

CWM: Where did she get the recipe?

AU: From her great, great grandmother. It was very fudgy. But through the years, that recipe has changed, because when you bake in a commercial oven, you have to do things differently.

So our partnership lasted just a year. We got our business name, from her last name, Silverman and mine, Uslander. We had some other ideas, but they were already registered, so we came up with Silverland and registered it. It was originally Silverland Brownies. We also registered our tag line, "A serious chocolate sensation".

About a year and a half later I moved to the old Zenith building – we had a lot more space and also a lot more problems. There were all kinds of building violations and they had cats to take care of the rodents. I had my first baby, was pregnant again and had the business. I was working more than 12-15 hour days. Sometimes I had my daughter there with me and sometimes I would hire someone to be with her at home.

CWM: How did the business evolve?

AU: The first ten years of a business, if you last that long, are just a nightmare. If you think that when you work as a hired hand in a company that you work a lot harder than if you have your own business, that you can work at your own pace, you're kidding yourself. Because in your own business, you're everybody – you're the secretary, the janitor, the salesman, because you don't have the resources to hire those people. We didn't go to our first trade show until 1988 – it was the Fancy Food Show.

CWM: How many flavors did you have by then?

AU: By then we had maybe 12 flavors of brownies, all chocolate and about 6 different flavors of cookies. And I also realized that most of our customers were asking for cookies.

CWM: How did you go about making Silverland a recognizable name?

AU: Early on I think I decided that retail wasn't where I wanted to go. I'm not sure that was the right decision, but that's where I went. The name was not what I was after to have in the media or stores, what I wanted, was manufacturing. I loved our product and I wanted to have it in every store. I wanted it in grocery

stores, in hotels, restaurants and food service. So because of that, most of our marketing was done toward food service. But at the same time we always had a little outlet store; people came from the neighborhood and all over Chicago. Now we have this really strong, almost cult like following.

CWM: Really?

AU: Yes, people call us from far away places and tell us, "I grew up with your brownies", or "My mother sent them to me and I'm not going to give them up...". That's why we started our mail order business.

We tried to get "brownies.com", but it was taken, and this was already by 1996. So we decided to just go with our name. "Cookies", is still not taken, but because of the cookies on your computer, it isn't a good name. If you did a search on brownies, I think we come up like 300th or something, so you'd have to know us to find us online.

CWM: What customer profiles account for your sales today?

AU: Manufacturing is probably about 85% of total sales. Through the years we've sold to companies like, Mrs. Field's Cookies – people think that if they buy a brownie at Mrs. Fields, she must have made it – and to numerous grocery chains, food vendors and to all of Nordstroms' espresso bars and cafes.

CWM: Manufacturing under your customers' brand names?

AU: Yes, but at Nordstroms, although they don't have our name on the product if people ask if it is Silverland, they will tell them it's us. Our regular brownies are very distinctive looking. Like the caramel, the way the caramel doesn't sink to the bottom. I worked on that for like four years, to come up with a formula that kept the caramel on top.

When you look at most caramel brownies, the caramel is either sandwiched in the middle or floating somewhere you can't see it; unless you put it on afterwards.

CWM: What do you mean when you say, "formula"?

AU: The recipe. It took me so long to find a way to do this so that I wouldn't have to use chemicals or additives but still have that look. And let's face it, most of us eat with our eyes, if something doesn't look good we're not that tempted to eat it. That's why you see famous chefs bring you a plate that's got two little eyes [of food] looking back at you with decorations around the plate,



Brownies are baked in foil trays for manufacturing ease

and some green for color – its all about the attractiveness.

CWM: What is the most difficult thing Silverland has had to contend with regards to mass production, health laws and/or government regulations? What has been your biggest obstacle?

AU: 'Obstacles' are challenges. I think the biggest challenge in any kind of business, especially when you have a product, as opposed to a service, is how consistent your product is. Good, bad or mediocre, if the customer can have the same thing over and over; then they can count on it. They know, even if it is too chocolaty, they can have the same thing again and it won't be too cakey the next time. And that's the biggest challenge.

For example, there's Sara Lee, where everything is done by robot, and human beings are only at the end of the line where they're just inspecting, and there are the brownies you make at home...and we fall

somewhere in between; it is the challenge of consistency. With robots, they make sure its uniform, no matter what you do. And when you're at home, its small enough so you can work with your fingers to make sure it is the same, or do so visually. But when you're in between like us, where everything is hand made – as long as I am the owner, I don't want machines involved – then it becomes a big challenge to make sure you put the same product out, day in and day out. Not one undercooked, or overcooked.

CWM: Do you have to throw a lot of product away?

AU: Absolutely. The other day we had an order for Rice Crispy squares that were frosted. It's not what we usually make, but this was for a big customer and we wanted to make it for them. We had never done it before and the chocolate bloomed.

CWM: 'Bloomed'?

AU: That means the chocolate looked white.

CWM: What does that mean then?

AU: If chocolate is baked at the wrong temperature or cooled too fast it can look totally white. There's absolutely nothing wrong with it, but it goes back to what I was telling you before – we eat with our eyes, and so it doesn't look appetizing anymore. It's the same product; it tastes the same, the same exact thing. But because it bloomed, you have to throw the whole thing out. And that also goes back to your question about regulations – when something like this happens and you're not sure about it – you have to get rid of it. Or with something that stayed in the freezer past the due date and you have to decide if you're going to sacrifice freshness or get rid of it or donate it to someone who knows it's past the due date but there's not necessarily something wrong with it.

CWM: Legally, you can't sell it then?

AU: Right.

CWM: And what do you mean exactly when you say your products are, 'hand made'?



Fans are used as part of the cooling process for freshly baked goods