

Restaurants

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Sweet Spots

The Polish Patisserie

There are a lot of Polish bakers in Chicago, but Dobra Bielinski believes she's one of the few doing things the right way. "No offense to other bakeries, but they skimp on ingredients," she says. "I bought a cheesecake from one place and my dog refused to eat it."

For nearly a decade, Bielinski has been the proprietress of Delightful Pastries, a cozy European bakery in Jefferson Park. A onetime employee of Gale Gand, she's meticulous about her food, sourcing fresh ingredients from local producers as much as possible. Her butter and heavy cream come from Wisconsin and Illinois; apples, cherries, blueberries, peaches, rhubarb, and raspberries from small family farms in southwest Michigan; and vegetables from southern Illinois.

Bielinski, 35, moved to Chicago from Poland with her family when she was 15. She graduated from Madonna High School for Girls and attended UIC, earning bachelor's degrees in French and history and a master's in U.S. foreign policy. But she was bored with academia. As an undergrad she'd spent a year in Paris studying at the Sorbonne and fallen in love with the city's pastry shops, so rather than work toward a doctorate as she'd planned, she decided to change course entirely and enroll at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago.

After completing the culinary and bakery programs in 1997, Bielinski worked under Gand at Brasserie T and Vanilla Bean Bakery. The following year, tired of "doing the same thing over and over again," she bought a two-story building not far from her home and went into business for herself. Her mother, Stasia Hawryszczuk, who'd run restaurants and cafes in Poland in the 70s, provided seed money and signed on as the bakery's manager.

The confections at Delightful Pastries are simple and clean. "The effort goes into the inside of a cake, not the outside," Bielinski says. "When you

Delightful Pastries

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bite, you know what's in it right away. We make a

pumpkin pie that actually tastes like pumpkin. The Black Forest cake, you taste cherries, chocolate, whipped cream—there's no wondering." Sugar is used sparingly. "It's more in the European tradition," she says. "America



Dobra Bielinski and her mother, Stasia Hawryszczuk; dough for paczki; assortment of small pastries

has made huge steps forward, but some people still overdo the sugar to cover a blah taste. I want to let peaches and strawberries speak for themselves."

The bakery's glass display counter is typically filled with treats like Viennese almond crescents, Parisian macaroons, authentic tiramisu. But Bielinski's heritage plays heavily in a lot of her recipes. "I'm American and Polish," she says, "so we've got a fusion going on here." She bakes desserts she says are too sweet for the Polish palate, like chocolate-chunk cookies and cream-cheese brownies, and the otherwise traditional Polish ambassador torte—a tall chocolate sponge cake filled with creme mousseline spiked with 95-proof grain alcohol—contains diced pineapple, mandarin oranges, and dried cranberries. "The Polish would

use raisins," Bielinski says, "but the cranberries give it a nice tartness."

Alcohol is a must for many Polish specialties. "We go through a lot of rum and grain spirits," Bielinski says. "Polish pastries are famous for being liqueured up. It just gives anything chocolate that little zip on the end." One of her tortes, a three-layer sponge cake with poppy seeds and walnuts, is filled with an "extremely boozy" mocha butter cream; each batch of the stuff, which gets spread over 54 individual slices, requires two liters of alcohol.

The Polish treats can also be incredibly labor-intensive: a raisin cheesecake with candied orange peel takes about a week. "You have to soak the orange peels in water before removing the pulp, then blanch them three times and candy them four times to remove the bitterness and hold the

scent of the fruit," Bielinski says.

Every year before Lent, Bielinski and her crew spend nearly a month preparing more than 40,000 *paczki*, little ceremonial pastries not unlike jelly doughnuts. The dough, infused with rum and lemon- and orange-flavored oil, "has to hold up when you bite," Bielinski says, "so it doesn't collapse in your mouth like a Krispy Kreme." They're filled with plum butter and rose-petal jellies imported from Poland and apricot, blueberry, and raspberry jellies made on-site, but the amount Bielinski puts in each is one tradition she won't change. "Americans want more filling than dough," she says. "Poles want just one teaspoon—they like the dough." —Alan Mammoser

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