



culinary conversations

at work in the kitchen: home bakers turned entrepreneurs

The hours are long, the work taxing and difficult, and there are few breaks, but all three of these women are happy with their jobs. They're employed in the "simchah business", as party planners, bakers of elegant desserts, or creators of custom dishes that match the décor of the event. Meet the latest genre of creative Jewish cooks, whose prodigious talents in food preparation and presentation have evolved from hobby to genuine (albeit demanding!) occupation

Mira Septimus, longtime party planner and caterer from Highland Park, New Jersey, knows who is engaged in town before even closest family knows. When she gets the phone call to organize the simchah — always on short notice — she is sworn to secrecy. She shares: "The funniest thing is that I'm the only one who knows in advance about what day the *vort* is, what time the couple is getting engaged, how they are getting engaged, what food they are serving, where it is going to be, and all the details. When I see the parents in public, we make no eye contact so the secret doesn't get out!"

Mira has seen her share of *simchahs* over her two decades of experience as a caterer and party planner. Living in Highland Park all of her life, and now married to musician Psachya, who spends all of his working hours playing music at *simchahs*, it seems that these two are the kind of people who know "everyone." Every event taking place in Highland Park/Edison, whether sponsored by the local yeshivos, P.T.A.s, fund-raisers for *tzedekah*, Shabbos dinners for Jewish singles from Rutgers Jewish Experience, or *sheva brachos* for the most recent *kallah* and *chassan*, seems to have Mira Septimus's hands in it. Literally. And that's what got her into the business in the first place. She's always had an artistic streak and she learned how to cook early in life from her mother. She knew that she wanted to be in the food business where she could marry her love of tasty food well presented, with her artistic creativity.

Mira established her cooking credentials through years of cooking and catering at the



kosher pizza restaurant in Highland Park (Jerusalem Pizza) as well as at a fleishig restaurant in Elizabeth. Eventually she started receiving requests for catering parties, and she decided to start her own catering business, which she named Simply Elegant. She acquired a respected *hashgachah*, rented a storage garage for all of her dishes and linens, and hired a driver, truck, and waiters. Cooking was done on site after the *mashgiach* had koshered the kitchen; alternatively, she purchased the food in advance. She recalls of this time: "I had to be super organized, because the storage facility was closed according to a certain schedule. So I had to pre-plan and remove everything I needed for the job — because if I forgot something, there was no going back!"

Like many in the food business, Mira found the job to be draining and very consuming. Too consuming, in fact. "I gave up running my own catering business because I knew that you have to be married to a business like this, and on my wedding day in 1999, I decided I couldn't have two husbands."

Still, she knew she wasn't meant to work in an office. So after her wedding, Mira transitioned out of food preparation and into party planning, which she loves. She describes her role at a *simchah*: "The customer hires someone for the food and I set up the buffet, run the party, and am in charge of the party from a-z, so that the family can relax and enjoy themselves. I also assist the customer in ordering, and am the go-between so the customer gets what they want. Sometimes I coordinate with my husband — our first joint *simchah* was a *vort*. It works out nicely for him because most caterers don't feed the musicians, but when I'm there, he and his band make a beeline to the kitchen and they really appreciated being fed! I love the artistic angle of the presentation, creating new buffets, that moment when people walk in and say, 'Oh, this looks beautiful!'"

The Cake That Grew ... and Grew

Chanie Daskal of Boro Park, founder of Daskal Delights, would certainly understand Mira's sentiments. Chanie has not figured out how to clone herself, but if she could, she would. As she balances her business with the needs of a young family of six ranging from age four to twenty, her husband, Bery, not only fully supports her commitment to the business 24/6, but he's also her partner, taking care of reordering of stock, business related to the Internet and their website. And of course,



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there's the schlepping of the endless boxes.

When Chanie was a young *kallah* of eighteen, the thought of running her own business was not even on the horizon. Typical of young women from her chassidish background, her thoughts were on raising her future family and taking care of her household. True, she'd always had a talent for baking, but she tended to express that flair mainly on Purim, when she would have great fun baking elaborate *mishloach manos* that always earned rave reviews.

