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A Bigger Pie By Sam Scott

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A Bigger Pie

Mission Pie, a for-profit bakery and café, supports local farmers while training at-risk kids **BY SAM SCOTT**

AFTER THREE YEARS of working at San Francisco's Mission Pie, Marzett Lee would still rather eat cake. The 20-year-old shrugs off the café's just-baked pies with a smile—never mind that the goodies are made with seasonal pickings from some of the Bay Area's finest sustainable farms. Baked fruit just isn't her thing, she says. Neither are vegetables.

Indeed, when she first started working behind the counter at Mission Pie, ingredients like turnip and butternut squash were as foreign as quiche. But as a place to work, the bakery-café has found a steadfast fan in Lee. When she started as a 17-year-old intern, Lee was so terrified of customers that she would root herself to the sink and wash dishes. Three years later, she has had raises in pay, responsibility, and confidence—opening in the morning, supervising other workers during the day, and keeping up small talk with the regulars who file in on weekends. The bakery even helped raise money for her to join an educational sailing program in the Caribbean.

"Working here just opened everything," says Lee, a budding hairdresser who gets to the café via a two-bus commute from her home in the city's Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood. There, she says, the sound of nighttime gunfire isn't uncommon. "I understand so much more about life."

Such transformations were high on Karen Heisler's list of hopes when she opened Mission Pie in January 2007. Heisler had never run a food business, or even baked professionally. Yet she sold her three-bedroom house to fund a for-profit force for good: Mission Pie would offer job experience for at-risk urban youth while supporting local farmers. And it would do so while making money.

Three years later, Mission Pie is riding a wave of consistent profitability, buoyed by a tripling of revenue from about \$300,000 in 2007 to \$885,000 in 2009, all while training about 20 youth interns. It has had these successes even while holding its prices low so that everyone can participate in sustainable agriculture—an area too often tagged as a wealthy person's concern—and community development. Along the way, the bakery-café has forged creative partnerships with other local farms, businesses, and organizations.

FROM SCRATCH

Heisler had previously pursued her interests in youth and food in the nonprofit realm. In 2002, she was a federal environmental poli-

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The two young men (at left) started as interns and now work full-time at Mission Pie with co-owner Krystin Rugin.

cy analyst yearning for a more hands-on way to support sustainable agriculture. With two partners, she bought 14 acres of farmland near the Pacific Ocean an hour south of San Francisco. The land became "Pie Ranch," and welcomed young students to farm and then bake pies with the produce they helped grow.

The pie in Pie Ranch was partly a clever marketing ploy to lure city kids to the farm. But it was also a powerful prompt for discussing social justice issues—like "Who gets what piece of the pie"—and for exploring the connection between what we eat and how it grows. The pies also built camaraderie. Nobody bakes a pie for one.

But as a city dweller, Heisler wanted to raise those issues closer

to her home turf. That feeling grew after she learned that many kids could not visit the farm with their families because they lacked cars. At the same time, she knew the city could seem just as inaccessible to farmers, who felt unappreciated in an urban environment. Perhaps a pie shop could also bridge the two worlds, benefiting both.

Thus ensued a year of brainstorming, during which she and a half-dozen like-minded thinkers imagined everything Mission Pie could be while coming to grips with the realities of the business. Sometimes they would sit in other cafés, quietly measuring what volume they might expect. But nobody figured on the demand that has since transpired.

To meet that demand while keeping wages high and prices low, Mission Pie runs a very tight ship. “If it’s time to make apple galette, we don’t make eight, we make eight dozen,” says Krystin Rubin—who started as operations manager and quickly became co-owner with Heisler. “We make a lot of pie, and we don’t make a lot other than pie.”

Mission Pie’s success has let Rubin and Heisler invest in causes that overlap with the business and their beliefs. True to its roots, the bakery is a big supporter of Pie Ranch, which is a separate entity. (Heisler no longer directs the ranch.) The bakery supplies pies to Pie Ranch at wholesale prices for resale. It also pays a premium for the farm’s strawberries and wheat—an ideal situation for Pie Ranch, says Jered Lawson, the farm’s executive director. A high-volume urban business has cash flow and public exposure of which a remote nonprofit can only dream.

