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## Five Questions: Ralph and Jennifer Yarbrough, owners of Crestline Bagel Co. and Yolo Dessert Bar

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Jennifer Yarbrough co-owns Yolo and Crestline Bagel with her husband, Ralph. (The Birmingham News/Michelle Campbell)

Birmingham has seen a yogurt rush of sorts, with big national chain stores opening nearly a dozen new locations in the metro area over the past year. So at first blush it might seem like opening another yogurt shop, and doing so without the backing of a big chain, would be a big, big challenge.

Husband and wife entrepreneurs Ralph and Jennifer Yarbrough, who own the popular Crestline Bagel Co. shop in Mountain Brook, have decided to take it on. They recently opened Yolo Dessert Bar in the Colonial Brookwood Villages development.

The shop -- the name stands for "You Only Live Once" -- differentiates itself by offering a lot more than yogurt, with choices of high-end desserts and coffees, and even wine.

The Yarbroughs took a break from their fast-paced routine recently to talk about how they came to the decision to go it alone instead of partnering with an established chain, and what it's like to try to build a retail business during tough economic times.

*If you go the franchise route, you get marketing, you get support. So why did you choose to do it on your own?*

**Jennifer:** We both came from a (medical) sales background before we entered the world of restaurants and the bakery. We felt like between our bakery experience with Crestline Bagel and our sales background that we were capable of developing the concept and marketing it.

**Ralph:** We looked at different concepts and we considered other concepts. But there's nobody out there who was doing things the way we wanted them done. ... At Crestline Bagel, we make everything from scratch. We felt like, if we were part of a chain, we wouldn't be doing things the way we think they need to be done. We'd be following a set of rules and we'd get the initial name



recognition, but we'd have a business that you can go anywhere and find. We wanted to make something unique, and we didn't want to compromise.

*You started this business at the depth of a pretty serious recession. What kinds of challenges did that present?*

**Ralph:** A whole lot.

**Jennifer:** It's getting better. At least I hope we're past the worst part of it. We've definitely seen an improvement at Crestline Bagel. We saw it get bad before it occurred to everybody else how bad it was. ... It's made Ralph and I be a little more aggressive about marketing. But I think people are ready to get out a little bit and have a little bit of fun.

**Ralph:** Sales fell off for everybody in 2009. But the last three quarters of 2010 were great for Crestline Bagel. The fourth quarter was our strongest ever. The business came back to those people who are offering a quality product at a lower price point. I think where the business is still tough is at your fine dining establishments.

*Yogurt is the backbone of your business?*

**Jennifer:** Yogurt is definitely a big component of the business. What we've been surprised at is that we thought yogurt would be by-and-far our main product. But it has been split really evenly between the gelato, the cupcakes and the plated desserts. You have big visual appeal before you ever get to the yogurt machines, with the gelato, the cupcakes, the plated desserts.

**Ralph:** That's one thing that really bothered us about the basic yogurt concept, is there's no visual appeal, there's no olfactory appeal, there's nothing warm about it. When customers walk in here we want them to smell the coffee, the cupcakes.

*Why not some other business? You have a world of things you could have done with your business experience, why this?*

**Jennifer:** We wanted a concept that was adaptable. If you open a cupcake store, and the cupcake fad ends, what do you do? If you open a frozen yogurt store and nobody wants frozen yogurt anymore, where do you go from there? We wanted a concept where we could incorporate new things. Desserts in general are gaining popularity. If you look in Bon Appetit or Food & Wine, it's written up more and more. Artisanal chocolate has become more popular. We wanted to do something that would incorporate our bakery background, but also give us a flexible business plan.

**Ralph:** We're not trying to ride the wave of the yogurt craze. We're after longevity.

*You have Crestline Bagel. You have this store. And you're opening one in Mobile. Do you worry about taking on too much?*

**Jennifer:** One of the keys to our success has been our employees. We have some amazing employees. In the food industry it's rare not to have turnover. At our Christmas party this year it occurred to me that the newest person (at Crestline Bagel) has been there a year and a half. That's really rare in the food industry. So we have these people who have been able to help us implement the things we come up with.

**Ralph:** I don't think I'll ever try to open two stores simultaneously again. I can tell you I never will. If we're not sleeping and we're not playing with the kids, we're working. We don't watch movies. At this period of our life, we don't have a lot of free time. But I know once we get them both opened, we'll be very happy. It's nice to look around and see a concept that we've come up with and developed come to fruition.

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