

FEATURE STORY — September/October 2008

## No piece of cake

**Toni Marie Cox owns and operates a highly successful bakery in Hinsdale. But reaching this point was not easy**

By Rachel Farrell  
Photography by Lloyd DeGrane

On a bright Friday morning in Hinsdale, there's a feeling of leisure running through Washington Street. Outside a deli, an older couple lounges on a bench eating bagels smeared with cream cheese. Two teenage girls, clad in sundresses, stroll down the street while gabbing and sipping iced coffee. A police car rounds the corner slowly, easily, while a well-dressed woman pushes her stroller past a row of boutiques.

Toni Marie's Sweets and Savories fits right in here. But the owner of this popular bakery, **Toni Marie Cox '81 AA**, didn't arrive at this point by moving at the same pace as her customers.

Instead, over the course of 20 years, Cox worked her way up from waitressing, learned how to create dozens of desserts and started a business, quite literally, from scratch.

Cox's journey began in college, when she took sculpture classes at UIC while bartending, checking coats at the Mayfair Regent Hotel and waiting tables at two Lincoln Park restaurants. Thanks to the influence of her cooking-savvy boyfriend (now husband) Paul, Cox eventually switched from waitressing to "the back of the house," she says. She got her first taste of the culinary arts at a restaurant called Halsted Square. There, she learned how to make pastries and concocted a few desserts of her own. But her big break happened in 1986, when she became a pastry chef for Mayfair's restaurant, La Ciel Bleu, and learned how to decorate wedding cakes, make delicacies such as chocolate-pear strudel and prepare dessert tables for Sunday brunch. Cox also enhanced her baking skills by taking classes at Chicago's French Pastry School and flying to New York City for a six-week course with Albert Kumin, the White House pastry chef during the Carter administration.

In 1992, while Cox was still working for the Mayfair, she received an offer that she couldn't refuse: Euro Disney asked her to serve as executive pastry chef for The Disneyland Hotel in Paris. She accepted and moved to France within a few months. But after two years, Euro Disney developed financial problems and started offering its



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employees a severance package in exchange for their voluntary resignations. "Or you could stay, and take a chance that you wouldn't have a job after the cuts," Cox explains. She decided to take the package, move back to Chicago and use the money to start her own bakery.

It proved to be the right move: Since opening Toni Marie's in 1994, Cox has seen her business grow about 20 percent annually, and she's now considering opening a second location to meet demand. She's more than tripled her staff, which keeps the kitchen running 24 hours a day. Her cakes, cookies, breads and pastries are all made from scratch, using ingredients such as fresh berries, Belgium chocolates and fruit purees from France. Paul runs the administrative side of the business, while Cox markets the bakery, designs wedding cakes, consults with brides and does the finishing work on cakes.

The bakery's biggest seller, the white chocolate mousse cake, may be the secret to Cox's success, but she says the Hinsdale community has played a big part. When the shop first opened, "there were people who made a point to come in to support us," she explains. "We had a couple of customers say, 'My wife sent me in and said I had to spend a hundred dollars.' They wanted us to succeed." Pretty sweet.