

The Comfort of Cookies

Baking brings a special solace

TEXT BY HEIDI BILLOTTO PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIÈRE

Forget about the day-to-night pressures of getting plates on the table. Food is more than fuel; cooking and creating is the process of transforming edible ingredients into that which gives nourishment and lends comfort and joy – providing both creative and cathartic outlets. This is the spiritual side to cooking and baking.

Use the time it takes waiting for the water to boil to go inside to the calm rhythm that that comes with stirring, slicing and spreading. The mantra-like state that enters your soul as you knead the dough or stir the pot; take a sniff and breathe in the warm aroma of it all.

There is a healing, a solace that comes with cooking or baking as with any sort of artisan craft. A presence and a pride of self that comes with a finished product and a pleasure as a result of the joy it all brings.

Just ask Charlotte born and bred Paige Gesing of Paiges Designer Cookies.

Paige's husband, Bernie Gesing, was an ER physician in the Queen City for 30 years. In 2010 he was

diagnosed with early onset dementia. In 2015, as her husband Bernie's health declined, the couple spent more and more time at home. Paige, an experienced ER nurse and trauma manager, became her husband's full time caregiver. When she needed a therapeutic outlet for the stress and sadness, she decided to bake cookies.

But not just any cookies. After the baking came the true creative outlet for Paige. These aren't just any cookies. They are edible works of art.

Paige's homemade tender, moist, perfectly sweet sugar cookie and chocolate sugar cookie dough is first cut or shaped and then baked to just the right doneness to keep them soft and tender with just the right bit of a crunchiness to the bite.

And then, as if baking the perfect cookie wasn't enough, these flat bits of baked dough each become a canvas where Paige works her magic wielding tiny pastry bags to create strokes of color, lines of intensity and dotted details you must see to believe.

Paige never considered herself to be a cook, or a baker like her mom had been when she was growing



up, but she has been a casual artist most of her life.

The art was in her genes. Growing up she worked in various media like graphite, pen and ink, watercolor and tempera paints. Paige followed in her father's footsteps. Mel Kester was a well-known award-winning Charlotte artist, and his talent has clearly been passed to the next generation. Paige has a BS in Psychology, a nursing degree and a Master of Health Administration, and as such never received any formal training in art; but she acknowledges that she learned a great deal from watching her dad paint and the instruction he occasionally gave her on technique. She was able to draw and paint at a young age and has always been an avid photographer.

Paige traded in her paint brushes from days gone by for pastry bags with tiny tips and gave her artistic

side culinary wings. Paige dove into the internet and immediately began learning more and more about decorating cookies, and in doing so found a niche all her own.

All said, the cookies were a perfect answer, and Bernie loved that Paige had found a way to work from home. It was a happy way they could be and work together as they battled the results of horrible disease.

As a part of his therapy to help keep his memory alive, Bernie sang to karaoke records; and the two of them made it fun. Paige baked and decorated while Bernie serenaded her.

Bernie Gesing passed away in October 2017. Paige says their journey changed her life in many ways, but through these last few years she has found her inner chef, and her culinary art continues to be her therapy.

In less than a year, her outlet to find solace has turned into a very successful cottage industry.

Paige delights in creating one-of-a-kind “designer cookies”. Her mom, Joan Kester, now of Concord, has been one of her daughter’s biggest cheerleaders, helping Paige to select an official name for the new born business and loving the excitement of how her daughter has discovered a new passion.

The details on these cookies are unparalleled. To look at them you would think Paige worked from templates or somehow drew the design on the cookie first and then filled in the color. But that is not the case. Each cookie is an original – all drawn or painted from Paige’s imagination with royal icing. Each of these Lilliputian works of art are entirely done by hand.

For Paige the pleasure is that her cookies make people smile. She loves the fact that customers say they are too beautiful to eat, but encourages them to enjoy the cookies while they are fresh, noting that she can always create more. These cookies taste as beautiful as they look, and you don’t just have to believe this food writer – all of the nieces, nephews and grandchildren in her family concur.

Paige’s biggest challenge has been learning the ups and downs of working with royal icing, but she faces each new problem head on and finds a way to work her new medium.

What’s next? Royal icing mastered, Paige will soon turn her attention to the cookies themselves, creating more choices, such as differently spiced cookies or perhaps a gluten free variety. Stay tuned...

Paige’s Designer Cookies come in a variety of sizes, and during the holiday 2017 season she landed on the idea of creating special sets of cookies for gift giving – all encompassing the same theme – some large, some small and one incredibly detailed larger cookie in the designer set.

For more info or to order Paige’s Cookies, visit her brand new website at Paigesdesignercookies.com or email paigesdesignercookies@gmail.com. You can also follow Paige and see some of her ever changing designs on Facebook at Paige’s Designer Cookies.

