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## Cookies, Please!

By Susie Iventosch



Elsie's lemon bars Photo Susie Iventosch

As a child, Johnson fondly remembers baking Swedish treats with her grandmother and coming home to her mom baking chocolate chip cookies. She has shared her grandmother Elsie's Lemon Bars in this week's column, and they are divine. I have already made them twice, and used a combination of Meyer and Eureka lemons each time.

Though she has always worked in the restaurant business, Johnson waited tables or tended bar until opening her own cookie business two years ago. She has worked at a parade of local eateries including Freddie's Pizza, Rocking Horse Saloon, Bing Crosby's and Italian Colors in Oakland's Montclair district.

Johnson does not want to try too many newfangled cookies, but does like to add a new twist to a simple cookie. For example, she uses lemon chips in her lemon cookies and cinnamon chips in her snickerdoodles, something I had never seen before! Both her husband, Peter Curlee, and their son, William, are the beneficiaries of her cookie creativity. Peter is known as the "Cookie Man" as he brings samples to his customers, suppliers and sub-contractors.

"They are my test market," she pointed out.

The full cookie assortment includes: snickerdoodles, chocolate toffee pecan, peanut butter with chocolate and peanut butter chips, oatmeal chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, lemon chip, mocha chocolate chip, and molasses caramel with sea salt. At Easter time, they also feature lemon shortbread. And, while Diablo Foods carries the Meyer lemon cheesecake on a regular basis, several additional flavors are available by special order: S'more, Dulce de Leche, both on graham cracker crust, Creamsicle on vanilla wafer crust, White Chocolate Strawberry and Jamocha Almond Fudge, otherwise known as "For the Love of Pete," in honor of her husband!

Johnson keeps it local by baking her cookies at Back To The Table production kitchen in Lafayette, and hopes to one day be the official cookie of the San Francisco Giants and 49ers club houses. But, she doesn't want to be just a cookie company. She wants to leave a little mark that will mean something extra. She'd like to start a foundation for special needs kids, by donating a percentage of her proceeds to help these kids and their families. It appears she is on the right track to being able to do just that.

"I'd like to thank my customers for their support and Connie and Ray of Diablo Foods for taking a chance on me," Johnson mentioned. "I love to bake for all of you, and I hope one day my son will take over the business. I want to be one of those businesses that can look back and say, 'In business for 40 years!'"

Cookies, Please

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Cookies Please is available at Diablo Foods and at the Kaiser, Walnut Creek and Danville Farmers' Markets on Tuesdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and spring/summer Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., respectively.

As you wander the aisles at Diablo Foods, you may notice a new addition to the bakery selection, a most fabulous line of cookies called Cookies, Please! The store features six or so flavors on a regular basis, in addition to a delightful Meyer lemon cheesecake on cookie crust ... in two sizes, perfect for two or a party of 10!

"I love her, I love her, I love her," said Diablo Foods' Connie Collier of Christine Johnson, cookie creator and owner of Cookies, Please. "She grew up shopping in our store with her mom and dad, and I am so pleased to be her first retail partner. Christine began selling at the local farmers' markets, and I love to pull vendors in from that venue. I want to bring the farmers' market to Diablo Foods seven days a week."

For Johnson, who is a graduate of Campolindo High School and Tante Marie's Cooking School in San Francisco, baking was always a gratifying pastime.

"Baking has always centered me," she said. "If I had a fight with a boyfriend, was stressed or had problems to work out, I would head to the kitchen to bake. It helped me work through my problems and made me feel good, happy."

## Elsie's Lemon Bars

### Crust

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 cubes unsalted sweet cream butter, cut into small pieces

Mix all in a large bowl until crumbly, using clean, cool fingertips or a pastry cutter to work butter into flour/sugar mixture. Pat into a greased 9x13 oblong pan. Bake at 300 degrees for 18-25 minutes, or until crust is lightly golden. Cool.

### Filling

- 6 eggs, room temperature and slightly beaten
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 cup fresh lemon juice (from Meyer lemons when in season)
- Zest of 2 lemons

Mix eggs and sugar until well combined. Fold in flour and baking powder and mix well. Stir in lemon juice and zest. Pour over the cooled crust and bake at 300 degrees until set, about 25 minutes. Cool.

Before serving, dust the top of the cooled bars with powdered sugar and fresh lemon zest.

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