

Designing woman

Baker's artistry makes her cookies a cut above

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She's traded her canvas for rolled-out dough and her palette for icing bags, but Christine McCrae is every bit the artist she's always been.

The difference? McCrae now is producing works of art that are as good to eat as they are to look at.

McCrae, owner of Lily 's Cookies , makes shortbread cookies in every shape and design. She's limited only by her imagination, which hasn't restricted her thus far. When a client has an idea for a cookie for which she doesn't have a cutter, McCrae simply sketches the design, turns it into a template and starts cutting dough.

McCrae grew up in San Antonio, getting an art degree from Pepperdine University and a master's degree in fine arts from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. She worked as an art gallery director in Chicago, then in New York, before moving back to her hometown after Sept. 11, 2001.

A Best of Show win for her brownies in the Kendall County Fair was an impetus for McCrae to seriously consider a career as a professional baker. After attending a dinner party at the home of cooking teacher Jane Satel, her dream became a reality in late 2002.

As a thank-you for what McCrae calls "a fabulous dinner," she made some decorated cookies for Satel. Satel was so taken with them that she asked McCrae to make cookies for a Sip 'n See party she was hosting to introduce her new twin grandchildren to friends. There, other potential customers saw the cookies.

"Everybody loved them," says Satel. "These cookies are just not like the normal decorated cookies. Christine is an artist to begin with; she does the tastiest cookies and can do any decoration you want."

For an event at Satel and husband Jimmy's Satel's clothing store, McCrae decorated cookies to



Christine McCrae (top) uses her fine arts background to create exquisite, one-of-a-kind cookies. If she doesn't have a cutter, she'll design a template. She's won a number of awards for her creations.

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SEE PAGE 2

Baker turns cookie making into art form

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

look like men's ties and suits. For the christening party, she did cutout cookies shaped like little girls and boys.

"They're not those fat, thick cookies. They're just beautiful," Satel says.

Satel diminishes the importance of her influence, but McCrae is matter-of-fact about it: "If Jane says they're good, everyone thinks they're good," she says.

McCrae grew up cooking and baking, though her cutout cookie making was limited to the holidays, when she, her sister and their mother made decorated Christmas cookies. Her culinary interest was inspired in part by her Greek grandmother on her mother's side who lived in Bloomington, Ind.

McCrae remembers her as "a fabulous cook who loved to entertain." The baker was always smitten with the lilies of the valley that grew in her grandmother's back yard; her memories of those flowers and other lilies always present at her grandmother's house inspired her to name her business Lily's Cookies.

From her Scottish grandmother on her father's side, McCrae learned to love the simplicity of shortbread made with fresh butter, flour and sugar. Though McCrae's cookies also contain vanilla, eggs and baking powder, like her grandmother, McCrae uses only the freshest, best quality ingredients.

Growing up, McCrae used a cream-cheese based recipe for cutout cookies, but that dough was too delicate to stand up to the designs she makes professionally. After experimenting with numerous recipes, she settled on one that's sturdy enough to work with, yet tender enough to have good flavor.

On large orders, McCrae might work up to a week to complete the decorating required. For an order of 1,950 Christmas cookies, McCrae called on Maria Adame for help. Her part-time employee is "the best," McCrae says, citing Adame's knack for rolling and cutting out cookies as well as her ability to keep vast numbers of cookies perfectly counted.

Her mother helped fill in the icing on the cookies she outlined; her father helped make deliveries.

As McCrae describes the process, baking and decorating cookies is labor intensive. She begins by talking to clients and getting their ideas for the cookies that they want to serve.

The design process is part of the job that McCrae most enjoys. "I need to have some part of my life be creative," she says.



McCrae uses a parchment pastry bag to hold icing for decorating.

If she doesn't have a cutter, McCrae designs a template for cutting the cookies, using a new surgical knife to make the cuts (an idea that came from her doctor boyfriend).

McCrae then makes the dough, refrigerating it overnight to meld the flavors and make it easier to roll out.

After rolling out the dough to 1/8-inch thickness, McCrae cuts it into shapes, then bakes the cookies, cooling them on racks until they're ready to be iced.

The first step in decorating the cookies is outlining them with royal icing, which dries quickly. She then fills in the outline with glaze, which takes six or so hours to harden. Then comes the detail work in which McCrae adds the individual touches that make the cookies so special — a blue dot for an eye, an orange triangle for a nose and an aqua bow for a duck, for example. Then the cookies are packaged as the client wishes — sometimes bagged and bowed, sometimes boxed with tissue, sometimes packaged for mailing.

McCrae has made 1,000 cow cookies for the Cattle Baron's Gala, Faberge egg cookies for the German Club ball, Alamo cookies for events too numerous to mention and dinosaurs for a Botanical Garden event.

Her cookies come in all styles and types: oversized Christmas ornaments

used as party invitations; airplanes used for Standard Aero for U.S. Navy Appreciation Day; rattles, ducks, teddy bears, booties and gowns for baby showers and christenings; and, farm animals, cowboy hats and boots for birthday parties and more, just to name a few.

Since she started her business in October 2002, McCrae has taken first place in the Blue Star Arts & Eats and Best of Show in the 2003 Glorious Gingerbread competition sponsored by the San Antonio Children's Museum for her Madeleine-themed entry. She now does her cookie making at the former Farm to Market bakery in the building that houses Silo restaurant, which gives her ample room to spread out cookies for decorating.

Every day is a challenge, she says, not only growing her company, but handling the business side, which is a new experience for her.

"I'm really happy with the way it's taken off. I had no idea when I started," she says.

She offers these tips for those who want to make their own sugar or shortbread cookies at home.

Make sure ingredients are fresh. "Don't use butter that's been sitting in the fridge. You want to smell the butter and make sure it's really fresh, and get good eggs." She also recommends using a top-quality vanilla, one you can smell when you take cookies from the oven, since you are depending on vanilla for part of the cookies' flavor.

Use good-quality flour. McCrae likes unbleached King Arthur flour. White Lily is another favorite, though it's "more fragile," she says.

Be consistent in your baking. McCrae weighs ingredients to make sure she is using the same amount each time she bakes. She sifts her baking powder with the flour to make sure the powder is evenly distributed.

When creaming butter and eggs, make sure they are at the same temperature so the creamed mixture blends better.

Cool baked cookies on a rack rather than on paper towels or parchment on the counter. It keeps the cookies from forming moisture under them and keeps them crisper.

Use parchment pastry bags to hold icing. McCrae calls them "the best invention ever. It makes decorating so much easier. You don't need all those fancy decorating tips."

When making royal icing, use Wilton's Royal Icing and follow the directions exactly.