

SMALL BUSINESS

REPORT



DARRYL STOVALL SR., D&S Electrical Corp. 17



STACEY BENDET, Alice + Olivia 17



JAMES SIMINOFF, SimulScribe Inc. 18

New York's Top Entrepreneurs

THE HALF A DOZEN WINNERS of *Crain's* 12th annual small business awards come from across the city, from Far Rockaway in Queens to Canal Street in lower Manhattan. Each exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit that helps drive the city's economy, providing a stream of fresh ideas and jobs.

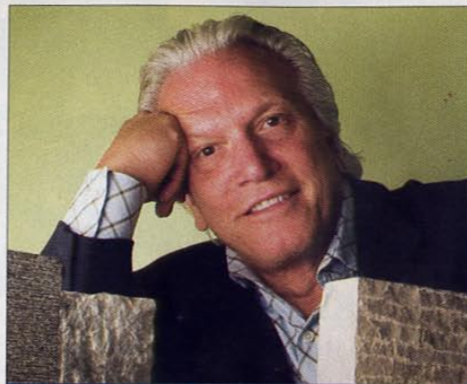
The business owners honored in the following pages were chosen by a panel of *Crain's* editors from scores of nominees submitted by readers as well as the paper's staff.

The winners include a wildly successful dress designer now slipping into shoes, a determined union electrician in Queens who quit to launch a contracting firm, and the maker of technology that turns voice mails into text.

Rounding out the list are an innovative brother-and-sister glass manufacturing team, an award-winning park designer, and a young man who turned his mother's Indian recipes into the inspiration for a popular line of spices.



ERIC & ELLEN LATIN, Dundy Glass & Mirror 18



THOMAS BALSLEY, Thomas Balsley Associates 20



DHIRAJ ARORA, Arora Creations Inc. 20

New York's Top Entrepreneurs

Indian spice triumph: old recipes + new flair

Importer touts organic blends using tireless promotion, on-site attention

BY CARA S. TRAGER

ENTREPRENEURS must do more than believe in themselves and their mission. They have to get others to sign on as well. Just ask Dhiraj Arora, whose passion is healthful eating and whose product is a line of unique blends of organic Indian spices. Since starting his business six years ago, he has promoted his spices in stores large and small across the country. He has button-holed chain executives and floor managers, led in-store cooking demonstrations and fastidiously adjusted his own displays.

"Dhiraj has been to about every Whole Foods store in the United States," says Perry Abbenante, senior global grocery buyer at the Texas-based chain. "He is a go-getter who gets it done."

The list of 8,000 stores that carry Arora Creations Inc.'s line—including Fairway, Publix and Wild Oats—testifies to his success. So do the

sales figures: Last year, revenues hit nearly \$2 million, double the 2005 total. Mr. Arora has accomplished this with three employees, working out of a SoHo loft that has been their home since May.

"I'm making money because I'm young and energetic, and because I'm breaking my back," he says, noting that his typical workweek is 90 hours and that he is on the road up to 20 days a month.

He traces the inspiration for his firm to his days at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he noticed many classmates lining up to shop at a new Whole Foods store. He aptly interpreted their interest as just one sign of a burgeoning health-food trend. Back home in New Jersey, he turned his mother's kitchen into a lab, using her traditional Indian recipes to create spice mixes that he then packaged and sold at flea markets, four packs for \$10.

A year later, in 2002, he maxed out his four credit cards and sold a small stake in his fledgling company to a college friend for \$2,500, allow-

ing him to start exhibiting at trade shows. He won 75 accounts over the next year. Gaining confidence, he replaced his products' no-frills packaging to incorporate new graphics.

Mr. Arora now sells seven spice blends, which he describes as "magic dust" for creating Indian specialties such as Goan fish curry, chicken tikka masala and Punjabi chhole. Each package features a step-by-step recipe.

A spice odyssey

TO MEET DEMAND, Mr. Arora put together a list of a dozen suppliers—many of whom he found on the Web—located in far-flung spots such as Brazil and Singapore, and delivering ingredients ranging from coriander to cumin. He also grows organic mangoes on 10 acres of land in Mexico. The ingredients are mixed by seven contract manufacturers, and the products are fed into a network of 22 distributors around the country.

Meanwhile, Mr. Arora uses his store visits and cooking demonstrations to buttress relations with customers and gather valuable insights on shifting consumer tastes. Sensing that people want what he describes as "food as easy and as healthy as possible," Mr. Arora has spent three and a half years and \$600,000 to pre-



VARIETY'S THE LIFE OF SPICE: Dhiraj Arora, who's beef gathering consumer input, will soon launch a line of heat-and-eat meals.

ARORA CREATIONS INC.

BUSINESS PLAN Doesn't have one, "because you can't stick to them."

WORST THING ABOUT NYC Parking tickets.

LAST TIME HE TOOK 2 WEEKS OFF He visited Denmark, France and Spain en route from a May business trip.

PROUDEST MOMENT When his line became the first Indian grocery item to be certified organic in the U.S.

BEST THING ABOUT NYC The energy.

IN 5 YEARS ... His company will have at least \$20 million in sales.

pare for the expected January launch of a line of about five heat-and-eat organic meals, including Indian-style lentils and vegetarian rice.

Mr. Arora's favorite charity is The Growing Connection, a grassroots project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

and the American Horticultural Society. The organization provides families with the resources they need to grow high-value crops, improving their nutrition and breaking the cycle of poverty. He also works with Door.org, a nonprofit that helps immigrant children. ■