

Tuesday, June 28, 2005



CORINA MASCARO

Senior vice president / Nueva Cocina

Miami

CELESTE DE ARMAS

President / Nueva Cocina

Miami

Favorite Nueva Cocina product: Paella (De Armas). Black bean soup (Mascaro).

Appeal: "We're making Latin foods accessible. I can make something that's very daunting easily," De Armas says

Cooking Up a Business

Twenty years ago, two Cuba-born women struck up a friendship in Bloomington, Ind., of all places. After completing their MBAs at Indiana University, Celeste De Armas and Corina Mascaro stayed friends as they pursued careers in cities a continent apart. The friendship now is bearing fruit in a new company, Nueva Cocina Foods, a premium Latin foods brand they launched this year in Miami and hope to take to \$150 million in revenue in five years.

De Armas left Cuba at age 4 in 1965 and settled in Los Angeles with her family. Mascaro left Cuba in 1960 and wound up in Missouri, where she went to college, getting a master's in romance languages and literature. De Armas spent 17 years working for Carnation, General Mills and Nestle. Mascaro went into banking. On separate tracks, they both arrived in Miami in 1997.

De Armas says that while thinking of what she could pursue outside corporations, she thought of upscale Latin food and discovered Mascaro had the same thoughts. They joined forces on a line of all-natural, convenient packs of seasoning and ingredients aimed beyond the Hispanic buyer.

Mascaro came up with recipes from family, friends and books. "She really has a flair for the culinary side of things," says De Armas, who herself doesn't cook much. They have 14 products — soups, rices, seasonings — and want to have 75 to 80 products in five years, Mascaro says.

Their products are in specialty stores, 50 Publix stores and seven Whole Foods. De Armas says the company is now starting to gain distribution in stores in Chicago.

The brand addresses "the growing Latinization of the United States of America," De Armas says.