



Just Desserts at Mission Pie

BY JEANNE STORCK

Walking into Mission Pie is a little like coming home. From the banana cream and olallieberry confections with their imperfect but lovingly handmade crusts to the rustic décor, this café celebrates the sweet, simple comfort of pie. A vase of wheat stalks sits atop an old kitchen dresser, peaches from a local farm fill a basket on the countertop and a long communal table invites diners to sit down and share a slice of goodness.

Mission Pie is about more than dessert though. The café opened in 2007 as a complementary project to Pie Ranch in Pescadero, a working farm where city teens dig in and learn to grow food. In the bakery, students serve up an iconic comfort dish while learning valuable job skills. It's a combination that manager Karen Heisler hopes will inspire students to realize that work can be joyful and meaningful.

Why pie you might ask? Pie Ranch is located on a slice of land whose shape resembles the sweet treat. "And pie is a jumping off point," says Heisler. "It's delicious and it helps move students and customers out of their comfort zone into new learning experiences."

Each pie embodies the local food system. Berries, apples, pumpkins, eggs, honey and flour come from the ranch while other pro-

duce is sourced from local farmers and organic produce wholesalers. "Our menu is geared to helping people know about where their food is coming from," says Heisler. That includes cooking seasonally. In the fall, apples and pears inspire the menu followed shortly by pumpkins then later Meyer lemons. "Last winter, when everyone was tired of pumpkin pie, our chef dreamed up a concoction of wheat berries, ricotta, golden raisins and candied citrus that was a huge hit."

Some of the sweetest results come, says Heisler, "When students serve up food they've helped to grow. It gives them a sense of completion. They bring ownership to what they're offering — in the café or at home on their dinner table. We get a steady flow of self-initiated pledges from students to reduce their junk food intake."

This summer the café expanded. With more space and a new oven that can turn out larger



batches of pies, students will be learning to cook on site, turning raw ingredients into delectable dishes and witnessing the entire food cycle from field to plate. In November, Heisler plans to add savory dishes to the menu, including salads and sandwiches.

Lisa Chernasky, in her book *The Artful Pie*, says: "A pie is not something to eat by yourself. It should be made to share." At Mission Pie there's more than enough to go around, and Heisler wants community to be an important element of the café. She introduced a pie-baking contest recently and has received requests for piecrust therapy classes.

City residents can visit Pie Ranch, buy a dessert or fresh produce at the farm stand or join the monthly work days which are followed by dinner and a barn dance. Visit missionpie.com or pieranch.org.

Mission Pie
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