



# Have Your Cake

**A LOCAL BAKERY BOOM  
PRESENTS A WEALTH OF  
OPTIONS FOR SWEET  
AND SAVORY TREATS**

**IN RECENT YEARS,** Richmond has seen a rise in new bakeries. Turning out sourdough bread and buttercream-topped cupcakes, flaky croissants, sprinkle-studded cookies, and multitiered cakes, these bakers are sparking some serious sugary joy. Nearly as delicious as the wide variety of offerings these carb-heavy ventures encompass are the stories behind them. During our exploration of local bakeries — just a sampling of the many that call the Richmond region home — we discovered bakers who double as artists, family recipes that have been passed down for generations, and treats made with vegan and gluten-free eaters in mind. Read on for a collection of fresh-baked pleasures and meet the people behind the mixing bowl.

**BY BIRD COX, STEPHANIE  
GANZ, EILEEN MELLON  
AND GENEVELYN STEELE**

*Photo by Jeff Saxman*

Olive oil cake with  
chocolate ganache  
filling and a salted-  
honey rosemary  
buttercream from  
Fat Rabbit

# Layer By Layer

For these bakers, cakes double as edible statement pieces / *Stephanie Ganz*

Perhaps more so than any other confection, cakes have the power to evoke powerful feelings, from delight to comfort to inspiration. A key element in milestone celebrations — birthdays, weddings and everything in between — cakes signify momentous occasions in the most delicious way possible. Recently, cake decoration has taken a turn toward the artistic, even esoteric, evolving from the fondant-and-sprinkles constructions we grew up with to platforms for personal expression, natural elements and even a few savory surprises.

## ELLYN HOPPER, FAT RABBIT

[FAT-RABBIT.COM](http://FAT-RABBIT.COM)

When Fat Rabbit owner Ellyn Hopper, 29, approaches a commissioned cake, it's a discovery process. "I hardly ever set out with a goal of how it's going to look," says Hopper, whose brick-and-mortar bakery opens this month in Union Hill. "If I have creative liberty over the flavors, I'm thinking about the seasons and the weather." She draws inspiration from her Scotch-English heritage and time spent in Italy as well as online, from cookbook author Thalia Ho, baker and writer Clare Ptak, and the crew at Gjusta in Venice, California.

While seasonality may not be the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks about cakes, Hopper's are designed to let peak-season ingredients shine. Once she has a grasp of the flavors she plans to use, Hopper will conceive the design. "Stylistically, I try to keep it congruent with the flavors that I'm working with, which are more on the natural side — herbs and things like that," she says. "It's really important that the design reflects that and that these two things are one and the same."

Hopper might note the way a swirl in her Italian meringue buttercream frosting creates a divot just the right size to fit a flower petal or candied orange peel and then build from there. "It feels like bringing all the elements to a place where they belong," she says.

Hopper's sweet tooth leans more toward the savory side, with an emphasis on contrast, and she prefers to work with ingredients such as rich dark chocolates, vibrant citrus and ripe fruit. She is inspired by vegetal flavors, favoring a carrot cake that is straight-up carrot ("no nuts, no fruit, no frills") spiced with cardamom and ginger. She laughs when she explains that she has to stop herself from adding olive oil to every cake. She shares that her "Dark and Bluesy," which marries a dark chocolate cake with sultry blueberry compote and a sweet vermouth buttercream, is one of the best representations of her approach to baking. "It's almost like each cake is its own being, and I'm excited to discover what it looks like and what its personality is."

## OLIVIA WILSON, FREELANCE BAKER

[OLIVIA-WILSON.COM](http://OLIVIA-WILSON.COM)

When freelance baker, artist and former Brenner Pass co-owner Olivia Wilson is hired to create an original cake, the first question she asks herself is, "How do I want this cake to make someone feel?"



Almond cake with chocolate ganache filling and white chocolate buttercream from Fat Rabbit



A cake with pressed pansies, violas and fresh gomphrena by Olivia Wilson

Wilson says she considers when and where a cake is going to be eaten before choosing decorative elements. If it will be eaten the same day, she may garnish with a whole fresh flower. If it needs to travel, she may use pressed pansies or dried gomphrena. There's an educational element to her baking as well: Often, it will be the first time the client has encountered edible flowers, so Wilson says it's important to communicate exactly what they are.

Wilson's cakes are known for innovative combinations of flavors and textures, including ingredients such as tonka bean, mesquite and hoshigaki — a Japanese dried persimmon that Wilson used after curing it over the fall and winter. While building each cake, she considers the flavor and aesthetics of florals, greens and seeds together, sourcing from Hummingbird Flower Co., Hazelwitch Farm and Amy's Organic Garden. Vegetables from Shine Farms have also made their way into her cakes, and even mushrooms grown by Rappahannock River Mushrooms have inspired decorative touches.

Ultimately, for Wilson, constructing a cake is an exploration of the natural world. "I'm always trying to get back to nature and the way things grow and how we grow with them," she says. "It might seem like a lengthy way to go about making a cake, but for me, it's always been about figuring out why I like cooking and feeding people."