Indeed, when local growers could only provide a fraction of the heirloom wheat needed for the bakery’s crusts, Mission Pie bought a rusty 1953 combine harvester for Pie Ranch to share with neighboring farms. The \$5,000 donation boosted wheat production from about a third of an acre to 10 acres.

One small ranch, though, can’t fulfill all the café’s needs, and Mission Pie has worked to establish steady sources of ready-to-eat produce from numerous small local farms, a benefit that goes right to customers’ bellies. Mission Pie’s desserts, for example, need less sugar than many pies made with wholesale fruit, which is picked to withstand days of storage, rather than when it is ripe.

Direct connections with local farmers have also led to more creative partnerships. When the bakery staff couldn’t find an organic rhubarb farm closer than Oregon, they approached Blue House Farm in Pescadero, Calif., which already supplied strawberries and tomatoes. Blue House was eager to add the new crop, but struggled with the up-front costs. So Mission Pie fronted \$1,500—an expense it will recover in rebated rhubarb. In turn, Blue House has begun using its trips to Mission Pie as a drop-off for its subscription deliveries to the city, which then brings more people concerned about sustainable agriculture into the bakery’s orbit.

PREP WORK

In San Francisco, which has a wealth of eateries touting sustainable foods, running a locally sourced bakery is almost ho-hum. For Rubin,

PROFIT THE PLANET AND THE PEOPLE

Mix good intentions with thorough research and athletic efficiency

Turn customers into community

Partner with like-minded businesses and organizations

who had earlier started a successful bakery in Boston, what makes Mission Pie exciting is its unofficial philosophy: “Do More.” For the pie makers, “doing more” includes taking on a steady stream of interns, usually at-risk teenagers with learning disabilities. The youth interns account for about a sixth of the workforce, but dominate the café’s thinking. Everyone is a model and mentor to the newcomers.

Often, the bakery hires students from nearby Mission High School (a multi-ethnic

school with notable alumni such as rock star Carlos Santana and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maya Angelou) who have completed Pie Ranch’s program. From the beginning, the bakery attracted agencies like Jewish Vocational Service (JVS), which now administers the state-funded WorkAbility program that pays many of the interns’ wages.

About half of the café’s current workers are former interns like Lee. But permanent employees aren’t the café’s goal. Instead, Heisler and Rubin want interns to walk away with a positive relationship to work, an understanding of appropriate conduct, and a strong letter of recommendation. As with baking, Rubin says she’s found that the most important ingredient in mentoring is repetition.

The heavy involvement with the interns has made Mission Pie a model employer, says Kevin Hickey, JVS’s director of youth programs. Even small things—like scheduling so that workers who live in dangerous areas do not have to commute in the dark—make a huge difference, he says. In 2008, JVS named the bakery “Employer of the Year,” and Hickey says that among the hundreds of businesses with which he works, Mission Pie ranks in the top three.

“They’re a true partner,” agrees Tess Reynolds, CEO of New Door Ventures, another job preparedness service that helps young people, many of whom are in foster care, have dropped out of high school, or have had brushes with the law.

The bakery does little to advertise its good deeds. But over time, customers figure out that there’s more to Mission Pie than delicious pastry, Heisler says. Perhaps the occasional uneven service by an intern tips them off to the café’s mentoring program. Or customers may learn that the reason why the café serves walnut pie, rather than pecan pie, is that walnuts are more plentiful in the Bay Area.

By letting customers figure out Mission Pie’s mission, rather than hitting them over the head with it, the bakery gives its customers a sense of discovery and connection, Heisler says. “It offers people an option to feel that they’re participating,” she says. “A lot of people are looking for something more than just an exchange of goods. They want to contribute to something.”

Going forward, Mission Pie plans more of the same—expanding relationships with local farms and adding interns. A second retail-only outlet may be in the cards. In the meantime, imitation would be the sincerest form of flattery. “If the exposure this business has inspires other businesses to do some similar things, to create some similar relationships—even outside the food industry—that would be a success,” Rubin says. ■