

FROM THE COVER



“I make a pastry so complex, it takes six hours to make 20 pieces,” said Natalie Zarzour, owner of Pasticceria Natalina. | JOHN J. KIM~SUN-TIMES



Elaine Heaney, co-owner with her husband, Nathaniel Meads, of Fritz Pastry, 1408 W. Diversey, describes the baking scene in Chicago as a “total community.” | RICH HEIN~SUN-TIMES

BAKERY | Premium ingredients at heart of pastry movement

back to that time in our history when you cooked with family.”

Prices reflect quality ingredients

These new bakers are not only in touch with their history, but they want to avoid the mistakes that felled their predecessors and thus are committed to using natural and high-quality ingredients.

Christine Cikowski, co-owner of Eat Green Foods, says of her company’s cornerstone granola bars, “I didn’t set out to make a baked good. We started sourcing stuff for our business and we found these great oats and local honey, and we’re like, hey, what can you do with this stuff?”

Natalie Zarzour, owner of Pasticceria Natalina, 5406 N. Clark in Andersonville, uses 10 different grains and flours, “so that we can get the right type of texture and mouthfeel in each of our pastries.

“I make a pastry so complex, it takes six hours to make 20 pieces,” Zarzour adds.

Flora Lazar, owner of Flora’s Confections, sells pate de fruit (French fruit paste) at Green City Market. She makes the fruit purees from scratch using fruit from Mick Klug Farms in Michigan.

“I was working on this documentary about pastry and I’m seeing all these very talented pastry chefs using factory-made fruit purees, and I start to realize skill can only take you so far,” Lazar says. “So much of flavor is about starting with great inputs.”

Committing to quality ingredients often means paying more and thus charging a relatively higher price for the finished product, which seems like a recipe for disaster in a recession.

Baked goods, however, even higher priced ones, seem to be recession-proof.

“They say in a recession people will always still drink, gamble and eat sweets,” quips Kirsten Anderson, owner of Glazed Donuts Chicago, which offers doughnut subscriptions.



Sarah Levy



Zarzour garnishes cookies with bits of rose petals. | JOHN J. KIM~SUN-TIMES

Levy says she’s selling more cakes again for weddings this year rather than cupcakes. Michelle Garcia, owner of Bleeding Heart Organic Bakery in Roscoe Village and Oak Park, also has seen a jump in sales. Last January, Garcia had to take out a loan to keep her bakery afloat.

“You might not be able to take a trip to the Bahamas or drop a hundred bucks on dinner, but you can still afford a \$3 cupcake,” Garcia says.

Capturing impulse market

With all the growth, it might be surprising to discover that Chicago has a lot of elements against it as a

bakery town. Despite its size, Chicago has about the same amount of sweet spots as a smaller town like San Francisco.

Our inhospitable weather certainly takes a toll. Patty Rothman, owner of more cupcakes, 1 E. Delaware, says her sales double in the warmer months.

“Bakery is still a walk-by, impulse kind of market,” Rothman says. Labriola adds, “We’ve noticed when people have to wait outside, they tend to leave. Our door used to be right next to the cash register and only a few people could stand in line before they were outside.



Patty Rothman, owner of more cupcakes on the Gold Coast, says her sales double in warmer months. | JOHN H. WHITE~SUN-TIMES

“We moved the door and we can get a lot more people inside now, and it’s amazing how many more wait. . . . In New York or San Francisco, people seem to wait in line all the time, but Chicagoans don’t have as much patience.”

In addition to the weather hurdles, some say consumers in Chicago still have a bit of a learning curve when it comes to understanding high-quality bakeries.

“Three or four years ago when I started selling my stuff, people didn’t know what ‘organic’ was,” says Garcia. “I spent a lot of time explaining it doesn’t mean egg-free and that we do wash our ingredients.”

“So many people are distracted by the illusion, the marketing, the frilly packaging, novelty and gimmicks,” Zarzour says. “They pay more attention to the fantasy of pastry and not the reality. Humans are attracted to sweetness and fat and that often means they eat a lot of industrial stuff and toxins. We need to spend more time discerning what’s really good.

“I’ve watched people pop one of my whole pastries in their mouth in one bite without even tasting what they’re eating.”

Finding support in community

The robust infrastructure of thriving farmers markets and big culinary schools in Chicago and the growth of shared commercial kitchens such as Kitchen Chicago in Logan Square have really fueled the bakery boom, observers say.

