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THE COOKIE EDITION



Julia Usher

Engineer turned business
consultant, turned pastry chef,
Julia is now a successful
author and food stylist

Q: Tell us about yourself

I am an engineer-turned-business consultant-turned -pastry chef, and I divide my time between St. Louis, Missouri and Stonington, Maine with Bryan, my husband of 17 years. (I've known him since I was 19, and he is my best friend and biggest supporter. Nothing I do would be possible without his calming influence and gentle guidance.)

I've always had a huge sweet tooth and a fascination for lavishly decorated sweets and tabletops, but I only relatively recently (1996) parlayed this passion into my career. I currently work as a freelance food writer and food stylist with a focus on desserts and party design, and writing/styling my own books on these subjects. In the last two years, I've published two cookie books, *Cookie Swap: Creative Treats to Share Throughout the Year* and *Julia M. Usher's Ultimate Cookies*, as well as a 16-video webTV cookie decorating course called *Julia M. Usher's Ultimate Cookie Decorating Series*. I'm currently at work on a third book and series of TV show treatments on the subject of sweets.

There are few things in life more satisfying to me than watching people's eyes light up when they see a remarkable dessert, and hearing their oohs and ahhs as they bite into one. I love creating one-of-a-kind ah-ha moments for my readers and guests – basically visual and taste experiences that they're unlikely to have encountered anywhere else.

Q: What is your earliest memory of baking?

My mom taught me the importance of shared time in the kitchen nearly as soon as I could stand on a stool to reach the countertops. She was an ardent proponent of everything made from scratch, which meant that much of our time together revolved around baking and cooking. As early as I can remember, I was working alongside her. Whether it was gathering eggs from our backyard chickens, picking red currants or blackberries from our untamed bushes, or turning these ingredients into cakes, cookies or jams and jellies, she showed me her various tricks. She also introduced me and my siblings to the fun and beauty of decorated cookies. In anticipation of the many neighborhood gatherings

that were part of our annual holiday festivities, we'd gather for a week or more in the kitchen for collaborative (and sometimes competitive) sugar cookie and gingerbread decorating! Admittedly, my mom enjoyed decorating the house and making tablescapes more than she did cookies or other desserts, so by the age of 8 or 9, I had turned to books and cooking classes to advance my decorating skills. One of my specialties of that era was a leavened stollen decorated with hand-cut flowers and leaves, arranged into a wreath. I think it's fair to say that a love of decorating was hardwired into my DNA!

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Julia baking with her mom and sister



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Q: What is your baking story, how did you get into baking?

Though my first career out of college was designing nuclear reactors (I have two engineering degrees; one from Yale and another from the University of California at Berkeley) and my second career was in management consulting. I carried my early love of baking and decorating with me over the years, using every spare moment away from work to try out new recipes and decorating techniques. I eventually tired of the exhausting travel and workload of management consulting and decided in 1994 to marry my passion with my profession by enrolling in the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts (CSCA). After honing my all-around culinary skills in the CSCA program, I worked briefly on the line in a restaurant as salad girl – and occasionally dessert girl – before making a break in 1996 to start my own bakery called AzucArte. The original business plan focused on providing high-end plated desserts to restaurants, but by the time I closed my shop seven to eight years later, the business was primarily centered around custom-designed wedding cakes. Having never formally staged in a bakery before starting my own, and having never before made a wedding cake, I – perhaps needless to say – learned a terrific amount about baking and decorating on the job, and via trial and error. I look back now and wonder how I averted any wedding cake disasters – but, happily, I have none to report – not even any near misses! Now food factors into my daily work as I develop recipes, prep food for photography, and write cookbooks for a living. (I also help out my husband when I can with marketing and business planning for our farm in Perryville, Missouri where we raise grass-fed cattle.)

Q: When did you decide to start your cookie business?

I don't have a cookie business in which I sell cookies to the general



©Julia M. Usher's Ultimate Cookies, 2011, Gibbs Smith Publisher

public. Since closing my bakery, I've operated strictly as a freelance food writer and stylist with sweets as my specialty. This means that all of the cookie projects and recipes that I generate fuel content for books, magazines, or blogs, including my own, www.juliausher.com. I learned during my bakery years (1996-2004) that I much prefer the process of creating to the process of making a recipe over and over again! Though it took me seven or eight years to come to this realization, there's no doubt in my mind that recipe/project development and writing are a much better professional fit for me than running a bakery. The schedule is more predictable; there's less repetition in the work; and there's no haggling with customers over price! I had actually intended for my first book to be a cake decorating book, as a logical follow-on to the work done in my bakery. But a coincidence of events at the time I was pitching proposals (low carb craze and little market demand for highly styled sweets) led me and my agent to

morph my cake book proposal into a cookie one. The cookie book was an easier sell, so soon after changing my proposal, I contracted with my current publisher, Gibbs Smith (Layton, Utah), and Cookie Swap was born (2009). While that book did extremely well (it's currently in its ninth printing), it didn't completely speak to readers' growing interest in cookie decorating. (Cookie Swap is more of a cookie party book than a decorating book.) So when approached by my publisher in 2009 to write a second book, it seemed only natural that it should focus on cookie decorating. And, thus, Ultimate Cookies was born, late in 2011!

Q: Why is your business called what it is?

Recipes for a Sweet Life attempts to capture my core – what stirs my soul, warms my heart, and makes me jump out of bed with renewed vigor each day. Sure, I'm all of the titles in my bio – pastry chef, food writer, food stylist, cookbook author – but what really moves me is creating unforgettable, ah-ha experiences for the special people in my life. For me, there are few things as gratifying as seeing guests' eyes light up at the

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first glimpse of a spectacular dessert - or the satisfied grin on the face of the child who stole the first taste on his fingertip. I share of myself best through food and entertaining, so that's what I offer with my business: my recipes, or rather my prescriptions in the very broad sense, for making life its absolute sweetest.

Q: Which has been the most difficult cookie you have made?

Probably my 3-D box-shaped wedding cake cookies decorated with the needlepoint technique. That technique is inherently very labor intensive. (Make a mistake mid-stream, and you have to start all over again!) Plus, this particular cookie design required some rather exact measurements to make sure the pattern continued uninterrupted all the way around, and that the pieces fit together once stacked.

Q: What cookies have meant the most to you?

Probably one of my very first sets, back in 1996, which was a bunch of hearts and wedding cakes for my sister's wedding. They were the ultimate labor of love because they had to be just perfect for her big day! But looking back on them now, I have to say that my skills were more than a little rough!

Q: What has been your best achievement to date?

Personally: Marrying my husband; Professionally: It hasn't happened yet (The words of a true perfectionist!)

Q: Is there anyone you would like to say thanks to?

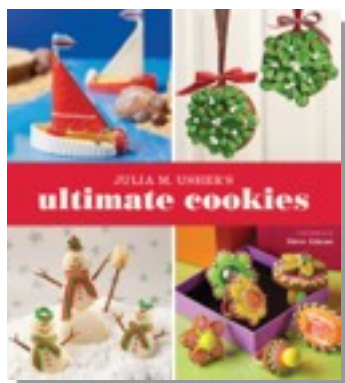
My mom for turning me onto baking at a very early age, and my husband Bryan for always being my rudder whenever I've struggled with navigating my professional course (and that's been often!) ■



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