
MORE BEANS

BUSINESS HEATS UP AT SUMMERHOUSE BAKING

After the first nibble, it took some willpower to slow down and save part of my Summerhouse Baking cookie for a careful analysis. While chocolate chip cookies are as common as crabgrass, the appeal of this one went beyond its just-baked freshness.

First, there was the not-too-sweet chocolate, in the right proportions. Because they're bigger than chips, the chocolate chunks provided gooey pools of pleasure in the midst of the buttery dough. The edges were cooked to perfection: just crisp enough to hold the confection together without being crunchy or dry.

A lot of trial and error went into perfecting the Brown Sugar Chocolate Chunk cookies and 5 other varieties that Lauren Ferrone turns out as Summerhouse Baking, her 5-month-old business at the Nuestra Culinary Ventures incubator in Jamaica Plain. The incubator is a licensed kitchen in a former brewery complex where approved businesses share a fully-equipped kitchen. The piquant vapors from buckets of pickles made by another incubator client can distract a visitor from the aroma of cookies baking, but Ferrone is focused on the end product: the texture and interplay of flavors.

"I had to do a good amount of testing when I was building the recipes up," she said, describing her friends' and family's ambiguous reactions to variations she tried, like substituting molasses for brown sugar. "I spent a lot of time formulating the menu and making sure each cookie is as strong as the others."

Her flavor testers also help package the made-to-order goodies at times, tying ribbons and tags on bags of fresh-baked cookies in Ferrone's Fenway apartment, where the marketing and shipping departments are housed in a spare room.

In a lot of ways, Summerhouse is a typical start-up trying to establish a niche in a city full of great ideas. But Ferrone's background in web-based teaching -- her "real job" before chucking it all for her true love of baking -- is proving to be a fortuitous detour on the road to cookie success. While the incubator provides some business help, like workshops on filing incorpora-

tion papers and food handling classes, Ferrone masks her relative inexperience with a classy, self-made Web site (www.summerhousebaking.com) that accepts online orders and payments.

Yet the inviting website photos of Ferrone's lemon butter shortbread cookies next to a glass of lemonade and the availability of Summerhouse t-shirts online belie the baker's confidence. She experiences the uncertainties that come with being a solo entrepreneur at age 26.



"I'm not really in the position to settle into 'OK, this is what I'm doing for the next 10 years,'" she said. "I want to take it day by day, to be involved but be flexible about where it might head."

And then there's the unsteadiness of the incubator itself. When Ferrone first applied for space here last fall, she was rejected because it was slated to close before the new year. In November 2006 Boston Mayor Thomas Menino promised to keep it open with a \$75,000 operating grant over the next few years. The crisis brought another \$10,000 from Citizens Bank and \$25,000 from Samuels and Associates.

In the turmoil, some start-ups left. Deborah Taylor of Deborah's Spreadable Fruit, a 5 year old incubator business, sold her house in Jamaica Plain and joined another incubator in Western Massachusetts when the Jamaica Plain venture appeared doomed. She has returned, she said, but maintains both locations for the security of her business. "There has to be some low cost way to get going," Taylor said. "You can't get a license for a shared kitchen in Boston."

Shoma Haque, deputy director of the incubator's non-profit parent, Nuestra Community Development Corp., said the kitchen space is shared by 55 start-ups now and aims to stay in business. "Once they found out we were staying open, many of them came back and we added some new ones," she said. "We're very close to being financially viable."

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All of that is good news for Ferrone, who has benefited from the knowledge of others there, like ingredient sources shared by a former incubator client, Stony Brook Cookie Co. Ferrone, who baked 650 cookies to fill orders in a recent week, sent samples to event planners all over Boston in hopes of catering meetings with trays of her crumbly creations and has signed up to sell cookies and other baked goods at the South End Farmer's Market this summer.

She imagines kids at summer camp lining up for mail and opening elegant bags of her chocolate chunk or oatmeal cranberry cookies, flavors that remind Ferrone of her childhood on Cape Cod (when she said she watched Julia Child instead of cartoons on Saturdays).

"I got into this because I just enjoy the act of baking. My mom said I'd make a good factory worker. I find beauty in repetition," Ferrone said. "The cookies are the easiest part of the whole thing." ❖

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