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Guilt and Pleasure

Mark McIntyre leads us into temptation.
by Deveron Timberlake

What is it about monks and sweets? The Benedictines make jams, the Brigidines do chocolates, and any number of monastic orders whip up sugary confections as their only allowable sin. Divinity is (almost) a double-entendre.

Mark McIntyre left the Jesuits as a monk in training years ago, rushing headlong into other pursuits — Latin scholar, calligrapher, graphic designer, portraitist, photographer and teacher of classics. But it's his sudden rise to acclaim as a baker that pits the tempter against the weak and hungry.

Customers get delightedly carnal while they describe the effects of McIntyre's desserts. As Vermonter Edie Zfass puts it: "These wicked creations are a smorgasbord of taste sensations folded into every morsel. Resisting is tantamount to torture." Another woman says she'd like to make a mattress out of his bread. Husbands and wives fight over the last bite of cheesecake; others tell him they hide their stash for secret moments.

McIntyre's North Side business, Norwood Cottage Bakery, is snowballing on this word of mouth; his friends, who've been taste-testing for years, aren't surprised. "He is absolutely a creative force and there is nothing that he touches that doesn't have that level of passion, that laser focus," graphic designer Lisa Cumbey says. "His work is a combination of love and science."

"When Mark does anything, he drowns himself in it," Bill Harrison adds. "He is an absolute perfectionist and neurotic about getting it right — he'll make something over and over until it's exactly the way he wants it."

For McIntyre, the work began with simple expectations.

"I spent several summers studying decorative arts in Paris," he says, "and I fell in love with French bread and eventually taught myself to make it." Last April, he baked his first loaves for sale. "The farmers' market just took off, and within five or six weeks I was selling close to 200 loaves a week. The first day I went to market, it was like, I'm home. I loved everything about it — the selling, talking about the food, kibitzing with the customer. I love that people eat it and come back for more."

They clamor for his repertoire: 19 varieties of crunchy baguettes and tenderly wrought desserts like pear-almond croustade, pumpkin crumb cake, peach torte cheesecake, brownies with bacon (yes) and a transcendent coconut cake that's his runaway top seller.

"Joy is my operative word," he says. "I just knew when I came to Richmond [from Chicago] that I would live here. All I know is that I'm doing things that are a complete surprise to me, merging hard physical work, which I love, with creativity and eating, which I love. People find unity in the food, and that's all I need." S

Find Norwood Cottage Bakery goods at the farmers market at Forest Hill Park, May through Dec 5, or order online through Fall Line Farms at <http://flf.luluslocalfood.com>.



Norwood Cottage Bakery operates from an actual Northside cottage where Mark McIntyre bakes breads and desserts to sell at farmers' markets from his vintage truck.



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