

The simple joy of baking – French style



Bridie West had planned a career in law until life decided otherwise – now she runs her own French-inspired bakery at the Port Fairy markets.

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[/dropcap] times of great stress, there is a comfort that can be found in baking – the warmth of the oven, the methodical steps of a recipe – and it is this immersion in the process that has pulled **Bridie West** through her greatest challenges.

Since 2010, Bridie has been creating delicious French-inspired treats for her Port Fairy business, **Bridie Claire Sucre Boulangerie** (or Bridie Claire Sugar Baker) and has developed a legion of loyal fans who make a bee-line for her stall each time she appears at the local farmers markets.

"I guess this is like my little shop and all of the locals know that they can find me here," Bridie says as she sets up another platter of salted caramel macaroons beneath her canopy.

While French cooking is known for its attention to detail, fiddliness and downright difficulty, it is for these very reasons that Bridie embraced the French style, despite having no formal training as a pastry chef.

"My Nan was a brilliant cook: one of those CWA types who could bake anything. When I was growing up, I worked at Portofino's (in Port Fairy), where I learnt a lot by watching, but that was the extent of my cooking experience," Bridie explains.



Bridie's macaroons remain her strongest seller, but her Portugese tarts are fast making ground.

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[/dropcap]ndeed Bridie was a young mother (to son, Jonty) and working at the Western Region Alcohol and Drug Service when

her own mother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer.

As her mother was a single parent, Bridie left her work to become one of her carers, in what was to be the first of two significant challenges that turned Bridie's life upside down.

"That was in 2007. In 2008, my husband (Michael) and I decided to have more children so that Mum might get to be a part of their lives," she explains.

Much to their delight, the couple was soon expecting twins, but scans revealed that one of the twins, Greta, had abnormalities in the heart.

Greta and Eamon were born in 2008 and were just six weeks old when Bridie's mother passed away. Greta, also, had multiple health issues as a result of her condition that required numerous operations and medical interventions.

"I began to study criminal jurisprudence and got back into paid work when the twins were 12 months old...but Greta's seizures got much worse, so I had to leave the job that I had at that time at Fogarty's lawyers," Bridie says.



A wedding cake with a difference.
Image courtesy of Bridie West.

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[dropcap]ridie is unashamed to say that she effectively had a breakdown from the built-up stress over two years and turned to counselling, where one of her tasks was to nut out what it was she really wanted to do – and that could fit around her changed circumstances.

She chose cooking. French pastry cooking.

“I actually really love the method behind it the most. I enjoy the difficulty, the different ways of creating textures and layers.”

The fact Bridie had a French-sounding name (Bridie and Claire are her given names) gave her the perfect title for her small business that she operates from a semi-commercial kitchen at home. She also, like the French, insists on using only the best ingredients, such as couverture chocolate that costs

\$28/kg.

“When people think of French cooking, they think quality and that is what I am about. It is about honouring the ingredients,” she says.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #ABCCAB;"] W
[/dropcap]hile Greta's condition has stabilised, life is still taken one day at a time in the West household.

“One day, maybe, I would like to open a little shop – a hole in the wall somewhere in Port Fairy – but I am also very happy with where I am at now and to just sit and enjoy it.”

You can find Bridie at most Port Fairy farmer's markets – just look for the steady queue – and also on [Facebook here](#).



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