

# Chef's local venture morphs into a nationwide enterprise

Like many people who end up in the culinary arts, Chef Maria Kemp's journey began in her mother's kitchen. From upstate New York to Illinois to North Carolina, where she now resides (and other stops in between), Kemp maintained her passion for pastry. That was true even during the 20-plus years she spent working in the IT field.

Everything changed after Kemp enrolled in Chicago's French Pastry School and embarked on its rigorous, six-month curriculum that culminated with her earning the L'Art de la Pâtisserie certificate in 2007. The following year, she opened Decadence Bakery & Pastries, a storefront artisan shop, in Illinois. In 2014, Kemp launched Beyond Decadence, also in Illinois, as a pop-up bakery. She moved the business to North Carolina in 2017.

Today, Beyond Decadence is an online artisan bakery located near Charlotte, specializing in handcrafted, gourmet desserts and myriad baking experiences.

Unity interviewed Kemp in early December 2021. Her responses have been edited for length.

## **Q. What was the most valuable lesson you learned at The French Pastry School?**

**A.** Something that occurred on the first day of pastry school while we were still in a classroom has stuck with me for 14 years now. The chef said, "Here are the books; you can take them and leave now, but you'll miss a lot. There are a lot of things we'll tell you and show you along the way that aren't in the books."

As trivial as that may seem, it really wasn't. For me, it served as a constant reminder that there's always more to a recipe than what's written on the page and until you try/test it, you don't know what you don't know.

I graduated The French Pastry School in December 2007, and I still literally learn something new every day and have notes scribbled all over my recipes. The learning doesn't stop just because I have a fancy 20K certificate in French with my name on it.



"My ultimate goal is to have my own baking show on the Food Network or another popular cooking/baking network," says Chef Maria Kemp, owner and founder of Beyond Decadence. "I have zero desire to compete in a baking competition to get there." Photo by Juan Zambrano Photography

## **Q. What are some of the turning points in your baking career?**

**A.** There have been many blessings from God along the way. However, the most notable in my journey was on Sept. 22, 2020, when NBC randomly selected me to join (businessman and TV personality) Marcus Lemonis on his Instagram Live show. Marcus introduced himself and asked what business problem could he help with. I didn't know how long I had, so I hit the ground running and laid out my challenges with bounce rate, conversion and SEO issues. 12:43 minutes later he had offered me three amazing \$10,000 solutions to choose from.

I selected the website redesign and SEO optimization. Within a week or two, I was knee-deep in conversations and planning sessions with Blackdog Advertising in Miami to overhaul my website. I had complete control over the project and had a phenomenal working relationship with the Blackdog team. I sent desserts to Miami and their food stylist made them look even more decadent with new professional photos.

Over the next five months, there were millions of emails, video conferences and phone calls to walk through every aspect of the new website. Behind

the scenes, Marcus paid the bill and I gave the green light to launch the new website on March 3, 2021. You can certainly call this turning point No. 1, but it should really be counted for 1,000 turning points!

The second major turning point was a byproduct of the new website. As I started courting new corporate clients, the first thing they would do was visit my website. Once there, my story and the videos drew them in. This new website turning point led right into my Minority Business Enterprise certification, which gave me a seat at the table right next to the supplier diversity contacts for Fortune 50 and Fortune 100 companies.

**Q. What impact did COVID and the shutdown have on your business?**

**A.** Prior to COVID, no other bakeries were really offering/marketing a delivery service unless they were catering an event. Once COVID hit, every bakery was offering delivery or curbside pickup. The delivery “space” got crowded very quickly. I was losing money trying to compete with them by offering too many perks on relatively small purchases to simply stay in the game.

After one particularly long day of deliveries all around Huntersville, I decided to pause the business to figure out how to adjust under our new norm. When I resumed, I introduced a pivot! (The word “pivot” is the most overused word of 2021, so I prefer the word “morph.”) With the morph,

I introduced nationwide shipping and private virtual baking experiences.

**Q. What new ventures are you pursuing?**

**A.** When I first started offering the private virtual baking experiences, I offered them to the general public – adults and kids. However, as they’ve evolved I’ve been pursuing more corporate clients for the private virtual and on-site baking experiences. Corporate clients can easily fill an entire class and have ongoing team-building or activity needs.

I’m also moving into doing more teaching, public speaking and videos – all on baking or entrepreneurship topics.

**Q. Where do you bake your pastries?**

**A.** I am fully licensed and insured in two different locations. I have a home-certified kitchen in Huntersville and rent usage of a shared commercial kitchen in Charlotte.

**Q. What’s your favorite dessert to eat?**

**A.** I know I should come up with some fancy, froufrou dessert, but that’s just not who I am. I’m happy to make fancy, froufrou desserts for my clients, but at the end of the day I still have an unnatural addiction to mini-unwrapped Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, raw cookie dough or cookies on the edge of being slightly underbaked.

*Follow @beyonddecadence on Instagram.*



Lemon bars are Beyond Decadence’s top-selling item. Photo by Blackdog Advertising