

Sweet Things for Sale

Sixteen pie varieties are sure to satisfy dessert cravings

By Jeanie Senior

“I love feeding people,” Julie Vance says. “I love feeding people good food.”

Fortunately for a lot of people, Julie shares that love through her company, Sweet Things by Julie. Her specialty is pie.

Sweet Things pies, mostly sold frozen and ready to bake, come in a variety of flavors. There are the standards—apple, cherry, berry—and seasonal favorites, such as sour cream lemon and pumpkin pecan. There are luscious combinations, such as candy apple pecan, peach raspberry streusel and marionberry-raspberry with an almond crunch topping.

“Sixteen flavors of frozen pies,” Julie says. “The reason for that many is because it’s hard to choose between children, and these are my babies. I know there are people out there who love rhubarb-raspberry, which is a great combination. I don’t want to discontinue that flavor for those people who love it. With such a wide variety, it’s hard to weed it out, trim it down.”

The runaway best seller?

“It’s a surprise to me, a surprise to everyone,” Julie says. “Peach-huckleberry.”



Three pie makers are behind the delicious creations of Sweet Things by Julie in White Salmon. From left are Vickie Schuster, Julie Vance and Angie Buffington.

Part of the fun of being a small business is “being able to mix it up and try new ideas,” Julie says.

Sweet Things pies look and taste like homemade because that is how they are produced. Julie and two part-time helpers, Angie Buffington and Vickie Schuster, work four

days a week in a bright and spotless commercial kitchen at 521 East Jewett Blvd. in White Salmon. They make the pie crust from scratch, using vegetable shortening. They roll out the crust by hand, and put together the pies one at a time. The crust edges are crimped by hand. Each of the

bakers has an individual style. Two-crust pies get a sprinkle of sugar on top and initials that denote the pie’s flavor.

The pies may be made by hand, but “what we are selling is consistency,” Julie says. “People need to know that every time they buy a pie it’s going to be good. They need

to know every time they can count on it being the same, from crust to sweetener to the amount of fruit.

"We pride ourselves in our kitchen on the crust that we make. When I do demos at different stores and people say, 'Oh my gosh, you've got this crust down to a science,' it's wonderful feedback."

Whenever possible, Julie uses local fruit. Huckleberries are picked on Mount Adams and Mount St. Helens. Strawberries, marionberries, raspberries and blueberries are from Sturms Berry Farm in Corbett, Oregon. Peaches are from California, because she hasn't found a local source.

Tart pie cherries are from a Michigan supplier. When Julie told the supplier she was sad to live in cherry country and couldn't find local pie cherries, he reassured her, pointing out that the firm buys tart cherries from Wenatchee.

The apples Julie uses are Newtown Pippins, purchased from Fox Orchards in Hood River.

"They are such a wonderful apple, with the right amount of sweetness and tartness," she says. "When I first started making pies, I used Granny Smiths, but when I started using Newtown Pippins my apple pie sales skyrocketed. I've been buying apples from Fox's for three to four years, and in that time my apple pie sales have tripled."

The daughter of an inventive cook, Julie says she wasn't always a good pie baker. She made her first pie without her

mother's supervision shortly after marrying Craig Vance, a veterinary student she met at the University of Idaho.

"It was a disaster," Julie says. "The crust just fell apart. It was still tasty, it was a decent pie, and my husband was happy I had made a pie for us. But I decided there's got to be a way to make this work. I like a challenge, and I just started practicing."

In 2005, she started making pies to sell. By then, the Vances had lived—and Craig had practiced—in Oregon and Idaho. They moved to White Salmon in 1993 when veterinarian Mike Foss, whom Craig had known as an undergraduate at Idaho, proposed a partnership.

The first pies Julie sold were already baked.

"I started experimenting with frozen unbaked pies in 2007, and in 2008 moved into my own commercial kitchen," she says. "That's when I went strictly frozen-ready-to-bake."

Her business has grown steadily. Sellers include Harvest Market in White Salmon and A & J Select Market in Stevenson. In Hood River, Rosauer's and Farm Stand in the Gorge sell Sweet Things pies. Several markets in Vancouver, Portland, West Linn and Lake Oswego also sell Julie's pies.

"It's been a gradual increase every year," she says. "I've taken on two more stores this year, and my goal is to add at least two more pie stores."

Skamania Lodge serves Sweet Things pies at its buffets. Julie supplies scones to



Angie and Julie put final touches on a batch of pies.

several area coffee shops—including Mugs and Mo Java in Bingen—and scones to Google in The Dalles.

She also delivers.

"A lot of businesses use a distributor," Julie says. "I don't have a distributor. I call the stores and say, 'Would you please give me an inventory?,' and I put the order together. I know exactly how much shelf space I have and what each store carries. I come up with the order and invoice, load my pickup and go into Portland and Vancouver."

Alternating with deliveries, she sets up a table at the stores and gives out samples of fresh-baked pies.

"These pies are not inexpensive," Julie says. "The customer has to know why they would pay \$18 for a pie," she says.

"My job is to educate on

what my pies taste like. I say, 'This is a small business with two employees and we work hard on these top-quality pies, using top-quality fruit. This is why you want to buy my pie.'"

In late June, the Sweet Things bakers were stepping up production in anticipation of Independence Day, which Julie calls "a great pie holiday."

"Thanksgiving is the best holiday of all for pies," she says. "Christmas is OK, but I think by Christmas people have moved on to other desserts. January, everyone is on a diet. That's our month of taking a deep breath and recouping from all the holidays."

"Starting with Easter, pie sales just start going up again. Easter is a really good pie holiday."

"I think anytime is good for pies. Anytime anybody wants pie, that's a good reason." ■