

Food: Taco Spot Expands Operations 25 Years In

Continued from page 1

high-end Marina City Club apartment and condo development, offering deli sandwiches and convenience store items along with tacos. And, two months ago, **Sky's Gourmet Tacos and Marketplace** opened at the JM Eagle Building on West Century Blvd. in Westchester.

Burrell does nothing without due contemplation, and said she waited so many years to add locations because she was struck with the inspiration to explore the concept selling hot foods alongside home necessities.

"I call it tacos and toilet paper, it's a new business model," she said. The Marina location also just received its liquor license.

Burrell said Sky's grossed \$50,000 in its first year, and now has \$1.5 million in revenue, which comes from three locations now under the umbrella of **Sky's Gourmet Marketplace Inc.**

That revenue is surpassed by Sky's catering, the largest part of the business, which brings in an additional \$4.5 million annually. Sky's Gourmet Catering began a few years after the opening of the first restaurant, providing food for parties, weddings and other events. It later became a vendor for larger entities including **USC**, the City of Los Angeles, **Paramount Pictures** and **Sony Pictures Studios**.

Fast start

Burrell's father was a jazz musician and her mother an avid cook. Burrell trained as a cook during her years at **Michigan State University**, working in various local restaurants including Polish, Italian and Mexican. Cooking remained on the back burner, so to speak, during her corporate career. After nearly two decades, she



RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABJ

New Digs: Sky's Gourmet Tacos' original restaurant moved to a new location in April.

quit that stressful world for what she called a nine-month vacation.

"I had a ball, (but) in that ninth month, I said, 'Well, what are you going to do now?'" she recalled. "You don't have a job, and you've spent your money."

"I did my usual novena (and) I awakened one morning at 6 a.m. and said: 'Tacos.' That was the beginning."

Burrell launched Sky's with the aid of family and friends who helped build out the original restaurant in the rented space. That

included hands-on effort from her sons, Victor and Jerry, who is now deceased. Victor remains a part of the business.

The business grew slowly. Burrell spent years investing in commercial and residential real estate in Mt. Washington and near the Pico Boulevard restaurant to support the venture.

Famous fans

Burrell is noted for reaching out to the local community surrounding the Pico location, but her connections throughout Los Angeles extend

far beyond the neighborhood.

One unlikely fan is German-born actress **Maria Riva**, 93-year-old daughter of movie star **Marlene Dietrich**. Riva credits Burrell with introducing her to the taco, now a favorite snack.

Dietrich said she met Burrell through a mutual celebrity connection, the late Pearl Bailey.

"I'm proud of her – she's got a lot of guts," Riva said. "She loves to cook, but she also loves to feed. There is a certain kind of sweetness to people who want to feed people."

Another fan is Los Angeles City Council President **Herb Wesson**. "We love Barbara," he said. "I think she's been a stabilizing force in the community."

"We have some unbelievably good taco joints in this city of L.A., probably a zillion of them," Wesson added. "But Sky's is a unique blend of Mexican, kinda sorta, with a Cajun wraparound to it. Her personality and her recipe is a combo for success." Like Wesson, Burrell believes there's no limit for Sky's.

"I see Sky's globally in a very short period of time," she asserted. "The plan to get there, I'm not sure, but I have yet to finish my work."

A devoted mentor to young women, Burrell said the climate has improved for women entrepreneurs since 1992. Now, she said, it's easier to impress with high standards than with high heels.

"I'm tough in that I'm not warm and fuzzy," she said. "My delivery is not always sweet, but I'm here to support you."

"Twenty-five years ago, when I started out, there wasn't the level of respect there is now," Burrell added. "We have fought for respect through our education, our exposure, and our leadership abilities. We fought for this."

Health Care: Federal Contracts Seed Field

Continued from page 1

"We're always looking to support products that not only support the U.S. government requirement, but the commercial market," said **Gary Disbrow**, deputy director for Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, or BARDA. "There's a lot of innovation and great technology in the Los Angeles area."

BARDA is an agency that's part of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, charged with protecting the U.S. against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats. It funds the development of new drugs, devices and tests, while also stockpiling approved treatments in the event of an attack or other event.

Local ties

A core of local companies and research centers have been putting the federal funds toward the development of diagnostics, medical devices and treatments for radiation.

