Each year, the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO®-SF) accepts nominations for their Entrepreneur of the Year Awards celebrated at the Leaders and Legends Luncheon, to recognize exceptional female business owners in the Bay Area. This year, I was honored to be asked to sit on the panel to select the award winners. The task was not a simple one.

The nominees were all accomplished entrepreneurs, articulate and passionate about their businesses. As we questioned each woman, they articulated a vision that came from a desire to create a unique and valuable product that would benefit society and/or make a contribution to the community. Each one had created a successful business, and they are all winners in their own way.

The selection committee had some lively discussions, in some cases each representing a different candidate they felt deserved to win the award this year. That certainly says much about the quality of the nominees. But in the end, we had to choose the winners in each category. And so we are thrilled to present the winners of NAWBO®-SF’s 2008 Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

Trailblazer
Jesse Ziff Cool, founder and owner of CoolEatz Restaurants and Catering

Starting as a waitress for the Good Earth Restaurant, Ziff Cool always had an interest in creating delicious organic food — before it became trendy to do so. When she opened her first restaurant, she didn’t list “organic” on the menu, out of fear that no one would order the food! How the times have changed. Truly a trailblazer, for the past 33 years, Ziff Cool has been dedicated to sustainable agriculture and cuisine. Knowing where food comes from, and how best to prepare it, is paramount in her personal and professional life. Her businesses support local, organic farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and dairies — her “heroes” as she warmly refers to them. They even compost 94 percent of their restaurant waste, and use compostable products for to-go containers.

Over the years Coolziff has opened nine restaurants — and she currently owns three in the South Bay: Cool Café, Flea Street Café and JZCool Eatery and Wine Bar. She also runs CoolEatZ Catering Company as a side business. Ziff Cool has authored seven cookbooks, published many magazine articles and has been featured on television shows, including The Today Show and The Food Network.

Rising Star
Laura van Galen: founder and CEO of Bleu Marketing Solutions

With an impressive client list that includes Apple, Citicorp, Omaha Steaks and Pitney Bowes, there is no doubt that Laura van Galen knows her stuff. As an authoritative direct marketer, she understands the woven fabrics of customer acquisition and customer retention marketing, and brings more than 22 years of domestic and international success in this field. In 2001, after four years heading up a list management division of a leading firm, van Galen decided to strike out on her own. She founded Bleu Marketing Solutions, Inc., an agency focused on supporting large businesses to acquire new customers through offline and online list marketing. She opened her offices with the generous offer of an uncle for free rent, and nothing more than credit card advances to get her started. Seven years later the company is not only thriving, but enjoys enviable profitability and consistent annual growth.

Although van Galen’s company is small (just 25 employees), she plays in the arena with big business. Providing services to the likes of Apple, Citicorp, Omaha Steaks and Pitney Bowes, there is no doubt that Laura van Galen knows her stuff. As an authoritative direct marketer, she understands the woven fabrics of customer acquisition and customer retention marketing, and brings more than 22 years of domestic and international success in this field.

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From: the Bay Area Business Woman

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