

Hard butter? Problem solved

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Tulane alumna Joelle Feinstock Mertz is the inventor of the Butterie, a countertop butter dish. (Photo by Geoffrey Ragatz)

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Sit down and hold onto your toast: Joelle Feinstock Mertz (NC '95) of Los Angeles wants you to know that butter does not need to be refrigerated. Mertz, inventor of the Butterie countertop butter dish, was once like many Americans: resigned to using cold, rocky, bread-tearing butter straight out of the refrigerator (First World problem, right?), until she realized, quite by accident, that it's OK to store it at room temperature, at least for a while.

“To learn that you can actually keep butter on the counter and always have it be soft and spreadable—it’s life-changing,” Mertzal said with a wink. In fact, it was life-changing in more ways than one. Eager to “spread” the word, Mertzal ended up inventing, designing and marketing her own dish: the Butterie, a nifty gadget that neatly stores room-temperature butter. Butterie has a one-piece, flip-top design, so you can’t drop and break the lid, and it has a wall to scrape the excess butter off the knife. She couldn’t believe such a product didn’t already exist.

“It seemed so obvious to me. You have the idea and it comes to you so naturally, but then when it doesn’t exist, you’re like, ‘Hmph! OK, now what?’ ” Putting her Newcomb College communication degree to work, she set out to educate the public that when stored properly, butter does not require refrigeration. She hired a food safety lab to test salted butter stored at room temperature; the results showed no spoilage for three weeks.

Mertzal had never invented anything before, never tended a product from hatchling idea to successful launch. She had owned a public relations firm before, though, and still felt the call of an entrepreneur’s life. But she said she enjoyed the process of developing a product and meeting each what-to-do-next challenge. Without any manufacturing contacts, she cold-called suppliers herself, undaunted. “I had to learn so many different elements”—like the patent process, food safety testing and market research—“it’s been an exciting journey.”

Butterie launched last year and is now available online and at Bed, Bath and Beyond. Mertzal’s company, Kitchen Concepts Unlimited LLC, has plans to make other products.

In the meantime, the soft-butter keeper improves Mertzal’s family life by a dab. “Now I make awesome grilled-cheese sandwiches,” she said.