ground. It's very much like it was a thousand years ago."

Yet, the simple methods are probably the most organic which is preferred and requested for some of Vanns customers, such as Nora Pouillon of Restaurant Nora and Asia Nora in Washington, D.C. whose restaurants are strictly organic. "We get some things like oregano and bay leaves from



Every kitchen should have, beyond basil, oregano, thyme, rosemary; a really good salt like Fleur del Sel or a Celtic grade and Tellicherry pepper which is the best of the black peppers. They should also have Saigon cinnamon a lovely true cinnamon, herbs de Provence, a good curry, and I wouldn't be without Tandoori, a good barbecue spice and a good barbecue rub."

Ann Davis Wilder, CEO and President, Vanns Spices, LTD.

Turkey as well as other things. The government allows people who are very poor to go into the national forest and pick bay leaves. It allows people who are poor to go up on the mountaintops to pick oregano where it grows wild. So, nothing could be more organic that's growing on a craggy mountaintop that has never been touched by man, that's what I find on my travels."

Even though she is a world traveler and on rare occasion will eat at the same restaurant twice, Wilder adores her home in Maryland especially Baltimore which she views as the little town hidden within a great metropolis. Along with her thriving business, Wilder feels it's the people who make it so successful. "You meet the neatest people who have a love of life. It's nurturing, feeding people is a nurturing thing to do. It's what we do everyday and it's a celebration no matter how big or small." SW

Ann Wilder



THE  
WILDER SPICE  
COMPANY—

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4121 Amos Avenue • Baltimore, Md 21215  
410-358-2008 • 1-888-358-2008 • Fax: 410-358-2116  
e-mail: [ann@wilderfoods.com](mailto:ann@wilderfoods.com)

**Rob Wilder**  
President



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**WILDER** **SPICE**  
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4121 Amos Avenue • Baltimore, Md 21215  
410-358-2008 • 1-888-358-2008 • Fax: 410-358-2116  
e-mail: [rob@wilderfoods.com](mailto:rob@wilderfoods.com)

Danny Christofano  
Executive Vice President



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WILDER SPICE  
COMPANY

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4121 Amos Avenue • Baltimore, Md 21215  
410-358-2008 • 1-888-358-2008 • Fax: 410-358-2116  
e-mail: [danny@wilderfoods.com](mailto:danny@wilderfoods.com)