

# *Mintah's magic*

Lured by the sweet science of ice cream, chemical engineer Ajoa Mintah conjures up a career change

BY LUISA D'AMATO

Ice cream is a magic trick. You put together cream, milk, sugar, egg yolk and flavouring. Cool it, churn it and watch as it miraculously becomes a luscious, addictive treat. There's something about that transformative process that drew Ajoa Mintah from a safe career in chemical engineering to the roller-coaster life of a small-business owner. Now she's the force behind FourAll Ice Cream. In her bright, tiny factory and tasting room on Whitney Place in Kitchener, she

creates a wide variety of flavours, from the classic (French Vanilla, Mango Sorbet) to the adventurous (Maple Bacon Brittle, Milk Chocolate Oat and Stout Crunch). All are crafted with the best locally and responsibly sourced ingredients she can find. There are no "modified milk products" in her ice cream, and a minimum of stabilizing ingredients that extend the life of the product. But there's plenty of locally sourced ingredients, such as organic milk from Eby Manor near Waterloo, craft chocolate made at Ambrosia Pastry in Waterloo and fruit from Herrle's Market and

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Ajoa Mintah offers a cone of her FourAll Ice Cream while wearing an off-the-shoulder blouse by Michael Kors, \$145. She is also wearing an assortment of 14-karat yellow gold jewelry from Pandora at Fairview Park and Conestoga malls.

PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

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'I like the act of creating,' Ajoa Mintah says. 'It's all about taking a raw ingredient and making it into a finished thing. . . . I think it is magic.'

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY HIM & HER STUDIO

other local farmers. Even the packaging, made from sugar cane fibre, is fully compostable and can be tossed into the green bin.

"I like the act of creating," Mintah says.

She enjoys sewing, baking and making ice cream for the same reason that she was drawn to chemical engineering.

"It's all about taking a raw ingredient and making it into a finished thing. How do you get this tree to become a paper? How do you get this rock to become a microchip?"

"I think it is magic."

Mintah, 40, was born into a well-educated family. Her parents were Ghanaians who met and married in Canada. Her father was a scientist specializing in food and agriculture. Her mother was a lawyer.

Mintah and her younger brother and sister have a total of seven university degrees. Her sister, Afna, is an obstetrician-gynecologist who lives in the United States, and her brother, Kojo, is a PhD candidate at York University, where he specializes in helping people with brain damage and autism to form relationships.

The family lived in Ghana when Mintah was young. Her father worked for the United Nations and her mother for the government. But they moved back to Canada just before a military coup hit Ghana in 1983.

When it came time for Mintah to go to university, she thought she'd go to the University of Toronto. But a trip to the University of Waterloo changed her mind.

"I loved the campus, I loved how small it was, I loved how collegial it was," she says. "University of Toronto was too big."

Her chemical engineering class of 55 students was a small community. "All of us had the same schedule," she remembers.

"We stayed together for four years. You came back to friends every single term."

In her first job, she solved problems. She worked in the automotive industry, and one of her first tasks was to figure out why the air vents in Cadillac's new model car weren't

directing the air properly.

She went on to other companies and eventually settled with a research and consulting firm based in Markham, where she helped other technical companies apply for research tax credits. The firm was purchased by a Mississauga-based accounting firm, and she became director of technical services.

But she wanted something more hands-on. "I'm a maker," she says.

So the woman who enjoyed sewing clothes, who would turn her entire house into a circus tent for a child's birthday party, and who loves baking because "everybody can enjoy it," evolved into the person who makes ice cream for a living.

When she left the accounting firm in February 2016, it was a "teeny, tiny idea in the back of my mind," she says.

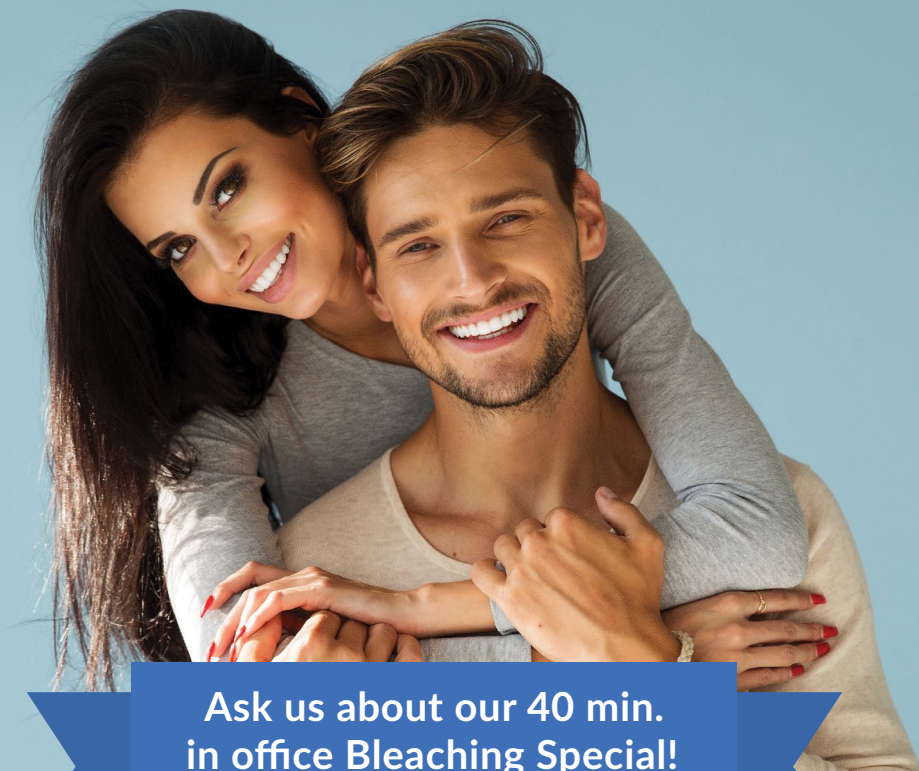
By then she and her engineer husband, Eric Lotimer, were living in Waterloo, where he has a job at Ultra Manufacturing. They have two children, ages six and eight.

