

# The Sweet Life Of Working As A Pastry Chef

BY JUDY HEVRDEIS  
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CHICAGO — Once upon a time, two Frenchmen decided to open a school in Chicago, built on sugar, cream, butter and lots of chocolate. They would teach math, science, French, art. Some classes would be sticky, others full of hot air — which is to be expected at an institute of learning where fondant, praline, baguette and puffed-up souffles are part of the curriculum.

The Frenchmen, Jacquy Pfeiffer and Sebastien Canonne, were already renowned for their culinary accomplishments. In 1995, they opened the doors of a small studio on West Grand Avenue and called it the French Pastry School. They drew students from across the country and around the world, moving to larger quarters on West Jackson Boulevard several years later and adopting a longer name, the French Pastry School of Kennedy-King College.

These days, the founders share dean duties — Pfeiffer student affairs and Canonne faculty and programs — and occasionally teach.

And those students? Some 1,200 have graduated from the school's full-time programs — L'Art de la Patisserie, L'Art du Gateau and L'Art de la Boulangerie — and taken their skills, their creative juices and their passions to pastry shops, restaurants, chocolate boutiques and caterers. They've lifted the bar (chocolate if you like) on the croissants, truffles, macarons and wedding cakes consumed in Chicago.

Perhaps your sweet tooth has enjoyed a creation (or two or three) from the school's alumni, including Meg Galus (NoMi Kitchen), Sarah Levy (S. Levy Foods), Jove Hubbard (David Burke's Primehouse), Greg Mosko (North Pond), Anna Shovers (The Publican), Gina Hartwig (Bakin' & Eggs; Lovely: A bake shop), Elizabeth Madden (Rare Bird Preserves), Peter Yuen (La Patisserie P), Cris Patalot (French Cakes Patisserie in Plainfield) and Tommy Zarlengo (Zarlengo's Italian Ice and Gelato in Chicago Heights).

For a snapshot of the French Pastry School's influence and reach on the sweets we eat, we visited three alumni — pastry shop owner Sophie Evanoff of Vanille Patisserie; Uzma Sharif, who owns the boutique Chocolat Uzma Sharif; and Patrick Fahy, executive pastry chef at Trump International Hotel and Tower — who are doing very different things in Chicago with that education. We talked to them about how they arrived at the school, the challenges such a career entails as well as their insights into Chicago's appetite for sweets.

All are graduates of L'Art de la Patisserie, a six-month butter-slathered, hands-on schooling in baking, pastry and confections. They all possess passion for the art of patisserie.

Their stories follow:

**PATRICK FAHY**

Executive pastry chef, Trump International Hotel and Tower

401 N. Wabash Ave. Fahy, 34, was born in Rogers Park, Ill., into a family of five. Mom's specialties were meatloaf and corn chowder with bacon, dad's was French omelets. He spent a year and half in Italy, first at the Apicius cooking school in Florence, then cooking for chef Andrea Bianchini. Back in the States, he worked in restaurants, then several bakeries before landing at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago. It was there his focus turned to pastry.

"At the Ritz, I heard all these stories from the managers about Sebastien Canonne. ... One day someone said, 'Oh yeah, he has a school here in town.' I did the math and thought, 'OK, Can I do 20 grand?'"

He did, studying chocolate with Canonne, sugar with Jacquy Pfeiffer.

"Did it ever change me," says Fahy, who also met his wife at the school. "They made sense. They gave me the temperatures. They explained humidity and crystallization. Of course, if I wasn't able to apply it once I got out of school, it would have just gone down the chute."

But apply it he did with a stage (unpaid internship) at Thomas Keller's The French Laundry (creating a dessert of thin almond dacquoise, almond cream layers and candied plums for his trypout),

followed by stints at Blackbird and Sofitel Chicago Water Tower.

"I still remember every boss I ever had, every teacher I ever had. I always have little memory capsules releasing words they said in my head. ... Every now and then you're doing your job and you go, 'Wow, I'm glad I listened that day because it's helping right now.'"

At Trump, where he's been for a year, he oversees a staff that prepares sweets for two restaurants (Rebar and the 4-star Sixteen), room service, the Terrace and banquets.

"Creativity starts with being in play mode — that's a John Cleese line I stole. When you're in working mode ... you're following a recipe, there's no second thought about it," says Fahy, who's been nominated for James Beard Foundation awards. "When you're in play mode, you're 'OK, let's have some fun. If we change the texture of that, what's it going to be like?'"

Most important tool? "I used to say spatula, I used to say thermometer, then I finally got smart and said it's my hands. ... A tool is something to speed up the process that your hands can't do."

Ingredients you love playing with?

"It's texture. Like making a puree so it's warm, so it's cold, so it's a silky-smooth sauce or so it's like a granita (granita) so it's crumbly."

Toughest thing you've had to learn?

"Sugar blowing. I'm still working on it."

Ever make mistakes?

"Every day. ... (In) Italy, I was making a big batch of pastry cream. It was in the beginning. I didn't know my Italian yet so what I thought was cornstarch was actually powdered sugar. It didn't thicken up and was really, really soupy. Andrea figured out what happened and politely whispered in my ear: 'Just take it over to the toilet and flush it.'"

