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‘ THE SATURN ’

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Changing Courses: New Ventures for Pastry Chefs

By Meryle Evans



Uyen and
Jeff Kirshenbaum
and their children.



“I just wanted to get back in the kitchen,” says James Beard award winner Angela Pinkerton, reflecting on her state-of-mind last spring after Covid-19 shuttered her San Francisco restaurant Che Fico. Pinkerton quickly plunged into a new venture, Pie Society, and is now selling an average of 200 pies a week to eager customers in the Bay area. She is one of myriad pandemic-furloughed pastry chefs across the country who have changed course, tackling new projects – from pop-ups and pickups to structured mail order operations. Their efforts range from a concentration on one specialty, such as cookies or doughnuts, to a wide assortment of sweets – and sometimes savories.

For some, the efforts are stopgap, with plans to return to previous posts when the virus has been vanquished, but for others, the hiatus has opened new vistas of a more flexible lifestyle with fewer late nights, low pay, and kitchen hassles, and more time with family and friends.

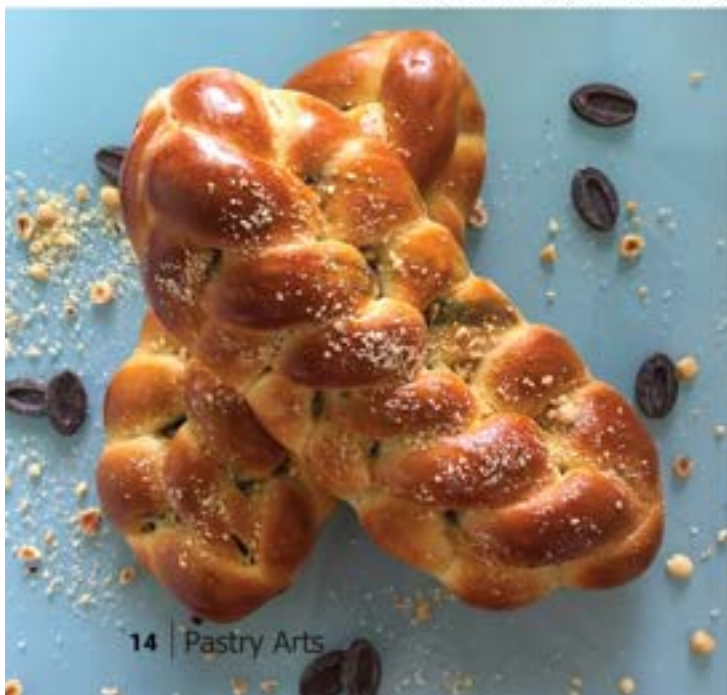
That was the case for New York power pastry couple Miro Uskokovic, Executive Pastry Chef at Gramercy Tavern, and his baker wife Shilpa, who turned their Queens apartment into a commissary to accommodate Extra Helpings, offering weekly boxes of assorted pastries for pick up at their home. The Uskokovics concluded their micro bakery chapter at the end of December, taking a break for family visits and travel to India. “We will be using this time,” Miro notes, “to evaluate our business plan and the next career move... We hope to take it to the next level and into a more traditional business model.”



A stack of assorted cookies from Kirsh Baking Company.

Similarly, Brooklynites Daniel Kleinhandler, Executive Pastry Chef at Aureole, and his wife, Karniyati, had talked about opening a restaurant or a chocolate shop for years, “and then the world fell apart and we lost our jobs on March 16th,” Kleinhandler recalls. “So we wrote a business plan in April and May, and launched Sugar, Butter, Chocolate,” focusing on high quality re-imagined versions of old fashioned confections like flavored challahs, cookies, and chocolate crunch bars made with Valrhona chocolate and French butter. “Our long-term goal was wholesale,” Kleinhandler explained, “hopefully supplying places that didn’t have a pastry department or could not afford a full-time pastry chef.” But they soon discovered it was easier to reach consumers directly, delivering locally and shipping nationwide. Aside from help with packaging from Daniel’s mother, a clothing designer, and hiring a driver during holidays, the couple do all the baking, packaging and shipping themselves in a commercial kitchen, selling primarily on the website that Daniel built and on Instagram. Their signature crunch bars are favorites; among them Hazelnut Blackberry, vegan tropical Green Coconut and Mango, and jammy sweet-sour Halva Apricot.

*Sugar Butter Chocolate’s
Chocolate Hazelnut Challah.*



Pastry Chef Martin Howard, aka 'The Pie Queen'.