Ten years ago, when Chanie moved to Boro Park, her sister-in-law urged her to transform her natural talent into *pamassah*. She was talked into putting up a few flyers around town that advertised her first specialty — dairy baking. Chanie shares how her business took off despite her reluctance to do any advertising:

"I don't even remember what I said on that little flyer that I posted around town with the tear-offs on the bottom. Something about dairy baking. I had one small oven, and the phone calls started pouring in. Very soon, things got out of hand. My kitchen stuff was spread out in the kitchen, dining room, all over the house, and I thought, I can't go on like this. We had a basement so we bought a freezer, then a second one, and then a third one. Then we finished the basement and made me a real kitchen with a double oven, one for dairy and one for pareve. At first, I kept one room in the basement as a playroom for the kids, but soon I was put-



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TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS

Here's a collection of tips from the experts that you can utilize when setting up your own *simchah*

HIGHER AND HIGHER On a budget for the *vort* but still want an elegant presentation? Instead of putting food flat on the table, put the food on different levels. Don't have professional tiers? Cover boxes of different heights and sizes with tablecloths and overlays. Start your highest level in the center of the table with the tallest centerpiece, usually the *chassan's* flowers. (Mira Septimus)

SHARP AND SMART When cutting fruit, make sure you use a knife whose blade goes all the way through the handle because otherwise it collects residue from the food, which will make it a haven for growing bacteria and germs. (Mira Septimus)

COOL CUTS Cheesecakes will cut nicer when they are kept cold. If a cheesecake is put out at a *simchah* and it sits on the table so long it's no longer cold, it will not cut well. Always cut cheesecakes when cold, and with a very sharp knife. (Chanie Daskal)

KEEP IT HOT Most recipes tell you to set the oven on a certain temperature, but every single oven is different and a lot of people have older ovens. In order to get the best quality from your baked goods, purchase an oven thermometer to see what temperature your oven really is. Most ovens, especially older ones, are inaccurate. (Esty Hirsch)

OUT WITH MARGARINE In your pareve baking recipes, substitute trans-fat-free shortening for margarine. If you put margarine in, it has a margarine taste. The shortening has no taste. (Esty Hirsch)

ting a fridge in the toy closet and when we outgrew the fridge we placed a pareve oven in that area. Then we converted our walk-in freezer to a walk-in fridge, and built a larger walk-in freezer. The business just kept growing, and the demand for pareve baked goods for *simchahs* was coming in so fast, that we eventually built an entirely separate kitchen area just for pareve baking.

"I started out baking alone in my upstairs kitchen, but then as the business took off, I got one helper, then another, and now there's enough work for three ladies and my husband who manages the business.

"There isn't a day that I'm not baking, except for Shabbos — thank G-d for Shabbos! My house always smells 'yum' and people often say when they enter my basement, 'I'm gaining weight from the smell!' "

Of course, it's not all sugar and icing. Chanie's occupation is a very draining one that consumes much of her life. "Sometimes I think — what have I got myself into? Especially before *yontif*. But then I go to sleep and I get my strength back and I'm willing to do it all over again. I'm probably one of the few who looks forward to Pesach all year because I close my business down then, so it's the only complete break I get all year. I know that most other women are overwhelmed at Pesach, but for me, it's the easiest time of the year!"

Unlike a store, which has business hours and off-hours, a home-based business comes with blurred boundaries. "Calls for *vorts* always come in at the last minute," Chani relates, "and people call to place orders when it's convenient for them — which can be eleven at night, or eight in the morning as I'm getting the kids on the school bus. Once, a customer called me after ten at night and I asked her to please call me tomorrow after ten (I meant 10 a.m.). She waited until ten the next night to call me again!"

Chanie loves it when her customers give her a few days notice, and then pick up the order during the day, but it doesn't always happen that way. "Pick-ups can be a chal-



lenge,” she admits, “as a customer often wants to pick up the baked goods on the way to the *vort* or *simchah*, which can be nine or nine thirty at night.”

Still, she is earnest about accommodating her customer’s needs when she can. “All my recipes come from real *heimishe* cookbooks. People tell me, I want this; will you make it for me? And then they give me the recipe.” Plus there are the requests for custom touches, like “can you please drizzle the cookies with periwinkle icing to match the tablecloths at the *vort*?”

Yet, all the while, Chanie makes an effort to be present for her family when they need her as well. She’s in the kitchen when her kids come bounding off the bus asking, “Ma what did you bake today?” and her older daughters help her often in the kitchen — good *kallah* training!

Although once known for her dairy baking, with Shavuot her busiest time of year by far, now her pareve delights are in demand, and there’s no Yom Tov that doesn’t find her baking whenever she’s not folding laundry or getting her own house ready for Shabbos and Yom Tov. When Mira Septimus looked into the future and saw herself in a business that would overwhelm all aspects of her life, she was right on — she was looking at Chanie’s life.

