

Sweet Talk with Cindy Kienzle

By Mike Stark, Publisher
Photo by Matt Phillips

I sat down with Cindy Kienzle, Founder of Hungry Monkey Baking at “That Little French Guy” to chat about her 11-year-old small-batch, wholesale, corporate and online bakery. Hungry Monkey dedicated themselves to a small line, including their Signature Chocolate Chip Banana Bread, Carrot Cake, Cinnamon Apple Streusel Cake, Lemon Cake with a Buttermilk Lemon Zest Icing, Coconut Macaroons — and the best Triple Chocolate Brownies on the planet! You may have seen her treats at Sunset Foods, or had them delivered to your home by Fresh Picks -- or maybe you ordered them online or received them from one of their corporate clients. I thought it a bit odd that a baker would want to meet at someone else’s bakery, so I asked her “why?” “I appreciate other bakers and I try and support them as much as possible.” “I believe if we support each other, we all rise,” Cindy added.

And, indeed, Karma came back to Hungry Monkey in 2020. I heard they were discovered by Howie Mandel and I asked her to share more.

I thought we were doomed...what was supposed to be our 10th anniversary year was looking more like the end. But magically, at the beginning of the Pandemic, Comedian Howie Mandel spotted me and my daughter selling “Social Distancing Treats Boxes” on TalkShop.Live, an online live platform. He wanted to help small businesses and featured us on his new show! Howie said that our banana bread was ‘beyond anything I have ever eaten before’ and ‘their brownies are to die for!’ That, along with our new website celebrating our 10th anniversary, made for a good year in the midst of a bewildering one,” Cindy said.

I asked Cindy what sparked her interest in baking and what or who was her inspiration; here is what she said:

I’ve had an interest in baking since I was a young girl. Growing up, I used to stand next to my Auntie Nanny, who is a fantastic baker, when she was baking. She has been an inspiration to me, as was my Grandma Bea, who showed love through food. I had my daughter Lily at 49 and she is really my greatest inspiration. Lily has special needs and she has taught me to never give up, no matter the challenges.



How and why did you start Hungry Monkey?

Since the 80s people have told me I should sell my chocolate chip banana bread, but since I had a marketing career, I set my dream aside. Fate intervened when I lost my job as the head of marketing at the Chicago Transit Authority when I was 7 months pregnant. Soon after my friend Eileen encouraged me to bake for a local charity event where we sold out two days in a row; people didn’t stop calling to order. Six weeks later, just days before my 51st birthday, Hungry Monkey was born in the Highwood Farmers Market!

How do you compete?

I don’t know that I know how to compete necessarily. I am not trying to sound altruistic, but we just try and make the best products, with unparalleled consistency, and do what is right in our community.

Why are you so inspired to help other people?

I admire organizations that make lives better for others. We’ve given at least 10% of our revenues to more than 70 nonprofits, the majority local. During Covid we also donated hundreds of banana breads to frontline workers at NW Lake Forest Hospital and to workers on the Covid floor at Vista Hospital in Waukegan to let them know we appreciate them.

Where do you see Hungry Monkey in five years?

I turn 62 this month and, while I often think I am just getting started, my husband and I are talking about retirement in the next five years. It really is never too late to live your dream, but sometimes dreams change. It is my hope that a larger company can continue my vision to take us national. Big brands are losing market share rapidly and they are looking for emerging brands to fulfill the needs of families wanting a more nutritional, natural alternative.

I asked local business owners about Hungry Monkey, and here is what they had to say:

“We love supporting local, small businesses like Hungry Monkey. Cindy’s brownies are always a client favorite! She has been an absolute pleasure to work with and has been an incredible resource for not only our individual orders, but our corporate gifting as well. You have fans all over the country, Cindy!”

~Christine Lutz, SVP of Business Development and Ben Cohen, Managing Director, SVP of Mortgage Lending, Guaranteed Rate

“Supporting local companies like Hungry Monkey has been in our philosophy forever. We have enjoyed working with Hungry Monkey because we share the same values by providing the freshest and highest quality products.”

~John Cortesi, President and CEO, Sunset Foods Mart, Inc. 🍌

