

Featured Chef: Tracy Dempsey

Written by Interview and photos by Debby Wolvos

Featured Chef Tracy Dempsey of Tracy Dempsey Originals.



AFM: Tell us about your culinary influences and how they found their way into your desserts.

TD: I think that my desserts reflect some of my time growing up in a variety of countries and states where I saw and tasted a lot of different things. As an 11-year-old girl downing 60 sticks of beef and chicken satay at Newton Circus in an attempt to impress a boy, I doubt I realized then how profoundly I would crave the spicy peanut sauce, the rice cake and those ubiquitous pickled chilies—tiny in size but hotter than heck—as an adult living in the U.S. The peanut sauce would later inspire an accompaniment to a chocolate dessert and the chilies would find their way into my ice creams, sorbets, cakes and cookies.

AFM: Did you ever eat run-of-the-mill, shortening-laden grocery store cake?

TD: I have eaten mass-produced cakes from the grocery store because I really wanted to taste how different they are from my cakes and to see if they taste as good as they look. Some do, some don't.



AFM: Describe your style and what you bring to the local dessert scene.

TD: I really wanted to be a cook who baked, using the same ingredients you would expect to find in a savory kitchen. So, that's what I did. To me, my desserts are quite simple and straight-forward. They may differ from their basic inspiration because I try to create an experience of contrast and layers of flavor. I also seek to bring out the playful side of dessert and to insure it fits with a particular restaurant's menu.

AFM: You have quite a prestigious list of clients. Tell us about one and how you work with them.

TD: I have been fortunate to work with Chef Bernie Kantak (Citizen Public House) for going on 10 years. He orders daily or every other day. Generally, we receive the order the morning before he needs it and we take stock of ingredients, purchase what is needed, prepare the order in the morning and deliver it in the afternoon. Upon arrival, we put away the desserts, gather any of our dishes or containers that were used for desserts and head back to our kitchen. It's just like being a pastry chef in a restaurant only we don't share the same space!

AFM: What was your vision for having your new kitchen in Mesa?

TD: My vision for my own kitchen had more to do with creating a comfortable, affordable and efficient workspace than having a state-of-the-art bakeshop (not to say I wouldn't love to have that!). I wanted a space that was (1) affordable, (2) large enough to grow into while growing the business, (3) provide a good space for training a team of pastry cooks who could grow with me, and (4) provide space for a potential store front.

AFM: Where can we find your creations and how can we purchase them?

TD: Our desserts are on the menus of Citizen Public House, Crudo, Noca, The Stockyards, House of Tricks, Café Boa, Karsen's Grill, Crêpe Bar (where we make guest appearances alongside Chef Jeff's amazing creations) and coming soon to The Gladly. Our confections may be found at Smeeks at the Union, Changing Hands Bookstore, Dos Cabezas Winery. Our breakfast baked goods may be found at Beneficial Beans Café in the Scottsdale Public Library at Civic Center.

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AFM: How did you get your start in the baking world?

TD: I got my start in the baking world with my jade green Kenner Easy Bake oven (which I still have). I had my first real world experience working for Pat Christofolo in the early days of Santa Barbara Catering Company. I left teaching to attend Scottsdale Community College Culinary Arts Program and starting working my way around the Valley. I landed my first baking position in the bakeshop of the now-closed Marriott Mountain Shadows Resort. From there I was hired as pastry chef at Lon's at the Hermosa Inn. I was fortunate to be pastry chef to James and Stacey McDevitt at Restaurant Hapa and Gregory and Kim Casale of Gregory's World Bistro – with whom I remain friends to this day. My most long-term position was at Peter Kasperski's restaurants, specifically, Cowboy Ciao. I loved that restaurant before I even worked there and to be asked by Peter to join his kitchen team led by Bernie Kantak was a huge honor. During my time with Peter's restaurants, I worked for Chefs Nobuo Fukuda, Rob Toll, Payton Curry and Gio Osso.

AFM: What does it mean to be a great baker and who are your favorite bakers?

TD: MJ & Tammie Coe, Thomas Greenwalt, Veronica Arroyo, Sebastien Rouxel, Nancy Silverton, Sherry Yard...now, *they're* great bakers. To my mind, a great baker is quite disciplined, well-organized, a good teacher and leader, obsessive, creative, a perfectionist, curious and neat. I don't think of myself as a baker as much as I do a dessert maker, but I think I share some of the aforementioned qualities plus, I am very bossy.

AFM: What's your current favorite Tracy Dempsey Original?

TD: The Neapolitan Budino at Noca. It is a layered dessert of dark chocolate pudding, malted milk panna cotta and a strawberry crema with dried strawberry dust. We serve it with a cocoa cookie stamped with NOCA. It's a perfect summer dessert—light, airy and cool on the palate. It tastes like the ice cream I remember having as a kid.

AFM: What is the craziest, biggest job you have ever done?

TD: I had a marshmallow fan give me a three-page single-spaced list of marshmallow flavors that he wanted me to produce for him. He told me that his flavor knowledge would be the key to my success with marshmallows. What he didn't know was that my husband already had the patent on brown gravy marshmallows! (just kidding)



AFM: What/who inspires you to create your own versions of the classics?

TD: Many products and many people have inspired me. Becky McIntyre, the pastry chef at Santa Barbara Catering made a red velvet ding dong which moved me to rethink the classic chocolate and vanilla-filled Ding Dong. We make a chocolate one with roasted white chocolate filling. These can be found from time to time at the Crêpe Bar in Tempe. Eliot Wexler, owner of Restaurant Noca and Nocawich and I have a shared affinity for whimsical childhood sweet treats, so he's always a great person to test a new item on, like the Neapolitan Budino, the Gianduia Hoho or the Noca HoHo as he named it on the menu at Noca. He will have an idea and challenge me to come up with something. I love that about my job!

AFM: You work long hours. Do you have a family?

TD: In season, I work long hours in the mornings, but I am very fortunate to have my evenings free to spend with my husband, Chuck and our spoiled cats. We have five rescued cats—Cannelle, Blue, Kirby, Rascal and Scooter. Although, they do have a screened patio for their outdoor time, they are indoor cats. They tend to be a little more sociable (read: demanding) with us.

AFM: What do you wish people understood about your business?

TD: I think my business is challenging for many to understand because we are on many menus, yet each menu is unique and designed solely for that venue. We provide a unique service to restaurants that want the benefits of a pastry chef without having to allot the space, inventory, labor and overhead that it requires. Chefs and owners come to me because they know my style and have had my desserts. I don't have a predetermined menu of options for them. In fact, I make it very clear that while they might love that cake we are serving at Restaurant X, we cannot put it on their menu. I want every venue to have desserts that reflect their chef's style or style of venue.

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AFM: Let's say that you win the lottery. What would you do?

TD: I can't say I would change much about our life. I'd probably pay off the house, take care of some of the home improvements that we can't seem to find the time to do, get our store front up and running as well as our online business, and maybe talk my cheese monger friend in California into letting me expand her kitchen so I can run a small dessert shop out of her store. Then, I could spend my time between Arizona and California and continue training my team and growing TDO. Working is too much of who I am...ask my husband who will gladly tell you I am horrible at taking time off. Truthfully, I'd probably spend it on a walk-in, pastry learning opportunities for my team, groovy pastry tools and a new grease trap.

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