Eat Green Foods, Floriole — which is opening a storefront at 1220 W. Webster soon — and Hoosier Mama all got their start at farmers markets and at Kitchen Chicago (which, ironically, as this story went to print, was at the center of a Health Department investigation regarding licensing for this type of business.)

“I couldn’t invest a lot of money if I didn’t know there weren’t some customers out there. Being able to rent space at Kitchen Chicago really eased that burden,” says Hoosier Mama’s Haney.

Jennifer Kane of Bake Chicago, 2246 W. North, got her start at the Division Street farmers market and says the markets are “a great test to see if people will actually buy your stuff.”

Levy credits her alma mater, the French Pastry School at 226 W. Jackson, with playing a big role in this resurgence.

Lazar of Flora’s Confections agrees. “You won’t see better pastry chefs coming into the country anywhere and offering these incredible three-day courses. I get a lot of stages [interns] from the school,” she says.

With all of these bakers entering the marketplace, you’d think there’d be a food fight brewing.

But Elaine Heaney, co-owner with her husband, Nathaniel Meads, of the nine-month-old Fritz Pastry, 1408 W. Diversey, sums up the general feeling among the city’s baking crop this way: “This new movement has a lot of diversity. We do a lot of pastries no one else does, and others seemed to be focused on their own niches.

“Just like the restaurant industry, bakers are a total community. We’ve had so many of our competitors come in and support us, and that’s really exciting.”

Michael Nagrant is a Chicago freelance writer.

YELLOW CUPCAKES WITH CHAMPAGNE POMEGRANATE BUTTERCREAM

MAKES ABOUT 24 CUPCAKES

CUPCAKES

- 3 cups cake flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1¼ cups buttermilk
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- 1 cup butter, at room temperature
- 2 cups sugar
- 5 whole eggs

BUTTERCREAM

- 2¼ cups sugar
- ½ cup water
- 1½ cups egg whites
- 12/3 pounds butter
- 1½ tablespoons vanilla
- 6 tablespoons pomegranate liqueur (such as PAMA Liqueur)
- 1 cup champagne, reduced over heat until halved in volume
- Pomegranate seeds

For the cupcakes: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Sift together the cake flour, baking powder and salt. Combine buttermilk and vanilla.



COURTESY TIM TURNER

Cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs one at a time and beat until completely incorporated. Alternately mix in dry and wet ingredients, beating at low speed until just incorporated.

Portion batter into lined cupcake tins using a uniform measure, such as an ice cream scoop. Bake until a tester inserted into the cupcake comes out clean (about 15 to 17 minutes).

For the buttercream: Mix together sugar and water in a saucepan. Heat until sugar dissolves and the mixture reaches 249 degrees on a candy thermometer.

While the sugar is boiling, whisk egg whites until frothy, then increase speed to high and beat until medium peaks form.

When sugar syrup reaches 249 degrees, remove from heat and, with the mixer on high, slowly pour the syrup in a steady stream into the egg whites, beating at high speed until the bottom of the bowl is cool.

Switch to paddle attachment, and add the butter in small pieces, mixing until combined.

Add vanilla, pomegranate liqueur and 6 tablespoons of champagne reduction and mix until incorporated.

Frost cooled cupcakes with buttercream and garnish with pomegranate seeds.

Patty Rothman, more cupcakes

Nutrition facts per cupcake: 412 calories, 22 g fat, 13 g saturated fat, 99 mg cholesterol, 49 g carbohydrates, 4 g protein, 470 mg sodium, 0 g fiber



RICH HEIN~SUN-TIMES

GATEAU BRETON (BRITTANY BUTTER CAKE)

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

- 1 pound cold butter, cut into cubes
- 1 cup granulated cane sugar
- 1 cup confectioners’ sugar
- 1 pound (2 cups) unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 11 egg yolks
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Combine butter, sugars, flour and salt in a food processor and process until crumbly.

Add egg yolks and vanilla and mix by hand until the dough comes together.

Press into a greased 8-inch cake pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 1 hour. Cool to room temperature before serving.

Nathaniel Meads, Fritz Pastry

Nutrition facts per serving: 586 calories, 35 g fat, 21 g saturated fat, 274 mg cholesterol, 62 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 1,286 mg sodium, 1 g fiber