Mintah researched the local food scene. She found lots of bakeries, but only one other ice-cream maker. There was room for her.

She took a course in ice cream from the food science department at University of Guelph – one of two such courses in the country. She arranged for use of a commercial kitchen and picked up an ice-cream machine. She started developing recipes with the aid of a spreadsheet, methodically balancing milk fat, milk solids, sugar and water content. The ratios are different each time to accommodate different ingredients.

Soon she was making the confection in small batches that she offered at select places such as last summer's Schneider Creek Porch Party, a one-day music festival in which local musicians play on the front porches of "host" homeowners and people gather in the street to listen. On a hot day, Mintah served hundreds of cardboard cups of Raspberry Sorbet and Whiskey Caramel Pecan, complete with little wooden spoons in the lids of the cups.

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FourAll's packaging, made from sugar cane fibre, is fully compostable and can be tossed into the green bin.

organize events locally that emphasize the importance of delicious, healthy and easy-to-make food.

Mintah worked hard to develop processes that fit with her philosophy. She wanted a minimum of additives, so she experimented with stabilizers, which are ingredients that help extend the shelf life of ice cream. Mintah explains that in a typical distribution chain ice cream has many opportunities to warm up, such as not being placed in a freezer immediately upon arrival at a retail location, or sitting in the trunk of a car. When it is refrozen the ice cream can become coarse and icy tasting, so stabilizers help slow down and reduce ice

crystal growth.

Using a combination of non-genetically modified locust bean gum and guar gum, Mintah has determined the exact minimum percentage of stabilizer she can use without damaging the texture of the ice cream. FourAll ice cream has 0.15 per cent stabilizer, which compares with a range of 0.3 to 0.5 per cent that is recommended at the University of Guelph course, she said.

She says the classic ice-cream flavours of childhood present the greatest challenge. "I want it to be fun, I want it to be candy-like, yet I don't want to put anything artificial in it," she says. So, for example, her Rocky Road ice cream is streaked with marshmallow that she has created herself from sugar, heat and air. That way she avoids all the gelatin and additives in most marshmallows.

After Mintah decided to set up her own

shop she discovered that in order to get the proper dairy licence, she needed to make renovations. She had to get a trench dug under the floor so that she could install a flat drain, as required. She had to have washable walls and pure filtered air coming into the dairy.

She was grateful to be partnered with a mentor by the small business centre at Kitchener City Hall. The program, called Futurpreneur, matched her with chemical engineer Brian Sterling of Oakville. They've had several meetings and she says his expertise in food process control has helped her greatly.

Mintah called her business FourAll because there are four people in her family and a style of ice cream for each – or, as you might prefer to say: "for all." Although new flavours are coming all the time, she has four basic themes, each of

which corresponds to a family member's particular taste.

There's "Childhood," with its emphasis on nostalgia-provoking taste, such as Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough and Orange Creamsicle. There's "Vegan" for the family member who prefers non-dairy treats, in tempting Pineapple Coconut and Dark Chocolate Brownie Chunk. There's "Classic" for the flavours that never go out of style, such as Vanilla and Butter Pecan, and then there's "Foodie" for the daring, including Mango Habanero and Whiskey and Salted Caramel.

But she's just getting started.

Her website asks visitors to suggest flavours they would like to try. "I've had lots of great ideas," she says. "One that I am working on now is an Earl Grey ice cream with lemon."

This spring and summer, Mintah's ice

cream will be available at Legacy Greens in downtown Kitchener and, of course, at her factory on Whitney Place.

As she gets that factory ready, with its huge window where customers can peek into the processing room, she's excited. There will be eight flavours offered at a time, and they will rotate. She'll serve large family-size buckets, small cones, and a special "All4All" pack, which is a scoop of each flavour, plus a bag of cones to take out. The waffle cones are locally made too, by Donsig Cones in Waterloo.

She's already thinking of flavours to suit the spring. May makes her think of flowers and honey. "Lemon lavender," she says. "And I was thinking of a Honey Rose, and a Rosemary Lemon.

"I'm excited to see what's next," she says. "No matter what happens, I'm happy to keep on moving forward."



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