Several have also made the turn toward the commercial market.

DxTerity Diagnostics Inc. of Rancho Dominguez signed a \$150 million contract to develop its REDI-Dx blood test – which estimates radiation doses – and to stockpile some 400,000 of the tests.

"If a bomb has gone off in a major city, and there were survivors, you would need to triage them," said **Robert Terbrueggen**, chief executive and founder of the DxTerity, which started. "We think the total world market is

about two times the U.S. market, or \$300 million."

But there are often non-national defense uses for these tests, Terbrueggen said, noting that the gene-based test, which was approved in Europe last month and slated for U.S. approval next year, can also help diagnose autoimmune diseases such as lupus, multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

"The auto-immune monitoring market is in the billions," Terbrueggen said.

The largest BARDA contract in Los Angeles County went to **Neumedicines Inc.** of Pasadena – a \$273

million deal to develop a molecular treatment for radiation sickness that can destroy vital bone marrow cells.

Its HemaMax drug is slated for federal approval for emergency use in two weeks, and full approval could come as soon as 2020, executives said.

The drug also is in a final trial for wound healing, diabetic foot ulcers and age-related macular degeneration.

Neumedicines Chief Executive **Lena Basile**, who founded the USC spin-off in 2003, said the BARDA funds were integral in developing HemaMax.

"We have benefitted tremendously," she said. "The BARDA contribution really enabled us to understand the drug. It's a cancer drug. Now we're pursuing a pipeline in immunology and regenerative medicine."

Among other local companies that have gotten chunks of funding from BARDA are **Avita Medical Ltd.** of Santa Clarita, which was awarded \$79 million to support its ReCell stem cell spray to regenerate the skin of radiation or other burn victims; and **Amgen Inc.** of Thousand Oaks, which received \$196 million to develop its Neupogen and Neulasta drugs to counteract

effects of radiation, and chemotherapy.

A study released by the **Southern California Biomedical Council** last month tallied \$799 million in BARDA contracts spread over nine companies. Also in the mix are UCLA and USC, each of which has received \$1.6 million from the agency.

The local spending was part of \$1.7 billion the agency provided throughout the state, funding a total of 24 companies and three universities.

'This helps the local economy and creates a competence here on radiological countermeasures.'

AHMED ENANY,
Southern California Biomedical Council

Research and development supported by the BARDA funds have ranged from antidotes against the toxic effects of radiation to vaccines to gird against a pandemic flu, according to SoCalBio.

The federal agency has spent billions of dollars on such efforts nationwide since 2006, with contracts going to nearly 200 private-sector companies and various universities to speed up biological countermeasures considered vital to national security.

The \$799 million that has gone to Los Angeles-area companies is "a significant amount of money," said **Ahmed Enany**, chief executive of the **Southern California Biomedical Council**, author of the report. "This helps the local economy and creates a competence here

on radiological countermeasures, which is likely to have a spill-over effect for cancer, wound healing, drug development and delivery."

UCLA vet

The area's ability to get the attention of BARDA as a biotech center tracks to Dr. **William McBride**, a UCLA oncologist who in 2005 founded the UCLA Center for Medical Countermeasures Against Radiation, according to Enany and BARDA's Disbrow.

McBride has since assisted a number of UCLA spinoffs, including **BCN Biosciences** in Pasadena and **Chromologic** in Monrovia, develop both biodefense and cross-over technologies. McBride was traveling and unavailable for comment as of press time, but SoCal Bio's Enany said he was involved with much of the research connected to the BARDA funding.

"He's a hot shot for radiation technology," Enany said. "Many who got BARDA grants collaborated with his center."

Direct investment

There could be additional BARDA money rolling in, but the federal agency might want a cut of whatever profits are made going forward.

BARDA last month rolled out a \$35 million initiative to spur business accelerators and investment into countering manmade threats.

Its DRIVE initiative – short for BARDA's Division of Research Innovation and Ventures – aims to set up a third-party venture fund to directly invest in biodefense firms on behalf of the federal government.

"This will allow the market to drive the technology, instead of the companies trying to meet the U.S. government regulations," Disbrow said. "We want them to be innovative, to develop the best technology available – and not be limited by the government."



Terbrueggen