

South Dakota sisters' savory pies taking flight in New York

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Abstract: The pies on the menu feature twists on traditional pie recipes, like the salty honey pie and honeyed pumpkin pie. The sisters started the business in their New York apartment in 2009, baking pies and other baked goods for friends and family.

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Full text: On a busy day, South Dakota-bred sisters Emily and Melissa Elsen sell more than 200 slices of pie from their Brooklyn bakery and cafe, Four & Twenty Blackbirds. That's about 40 pies.

Salted caramel apple pie, the sisters' take on the classic apple pie, is the store's bestseller. Emily Elsen, 29, says the taste resembles caramel apples that you get at the fair.

"It just seems to strike that chord of comfort," Emily said Monday by phone from the bakery.

Word has spread quickly since Emily and Melissa, who were born and raised in Hecla, opened the shop April 9. Four & Twenty Blackbirds was featured first in New York Magazine. The New York Times and Martha Stewart Living also have featured the shop.

More than six months after opening, Emily says they can barely keep up with demand. "We weren't prepared for the interest in our pie. We thought, we'll be a coffee shop that makes pie. And all of a sudden, we're like the pie shop."

Emily credits their use of fresh, seasonal produce - they buy about 75 percent of their ingredients locally - and making everything, crust and fillings included, from scratch. It's a baking mantra they learned from their grandmother Liz Zastrow. Emily and Melissa grew up watching her bake pies for The Calico Kitchen, the Hecla restaurant their mother, Mary Zastrow, owned with her two sisters for 15 years.

"It wasn't so much that Grandma sat us down and said, 'You're going to learn how to make pie,' " Emily says.

"We'd be there watching and observing. ... We had an understanding of what to do with the pie and her style."

Grandma Liz's use of seasonal produce - she rarely used canned filling - is one of the main techniques the sisters reference. At Four & Twenty Blackbirds, fruit pies are mainly served in the spring and summer (they make apple and pear year-round) and cream and chocolate pies in the winter. The sisters specialize in fruit pies but also sell savory pies, such as the farmer's cheese pie.

The pies on the menu feature twists on traditional pie recipes, like the salty honey pie and honeyed pumpkin pie.

Mary Zastrow, who lives in Aberdeen now, says part of the business' success is being at the right place at the right time.

Emily studied sculpture at Pratt Institute, and Melissa, 27, studied finance at the University of South Dakota and also has designed wedding cakes. The sisters started the business in their New York apartment in 2009, baking pies and other baked goods for friends and family.

The sisters agree that pie's status as classic comfort food, and that warm, wholesome feeling it elicits, is a large part of its popularity.

"I think it's the savory quality of pie," Emily says. "Cake and cookies are sugar. It's not sweet on sweet. It has a savory element to it."

The store offers three to five flavors of pie daily. Pie is \$4.50 a slice and \$30-\$35 per pie. Whole pies must be ordered ahead. The store also sells scones, muffins and savory pocket pies.

Four & Twenty Blackbirds currently doesn't ship pies. For directions and information, visit birdsblack.com.

Do you have news and notes for the Let's Eat column? E-mail BryAnn Becker at bkbecker@argusleader.com.

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