

Work Never Tasted So Sweet: Professionals Shift from the Desk to the Kitchen

by Elizabeth Weiss McGolerick

Bankers, lawyers, accountants, dentists... the lucrative fields people once thought would be enough to satisfy them are no longer as fulfilling. With a desire to get their hands into a "tasty" career that combines passion and potential, more and more professionals are changing their vocation and aspiring to the pastry arts. But what kind of recipe does it take for re-careerists to cook up success?

Getting there

Sebastien Canonne, master pastry chef and instructor at the French Pastry School (FPS) in Chicago, IL, identifies the key ingredients for culinary success to be passion, self-respect, and education. He explains that career-changers, which comprise about 80 percent of the students at FPS, "already come looking for something else to love. Like any craft or job, you have to have the passion for it."

Allyson Lara, assistant director of admissions and placement at L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, MD, sees many former lawyers, management consultants, and IT professionals in the pastry arts program. "People are unhappy sitting behind a desk, working on a computer all day. People want to work with their hands, get creative, and involve all of their senses."

Becoming a pastry chef, however, isn't just a matter of learning to bake. "It's intensive. Anything you want to learn in a short period of time is," Canonne says. (The FPS pastry program is 24 weeks; at L'Academie it's eight months.) Students should expect hands-on education taught in small groups, plenty of repetition, and exposure to pastry in the form of plated desserts, sorbets, wedding cakes, chocolate candy, artistic sugar decorations, and more.

Chemistry and technology also play a key role in the kitchen. Canonne explains. "There is a great deal for students to understand before they even make something. You need to be trained on how ingredients work together to understand what's happening at each stage. If you don't get the right education, there will be a lot more frustration along the way."

Saving grace

For Elaine Kilby, 29, it was more expectation than frustration that powered her initial choice of study. Having grown up in a small farming community, she says a four-year degree was seen as the only ticket to success. "My parents reinforced this and guided me away from manual labor professions." She admits though that a career in pastry didn't cross her mind until a challenging year had her turning to the kitchen as a way to release her anxiety. "Subconsciously, I have used pastry as a stress outlet my entire life."

While working as a finance manager for a non-profit member association, Kilby finally decided to take the pastry plunge and enrolled at FPS. Since then, Kilby's culinary education has been multi-faceted. After graduation, she worked in a major hotel kitchen, at FPS as a student intern, and in sales for a gourmet food house. She finally returned to FPS in her current position as the admissions and career placement manager, something she considers a perfect combination of her pastry education and business background.

Kilby believes she is an "example of how a career-changer can transcend the desk and the kitchen." But she learned the hard way. "My main challenge has been not listening to myself. I needed to find a balance in my career and in my values. It wasn't until then that I was able to identify my place within the field."

Wearing many hats

After earning a bachelor's degree and working for a congressman, Brian Donaghy, 36, found himself bouncing from

The image shows a screenshot of the MSN homepage. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Web', 'MSN', 'Images', 'News', and 'Maps'. Below these is the MSN logo and a search bar. A 'Popular Searches' section lists 'Deals' and 'Decorations'. A 'Welcome' section follows, with links to 'Hotmail', 'Messenger', 'My MSN', and 'MSN Directory'. To the right of these links are categories like 'Air Tickets/Travel', 'Autos', 'Careers & Jobs', 'City Guides', 'Dating & Personals', 'Extra', 'Games', 'Green', 'Health & Fitness', and 'Horoscopes'. Below the navigation is a 'MORE ON MSN' section. It features a small image of a laptop with 'Wash Me' written on the screen and a spray bottle. The text reads 'Dust Covering Your Screen? How to clean laptops, plasma TVs & cell phones'. To the right of this image is a list of links: 'Shop: This season's hottest electronics', 'Bold boots for women', 'What it takes to become a pastry chef' (highlighted in yellow), 'Useful commuter gear', and 'A look at the genius behind "Peanuts"'. Navigation arrows for '< Previous' and 'Next >' are at the bottom.

establishment to establishment as a restaurant manager. "The money was good and the hours weren't bad, but there wasn't an opportunity to be great or even to be my own person," he says.

That's when he turned to L'Academie. "I wanted to be the Michael Jordan of pastry." But, he cautions, "Ego can be a dangerous thing sometimes." After having the opportunity to work with award-winning pastry chefs, Donaghy says, "I learned that being good - really good - is about hard work and patience."

Donaghy is currently the corporate pastry chef and chocolatier for Tomric Systems of Buffalo, NY, which sells tempering equipment, chocolate, and supplies. Donaghy explains, "I write recipes, do demos, test moulds and ingredients, work with our sales people on training, and consult with our marketing team about trends," a departure from what some might consider as a "typical" job for a pastry chef.

The popularity of the Food Network and other culinary reality shows has encouraged people to nurture their love affair with food, but international fame is no guarantee for pastry chefs. While Canonne admits that dreaming is important, Lara offers a bit of grounding advice. "Shows like 'Top Chef' have drawn people into the industry, yet it's not glamorous by any means. From the outside it looks so different - everything's already prepped, shows are cut for time."

In fact, Lara adds, "The work in a pastry kitchen is not nine-to-five, which people aren't used to. All of a sudden they're thrust into a job where they have to work nights, weekends, and holidays like Christmas and Mother's Day. It's backbreaking work in the food business and requires a lot of stamina."

And though she agrees that there's nothing wrong with keeping a long-term goal in mind, Lara advises that "one, two, or three years [slaving away] in the business is very important for street credibility. We encourage grads to take bottom-level jobs so they can pay their dues and really learn."

Teaching the teacher

People might think that teaching theology to high school students would be enough to make anyone desire another career, but not so for 27-year-old Kristen Ryan. "Unlike most career-changers, I did not leave my job because I was burnt out or hated what I was doing or who I had become. It was quite the opposite for me. I loved teaching high school."

For Ryan, a foray into sweets at the FPS was the first step in accomplishing a second dream. "After a few years of teaching, I realized I had embraced a wonderful opportunity and achieved that dream. Why not try to accomplish another - a career in pastry?" She attributes her appreciation and understanding of "chaotic culinary life" to her work in front of the classroom.

Now in the midst of a year-long internship at the FPS, Ryan emphasizes that all-important ingredient passion, believing it can "carry you through the exhaustion of 20-hour days and seven-day work weeks."

Pastry for the people

Donaghy's biggest lesson for pastry pursuers is to develop a thick skin. "Don't take things personally. Working in a kitchen is hard. Standing for 12 hours is not easy. Personalities, when people are tired, are not always friendly." If you screw up, he says, "Take the criticism and move on." Kilby echoes, "Pastry is the kind of field where only the persistent and strong will persevere."

But a passion for pastry is not reserved for the kitchen alone and not all of pastry is as cutthroat as the restaurant scene. Catering, opening a business, teaching, food styling, specializing in wedding cakes, and even food writing and photography are some of the opportunities that graduates of pastry programs have within their grasp.

The realities of a career in pastry are long hours and low pay, oftentimes \$7 to \$8 an hour to start. But with the right foundation and attitude, "it's not uncommon to see chefs making around \$100,000. The foodservice industry is the fastest-growing [field] after the government," says Canonne. "The potential is amazing."

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