An equally diverse flavor profile prevails at Pie Society in Berkeley, California, where Pinkerton is turning out unique versions of traditional pies, everything made from scratch, even down to house-made crème fraîche. Pinkerton admits, “I totally winged it, and of course it would have been better to have a more solid plan of attack, branding, and financial backing.” For fledgling entrepreneurs she recommends, “Talk with business owners whose businesses you admire, and ask for help.” After starting out with time consuming no-contact home delivery for two months, Pinkerton reconfigured and now partners with local coffee shops and an ice cream parlor as “pick up sites” where customers go to grab their orders, and hopefully make other purchases while there. In a shared commissary kitchen, working with one full-time and two part-time pastry cooks, she oversees the operation, handling orders, delivery, and the business side, creating seasonal recipes that change every two weeks. Best sellers? Passion fruit Bayleaf Meringue, Key Lime, Dark Chocolate Custard, and Honey Caramel Apple, made with a variety of crusts, including all-butter, oat crumb, and brown butter shortbread. Especially popular are five-inch mini versions called “sweetie pies,” often ordered for tastings. Looking ahead, Pinkerton plans expansion, adding savory and breakfast items, and possibly consulting projects and partnerships.



Sugar Butter Chocolate's crunch bars.

Plentiful produce year-round has made California a pie mecca for other prominent pastry chefs. In Los Angeles, award-winning restaurateur Nicole Rucker, of Fiona, helms a "tiny pie shop" called Fat+Flour in Grand Central Market; Margarita Manske, co-owner of Republique, sells the Philippino specialty coconut pie Buka in the same market at SiriSiri; and Michelin-starred chef Curtis Stone has recently transformed his restaurant Maude into Pie Room by Gwen (named for his grandmother), selling both sweet and savory fare.

But the crown for peak pie performance belongs to celebrated former Rainbow Room Pastry Chef Martin Howard, equally acclaimed for his Broadway inspired drag queen act as Chocolatina, Queen of Desserts. Now Howard has a new gig in Denver, Colorado, baking a selection of 6-inch pies for hand delivery, and, for an extra fee, entertaining customers with a song.



Kirsh Baking Company's Chocolate Cherry Almond Cookie.



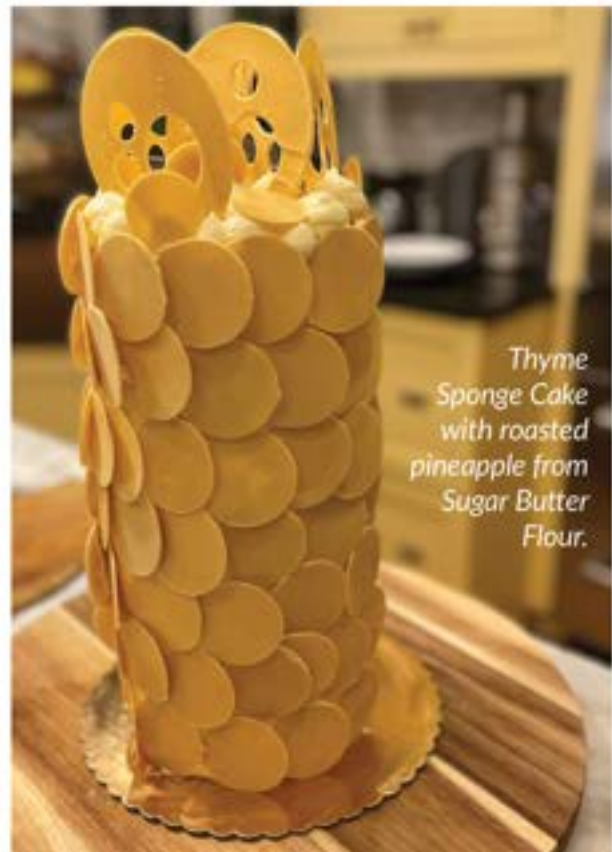
Pie Society's fruit-filled mini pie.

Along with pies and pastries, small cakes and cookies have been alluring pandemic initiatives, ranging from home kitchen operations like Joy Cho's (formerly of Gramercy Tavern) runaway hit gem cakes to the Kirsh Baking Company's cookie delivery business based in Long Beach, California. The company was founded by hospitality industry couple Uyen Kirshenbaum, who was running the pastry department at three acclaimed Manhattan Beach restaurants, and her husband, Jeff, a top restaurant manager, when both were laid off last March. With a new house and two children under three, "We had to find a quick solution," Uyen explains, and after the response to cookies she was baking for family and friends was "so awesome," a business just evolved organically. They rented a commercial space, designed packaging and a website and started selling mail order - Jeff handling the logistics, and Uyen baking at night, and shipping the next morning for a two-day arrival. Their by-the-dozen cookie collections feature flavors like Oatmeal Cherry, Vanilla Rose, and in honor of her lactose intolerant husband, gluten- and dairy-free Double Chocolate Chip.



Double Chocolate Orange Cookie from Kirsh Baking Company.

Now the Kirshenbaums have added pop-ups. Customers order online and prepay for pickup from their refrigerated van at a local restaurant, Uyen rejoicing that "it was so beautiful to finally meet people after quarantine." Long term, the couple are contemplating a bakery. "It's a lot of hours, but it gives us flexibility and time with the kids," Uyen concludes, advising neophytes, "There is nothing to lose - just go for it."



Thyme Sponge Cake with roasted pineapple from Sugar Butter Flour.