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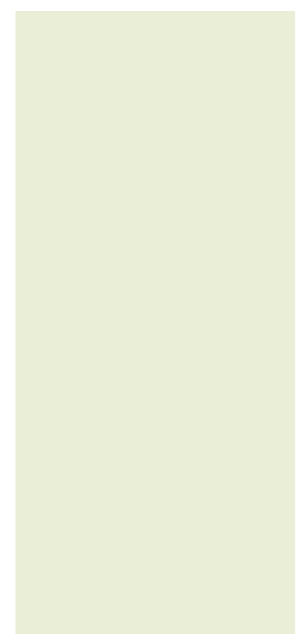
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[Flavor Trumps Flair at Bittersweet Bakery](#)

By Catherine Neville • Photo by Brian Fagnani

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Frisly cupcakes are on their way out. Classic pastries are on their way in. And not just classic pastries, but pastries that use seasonal ingredients and are made with intense devotion to technique. At her new Bittersweet Bakery in Benton Park, pastry chef Leanna Russo is focused on referencing the past, but don't think that means her selection is dated. Or small. Once you're standing in Bittersweet's bright, airy space trying to pick your poison, you'll be overwhelmed by the seductive selection. "We've got 120 different items on our menu, ranging from quiches and bagels that we make ourselves to the confections that you see," Russo remarked. "And our ice creams are handmade too. Everything is in-house."



Image 1 of 1

**Give me a snapshot of your career.**

When [my husband] Kurt moved to St. Louis, I went to Napa Valley and studied culinary arts and wine and afterwards did an externship at Trio in Chicago. They closed their doors shortly after, and I ... then moved to Ohio, where I was a pastry chef for a small boutique [bakery] similar to this. Eventually I went up to Chef's Garden, which is a sustainable farm, and got their kitchen going for the pastry aspect and then moved to St. Louis.

**So what is the vision?**

We just wanted to go back to the basics, back to the technique. Desserts were becoming so architecturally crazy, and people were losing flavor. We were like, "Remember when you used to step into your grandma's kitchen?" All those things that brought you back; every taste that you took brought a memory along with it. We joke around – we put the door in, the creaky screen door, because it's just like grandma's house. You take a bite of a hand pie, and it's exactly the way that you remember it.

Bittersweet Bakery  
2200 Gravois Ave., St. Louis  
314.771.3500

**Well, it's one thing to reference nostalgia, and it's another thing to do classic pastries well.**

We use really [high] quality ingredients with everything we do. And we bring technique into it, which I think a lot of people are just skipping these days. Technique is almost nonexistent.

**When you were studying food, what brought you toward pastries?**

I actually studied savory; I never studied pastries. When I was doing my externship, the pastry chef asked if I would consider coming over to the pastry side. We called it "the dark side," and I was like, "Absolutely not. No way. I hate it. It's never gonna happen." Chef Dale Levitski cut a deal that I could continue working *garde manger* if I went over to pastries. I figured, if anything, it would give me the technique that I needed to create savory dishes. Technique is universal. Not a lot of chefs know how important pastry is to their application of savory food.

**Can you give me an example?**

*Pâte brisée* – a perfect example. It's a dough, and you make it completely on the dough's terms. People use it all the time in savory applications like quiches or goat cheese tarts.

**What is it that makes savory chefs dislike pastry?**

It's the anal things, like hoarding your pastry brushes and not letting anyone use them. Savory side doesn't see any problem in sharing brushes but pastry absolutely does, because when you're brushing something and then it smells like garlic, it's gross. Sheet pans. Oh my gosh, ... a straight sheet pan is

nonexistent because people are roasting their bones on them, and it's just like a constant argument. Savory doesn't see any problem with it at all. They don't understand that you need a straight sheet pan for a cake. It's a constant battle.

#### So where did you get your base recipes? Where, for example, did you learn to make frangipane?

I learned to make frangipane with duck eggs, actually. ... We grew up baking. Things like that, I remember from when I was a child. And then a lot of it I know from reading books. [Frangipane] was always made using duck eggs. We'd like to try to implement that here if [the eggs] are available in the area. We're still trying to find out what is available locally.

#### What can you source locally in pastry? Fruit, obviously, but what else?

Everything can be local. People have given us little tips: If you want apple cider, you have to go here, and if you want this, go there. At first it was overwhelming because we found ourselves going different places for specific items, but then it all came together and it was like, OK, it's not so bad. It's shopping around. It's going back to the day, not sacrificing what you want because it's convenient. A lot of the purveyors in the area, the smaller guys, are amazing. Fox Rivers Dairy – they're ... four brothers that own this little place and you get good cheese, good jams and it's fun.

#### And your ice creams ... they are so creative.

Every ice cream that we make is made with fresh ingredients. We don't use any bases. We have an amazing ice cream machine. It literally is a dream come true. You make a crème anglaise, flavor it accordingly. Each one has a different tweak. The ice cream batter, we let it rest overnight. The ice cream machine works on viscosity. As it's cooling, each ice cream has a different viscosity, and [the machine] actually stops itself [when the ice cream reaches it]. In pastries, it's hard to utilize leftover things. Say we have a bunch of toffee left over. Naturally, [we] do ice cream. It's a great way to use product that doesn't look as pretty. [It's also] where we try flavor combinations.

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