

April 6, 2005, 12:49AM

## Faces In The Crowd

# Margarita mix is a full-time business

## Search for low-carb drinks leads to cocktail creation for local woman

By **CARISSA D. MIRE**

Copyright 2005 Houston Chronicle

From a margarita craving to a thriving business, Marcy Johnson has combined her love of the tangy cocktail and her low-carb, low-sugar lifestyle into a recipe for success.

The recipe in question is Johnson's own four-year-old powdered margarita mix, free from calories, sugar and carbohydrates. The success is what she's enjoyed since marketing the mix, called Zilch, in January.

"I was born and bred in Texas, and we love our Mexican food and the best thing with Mexican food is a margarita," she said.

### Researching a recipe

Johnson said she didn't set out to become an entrepreneur. She only wanted to be able to enjoy a margarita while still remaining committed to a healthier lifestyle.

"I really missed being able to have a margarita," she said. "They're so high in sugar and I just couldn't bring myself to drink all that, so I started looking for options."

Johnson said she tried many options in search of a suitable margarita mix that would adhere to her diet requirements, however, nothing she found tempted her tastebuds.

"I was very disappointed there wasn't one of the market (I liked), so I just made my own," she said.

For a few weeks, Johnson said she scoured grocery market shelves and tried different ingredients until she hit pay dirt.

"It looked like a laboratory in my kitchen," she said. "I just kept trying different recipes until it worked out. I'm not a cook, but I know how to work until I get it right."

### RESOURCES

#### WANT ZILCH?

To purchase Zilch, which costs \$4.99 for a 10-packet box, visit the company Web site at [www.zilchmixers.com](http://www.zilchmixers.com) or visit Woodlands Liquor or Anthony's Liquor.

#### MARCY JOHNSON

- **Age:** 53
- **Occupation:** Realtor and inventor of Zilch, a margarita mix free from calories, carbohydrates and sugar
- **Community connection:** Lives in the Village of Grogan's Mill in The Woodlands with her husband Mike Johnson. She runs her company, Zilch Inc., with her children Eric and Jodi.
- **Quick quote:** "Everyone in my family has their own business." Marcy Johnson, on her status as an entrepreneur and business owner.

## **Marketing the mix**

Once she cooked up just the right recipe, Johnson kept Zilch mostly to herself, toting the small purse-sized packets to restaurants to add to her tequila and water on the rocks or serving it at parties.

"I would serve it to my friends at parties and they didn't know they were drinking a low-sugar mix," she said.

Though she's been using Zilch for four years, Johnson didn't make the move to marketing until recently. The decision came after her son, Eric Johnson, came home from Uzbekistan, a country in Central Asia where he owns a tea company, and convinced his mother Zilch was too good to keep to herself.

Eric said being away from his company left him with a lot of free time and marketing Zilch seemed like a no-brainer.

"One-third of the adult population is on diets and 66 percent (of adults) drink alcohol," he said. "I thought people would love it, and I saw potential."

Marcy said she was hesitant at first but quickly warmed to Eric's idea.

"(Marketing the product) was definitely his idea. I just wanted to drink it," she said. "I said (marketing Zilch) sounds like too much work, but he said he'd do all the work and I said great."

## **Family business**

Now Marcy and Eric are part owners in Zilch Inc., along with Marcy's daughter, Jodi Johnson Rutledge, who helps with marketing sales.

Though they credit their mother with inventing the diet-friendly margarita mix, both Jodi and Eric have made their mark in the company.

Eric launched Zilch's Web site, [www.zilchmixers.com](http://www.zilchmixers.com), in January and Jodi recently accompanied Marcy to Las Vegas for a restaurant and beverage trade show to scout out new customers.

Jodi said she was very encouraged by the reception their product received.

"Everybody just loves it," she said. "Now we just have to get it to them."

Zilch is also doing well here in The Woodlands. It is on the shelves of liquor stores like Anthony's and Woodlands Liquor where, Eric said, it's the fastest-selling drink mix in both establishments. It also recently debuted at Tortuga in The Woodlands and it is already on the tables at Tortuga in Galveston.

Marcy said the Web site, which receives about 200 new hits a day, also generates steady sales.

"Once people use one box, they reorder 12," she said. "The Web site has been unbelievable," Eric added. "It shocked me."

### **Playing the name game**

With the company now practically running itself, the Johnsons said finding a name for the product was their toughest challenge to date.

"We hashed over the name forever," said Marcy. "We went through hundreds of names."

Eric agreed. "That was the slowest process."

However, after considering many candidates, from Party Flavors and Jive to Carborita, they decided on Zilch, a possibility that had never even landed a spot on the list.

"We didn't even have this one written down as a choice, but it was everything we wanted," Marcy said.

Jodi said Zilch is an accurate description of the guilt-free margarita mix.

Referring to Zilch's lack of carbs, calories and sugar, Jodi said, "It's zero, zero, zero, all across the board."

Now that her concoction is on the market, Marcy said she's surprised at how much she's enjoyed selling Zilch when all she really set out to do was indulge in a margarita without cheating on her diet.

"I didn't know it would be so much fun."