



The Sweet Life

BY TINA KLEINSCHMIDT

For Chef Maria Kemp, baking isn't just a hobby. It is a lifelong passion that started when she was just a young girl in upstate New York. Maria fondly remembers spending time in the kitchen with her mother, Gladys. With a step stool pulled up to the kitchen counter, she'd spend hours helping her mother and learning all the basics of baking. She knew then it was something she wanted to do for the rest of her life. But life has a way of putting childhood dreams on the back burner.

Maria's grown up life lead her to pursue an education in Business Administration and Information Technology. Though she never lost the love of baking, as a single mother she needed stability and practicality. Maria raised her daughter, Devin, in the Normal/Bloomington area of Illinois. While she often thought about reviving the dream of becoming a professional pastry chef, she had made a promise to

Devin that she would not have to change high schools. "I changed schools as a senior in high school and that was really hard," Maria recalls. As there were no pastry schools in the Bloomington/Normal area, Maria again followed to the practical path and stayed in her IT career field. A career she would wind up working in for over 25 years.

When Devin graduated and followed her own dreams, Maria decided it was time to follow hers. Maria's kitchen had not remained cold through the years. Baking was still a part of her life. She remembers having friendly baking competitions within her bible study group. "It renewed my love of baking," she adds. She searched for a school that focused solely on baking and found a week long summer "pastry camp" course at the French Pastry School in Chicago.

Maria signed up and upon completion, she knew she wanted to enroll in the school's full-time baking/pastry arts program. There was a catch, though. The pastry school was in Chicago and with an over 2 hour commute each way and a train schedule that would not get her back home in the evening, Maria's dreams were again on hold.

It wasn't until a serendipitous conversation, ironically with her dentist, that she was able to move forward with her life's dream. He mentioned to her that Amtrak had added a later evening train from Chicago. One that would get her back home every evening. Now, with the logistics in place, she was ready to make that first leap. In 2007, Maria quit her job and enrolled in the L'Art de la Patisserie program at the French Pastry School in Chicago, IL. It was a full time, 6 month commitment. Undeterred, she called the Amtrak station and bought all her train tickets at once. Maria muses, "I told the Amtrak agent, 'This is gonna take a while'".

Over the next 6 months and 224 train rides, Maria worked on her business plan for after graduation. She did not want to work in a restaurant or bakery, she wanted to own one. In December of 2007, she graduated with a newly minted chef status from the pastry program, and 8 months later Maria was the proud proprietor of her own bakery in Normal, IL. She opened her doors in August of 2008. Unfortunately, just 2 years later, her mother Gladys suffered a stroke. The responsibilities of owning a business and being heavily involved in her mother's care were just too much. Maria had made the decision to close the door on her successful bakery. Heavy hearted, but always placing her family's needs first, she returned to her IT career where she would stay for the next five years.

During that time, Maria remained by her mother's side but never losing her passion for pastry. After adjusting to her new normal, she came up with an innovative way to continue a slice of her bakery business. In 2014, "Beyond Decadence", a pop up bakery,



was born. Without the overhead of a brick and mortar business she could serve her loyal customers from her home kitchen. However, Illinois has some of the strictest rules for home kitchens which was often a struggle. But Maria pressed on.

Then on December 21st, 2016, on the 9th Anniversary of her Pastry school graduation, Maria's mother passed away. "I kept my promise to be by her side until her final breath" Maria remembers. Grieving, but knowing her mother was with God, Maria prepared herself for the biggest move of her life.

In February 2017, Maria put her house on the market. "God sold my house in 9 days", praises Maria. "That was my sign."

She spent the next several months traveling, visiting friends and considering other states to relocate herself and her business. She considered Texas and Maryland, but after visiting an old friend in North Carolina she knew she had found her new home base. "It just fit" says Maria. So on Father's Day, 2017 she drove to North Carolina to start the next chapter of her life.

Maria spent the next year networking and refining her brand. She was committed to making "Beyond Decadence" something fresh and innovative. As her brand evolved, Maria stayed true to her commitment of providing her customers with the quality she is known for.

All of her bite sized and full sized pastries are entirely scratch made and she prides herself on using only top quality, real ingredients. While she specializes in French, American and gluten

free desserts, she is always creating new ways to pair flavors. Interestingly elegant specialties, like her white chocolate pomegranate ginger truffle cups, are always crowd pleasers. "People occasionally want full-sized desserts, but there's more of a demand for bite-sized desserts" Maria notes, and with her beautifully packaged, sophisticated little desserts, she has grown "Beyond Decadence" from Lake Norman's first pop up bakery into something so much more.

"Beyond Decadence" has graced quite a few high profile tables in the last two years. Maria is a member of the Huntersville Chamber of Commerce and has worked with many corporate partners in the Charlotte and Lake Norman area. She has received federal, state and city certifications and provides her delectable desserts for many elegant establishments such as Raffaldini Vineyard & Winery. She also has enjoyed quite a bit of media exposure with some on air baking on WBTV, videos, newspaper articles, and radio interviews. It's not all business and profit for Maria, though. She is a firm believer in community involvement and works with organizations such as Lakeside Charter Academy and the Young Elites Leadership Summit. Beyond Decadence has quickly become a staple in the Lake Norman community and Maria shows no signs of slowing down.

It's often said it's the little things that make the difference in business and in life. Coincidentally, it's the little things that are Maria's specialty.