**SOPHIE EVANOFF**

Owner, Vanille Patisserie 2229 N. Clybourn Ave. and at the French Market, 131 N. Clinton St.

When Evanoff was a kid, she baked from scratch with her mother and occasionally took a day off school.

"Any time the church would have a bake sale, I would miss school to bake with the older ladies," says Evanoff, 30, who was born in Royal Oak, Mich., and grew up in Troy. "They teach you through motions and what it looks like and what it feels like."

Still, her parents weren't thrilled when she wanted to pursue a culinary career.

"My dad said, 'You should go to college for business, then pursue cooking' ... and I said no because he told me to and I was 17." Instead, she headed first to a community college, transferred to the University of Michigan at Dearborn and graduated with a psychology degree. Then, rather than pursue a master's, she got a job as a pastry cook at Steve and Rocky's in Novi, Mich. She was taking cooking classes at a community college but finding more questions than answers.

After some research, she enrolled at the French Pastry School with a partial scholarship, took out student loans and did some baby-sitting. After graduation she worked in research and development at a suburban chocolate firm — "It's machine driven. You have to train your mind to think a little differently." She worked at a cake bakery, then at an online gourmet food company. Then she heard that her former French Pastry instructor Dimitri Fayard had put Vanille Patisserie on the market. She checked it out, but had one reservation: "How are people going to take it now that Dimitri's gone? And am I going to be able to keep the brand and the shop up to his standards?"

After two years at the helm: "It's growing faster than I anticipated and that's the struggle," says Evanoff, who has expanded the shop's wholesale business and is opening a third wedding cake-focused location on Clark Street in Lincoln Park this summer.

"I never wanted to be a pastry chef. I always wanted to own a cookie company, then a candy company," she says. "It took me awhile, but it's the pastry business that

really drives me. I love every aspect."

Most important tool? "My hands. Once you train yourself, you can do certain tasks with two hands versus one, so it cuts your time in half. That's what they're there for. You don't need fancy tools."

Ingredients you love playing with?

"Any chocolate. ... When your hands are in the chocolate, it's very therapeutic."

Toughest thing you've had to learn?

"Macarons because the batter's so temperamental. Season's change, you change the batter. Humidity affects it."

Ever make mistakes? "Oh yeah. Some of the best things are made by accidents. ... Creativity is a force."

**UZMA SHARIF**

Owner, Chocolat Uzma Sharif

1823 S. Halsted St. "I was born and raised in Chicago. Albany Park," says Sharif, 36, whose first job after high school was in the kitchens of the Oak Park Country Club. "I thought about changing careers at certain points because of family pressure, but I always stayed in the cooking field." Perhaps that's because her grandfather Mohammed had been a pastry chef in Pakistan, and her mother always baked breads, from roti to a loaf made with cinnamon and raisins.

On a trip to Colorado, she fell in love with Summit County. "You look up and you're surrounded by the bluest skies and the mountains."

She enrolled in the Colorado Mountain Culinary Institute in Keystone's three-year program that splits work between the classroom and the school's restaurants. She still had questions, so she returned to Chicago to enroll in the French Pastry School. There was travel to France, Spain and more, plus a six-month internship at the school. She began teaching at Triton College, started an online chocolate business and worked at Puck's Cafe in the Museum of Contemporary Art while developing her business and recipes. A year ago, she opened her brick-and-mortar shop, brightened with splashes of yellow, pink, orange, chartreuse and turquoise, and accented with chocolate-brown paisley patterns. "This is the arts district. I am surrounded by creativity."

Sharif's sweets, including hand-painted chocolate butterflies, caramels with black salt from the Himalayas, a jasmine tea bonbon, a caramel spiced with Indian chilies, and a truffle called Original Sin, made with 66 percent single origin chocolate from Mexico, are sold at her shop and at markets, and served at restaurants.

"My specialty is my culture. Anything and everything is influenced, from the packaging, from the way I decorate the store to the chocolates that I make. I am creating chocolates for the customer, not for myself, but at the same time I try to throw a little bit of South Asian influence in there."

Most important tool?

"An offset rubber scraper and my scissors and my piping bags."

Ingredients you love playing with?

"Teas. Greens. Whites. Silver needle. Floral teas. Fruity teas. I'm an avid tea-drinker, so infusing that into the chocolate is really fun sometimes."

Toughest thing to master?

"Patience was the hardest thing for me to learn. ... I don't think there's a technique that's hard to learn as long as you practice and study. Developing patience and understanding how and why chocolate works a certain way, that's a tough part. Coming from a savory background, I had to slow down about 50 percent. I remember Jacquy telling me, 'Uzma, you have to slow down 50 percent.' When you go in a kitchen as a line cook, you're boom, boom, boom. You're everywhere. And pastry — things have to rest for 48 hours sometimes."

Ever make mistakes?

"Mistakes are great experiences that I learn from. If I can't figure it out on my own, I turn to some great mentors for help. I always ask questions. I am not good at making showpieces or sculptures — it never seems to work for me."



E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/MCT  
Sophie Evanoff, pastry chef and owner of Vanille Patisserie, in Chicago, Illinois, on May 22, 2013. After two years of running the shop, "It's growing faster than I anticipated and that's the struggle," the French Pastry School graduate said.

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