So why does she keep doing it, day, after

“Many people say, ‘it’s such a pity to be biting into these,’ but I’m just happy to be offering my art and seeing that it is appreciated”
— Esty Hirsch



day, after day? It’s the calls she gets frequently to compliment her on how her baked goods enhanced a *simchah*. “I get to share in people’s happiness!” Chanie delights.

A Cookie as a Palette

Esty Hirsch, founder of Whimsical Confections, a custom cookie and cupcake company out of Brooklyn, also shares a life with her husband and young daughter that is surrounded by *simchah* morning, noon, and night. Her husband, Yoel, works for a linen company that provides tablecloths for *simchahs*, and his day doesn’t end with his own work because at night he is helping Esty with their baby daughter — plus the business aspects of delivery, pick-up of ingredients and general schlepping. You might think it would be boring to be turning out thousands of cookies and cupcakes, day in and out, but for Esty, this isn’t really a baking job. It’s actually a palette for her artistic expression — it just happens to be that her canvas is edible. Esty loves what she does, down to the last cookie. She describes how she settled on creating her whimsical confections:

“I was always very creative, even as a child. My parents were amazing. They gave me a chance to explore and develop my talent. My mother would always take me to Lee’s Art Shop, and let me explore my creativity with media ranging from clay sculpting to drawing to scrapbooking. As a teenager, most of my high school years were spent sketching what I wanted to create. Every year I would pour my creative ideas into some complex creation for my best friend’s *shalach manos* — like a nine-layer cake with a theme of some kind. As early as high school, I knew I wanted to work with food and combine it with being artistic.

“After high school, from 2003- 2005, I took several courses at the Institute of Culinary Education in Manhattan. Culinary school was a very unique experience for a chassidishe girl like me. My mother baked a lot and she was very supportive. When I was in culinary school I took one single cookie class and from then on, I knew this is what I wanted to do. As an artist, you can do so much on one cookie! I started creating my business from my mother’s house, and I only sold to family and friends. But word of mouth took off, and while at first I was just doing it for fun, nights and Sundays, after my day job, —after spending time as an employee working as a cookie decorator for a large cookie company, I knew I wanted to start my own business.

“When I was expecting my daughter, I left my office job, and after she was born, I decided, this is it — no more office jobs for me. So I took some business courses (because I knew a lot



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RECIPES FROM THE PROFESSIONALS



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about baking and nothing much about business), and I poured myself full-time into this business.”

Yet skill and know-how weren't the only prerequisites to launching a business. Esty reflects that any entrepreneur who'd like to launch a home-based business needs confidence and ambition. “If you want to run a business, you can't rely on support of others,” she says. “You have to believe in yourself completely and put most of yourself into it. If you're even a little bit lazy, it's never going to happen. You have to be really ambitious.”

Home-based businesses come with other challenges as well. When you're running a demanding business out of your home, you can't lock up your workplace at the end of the day and say, “closed.” These all-consuming home businesses can't help but seep into every waking moment of the family's life. For Esty, the expression “full-time” is an understatement. She has seen many a 3:00 a.m. on the clock as she is finishing an order, and like Chanie, her life is consumed by the business all days but Shabbos. She works out of a tiny kitchen close to home, and no one can believe how much is produced out of this kitchen, which consists of one oven (she only does pareve), a commercial size mixer, and a large room stocked with baking supplies, including well over 200 custom molds. One of the activities she enjoys the most are cookie-design classes she offers in Brooklyn throughout the year, where eight women per class, ranging from teens to senior citizens, join her to learn her craft.

Any service-oriented business gives customers some leverage over the owners, but home baking entrepreneurs will find this to be compounded. Because Esty's business is entirely custom, her schedule is at the mercy of the orders of the week. Esty often works with party planners who are customizing a *simchah* with a theme — whether it is the “diamond ring on top of a cupcake” theme she recently baked for a *vort*, or cookies shaped as pacifiers for a *bris*. It's not unusual for a client to give her a sample of the *simchah's* color scheme and to ask her to match it perfectly, or for a customer to request an entirely unique creation she's never done before. As an artist, she looks forward to these moments the most.

Esty shares the joy that fuels her business: “I get to design amazing little creations, often one of a kind, and then people get to eat them. Many people say, ‘it's such a pity to be biting into these,’ but I'm just happy to be offering my art and seeing that it is appreciated.”

It's a sentiment that you'll find echoed by Mira and Chanie. All agree that the hours are long, the work taxing and difficult, and there are few breaks. But they've found fulfilling occupations without having to answer to a boss or spend their days in an office environment, and they're very grateful that they have been granted the privilege to spend their days and nights doing what they love to do. What better business for a talented baker than adding flavor and flair to countless *simchahs*? ■