#### ARLEY BELL, ARLEY CAKES

[ARLEYCAKES.COM](http://ARLEYCAKES.COM)

Arley Cakes owner Arley Bell often aligns her baking with a mission of social equity, whether overtly, through messages including "Black Lives Matter" or "Trans rights are

human rights" written atop a cake, or through activism and fundraising for community organizations. When baking, Bell often contemplates, "How do I deliberately and loudly use my platform for the things I care about?"

A University of Virginia alum, Bell likes to test techniques she discovers on Instagram and YouTube and is inspired by bakers such as Paola Velez, the founder of Bakers Against Racism, and KC Hysmith, a North Carolina-based writer and food historian.

For one-off cakes, Bell aims to create flavors that fit the occasion, like a peanut butter and jelly-inspired cake for an auction that benefited the Jackson Ward Youth Peace Team. For other cakes, Bell uses olive oil and tangy citrus as well as florals such as lavender, which she combines with lemon, honey and blackberry. Her online menu is the jumping-off point from which patrons can riff. "A lot of times I'm trying to hone techniques I've done before," she says, "and mix things up at least a little bit to keep things interesting for me and unique for clients."

Bell began adding social justice messages to her cakes by request after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017, and making a statement through baking is a literal expression of her personality. "Baking has always been a creative outlet for me," she explains. "As a Black woman, I feel like putting these things on cakes is expressing a part of myself. It's very therapeutic and beautiful for me to put these messages on cakes."



A themed creation from Arley Cakes



Jeff Laine,  
owner of  
Europa Crust

# A Day in the Life

Behind the scenes at Shockoe Bottom's  
European-inspired boulangerie

/ Genevelyn Steele

**IF YOU'VE DONE ANY SOURDOUGH BAKING**—hell, if you've only read about sourdough baking—coddling the bread starter, mixing flour, water and salt until they are elastic, rolling the loaves, creating steam so the boules form a crackly, tanned crust, you begin to understand the elusive, laborious craft.

Sourdough baking is ancient. Christopher Columbus traveled with a bread starter. California gold miners put San Francisco sourdough on the map, and in their sleeping bags, cuddling the ambient yeasts to keep them alive.

At Europa Crust bakery, owner Jeff Laine nurtures his starters, Harriet, Henry and Hazel, in a 700-square-foot boulangerie. He does all the work, from making and mixing to cleaning and ringing up customers, alone.

Workdays are more than 12 hours. At age 57, Laine is lanky and likes to rock goofy T-shirts. He's only been baking for two years, beginning at home at the start of the pandemic after he was laid off from his job in spice sales. In August 2021 he opened Europa Crust.

I spent a day with Laine in his shop at 1321 1/2 E. Main St. to watch the Old World magic unfold.

**7 A.M.** Laine preheats several double-decker ovens to 550 degrees, brews coffee, puts out the cafe table, props open the front door and positions a fan to disperse the smell of freshly baked bread onto Main Street.

**Tip:** Line a home oven with square paving stones to increase heat and diffuse steam.

**8 A.M.** The oven hisses. A cast-iron pan filled with heated stones is hit with cold water, creating steam. Laine bakes two loaves of each of the seven varieties of bread sold at the bakery. He will bake to order all day, replacing only what he sells.

Hazel, the rye sourdough starter, and Henry, the white, San Francisco-style starter, are fed water and flour. The starters will rise until 11 a.m.

**Tip:** When using a cast-iron skillet to create steam, cover

the oven door with a towel when adding the water to the pan. This keeps spatter from potentially shattering the glass.

**9:30 A.M.** The day's first sale is half a loaf of "Poilâne" sourdough, named for the French bakery Europa Crust emulates. Poilâne sells thousands of loaves daily, in various locations, all serviced from a central commissary. This is the business model Laine hopes to achieve eventually. The customer pays with a 20-dollar bill, and Laine makes change from a cabinet drawer.

Laine's baking prowess comes from mail-ordering a loaf of Poilâne sourdough, then cooking from the cookbook, "Poilâne: The Secrets of the World-Famous Bread Bakery."

**10:00 A.M.** Laine scalds milk for Finnish sweet bread, nissu. The browned,



Laine pours cold water  
onto heated stones to  
create steam.

ALL: JAY PAUL



Finnish sweet breads, or nissu, await baking.



Laine pops loaves into the oven.

sugar-crusted braids are laced with cardamom and perfectly accompany hot coffee, of which his great-grandmother, who immigrated from Finland through Ellis Island, drank seven cups a day. It's her recipe.

Sales are brisk. Laine feeds the starters again. He runs the dishwasher, cleans the counters and starts a load of laundry.

**11 A.M.** A collection of secondhand Kitchen Aid mixers whirl. "In order to avoid commercial mixers, the dough doesn't need to mix that long," says Laine, as he stretches and folds bands of dough, pulling them up past his chest, then letting them drop. "Commercial mixers make tons of bread, but they only mix — no stretching. We do the stretching to avoid buying a floor mixer.

Eventually we'll get dough dividers, because stretching 60 loaves a day is tiresome."

The first rise is on the counter, then the doughs go into bannetons — baskets used for the long, cold ferment that the rye, whole-wheat French and San Francisco white sourdough, along with Italian, five-grain loaves and baguettes, undergo in a 38-degree fridge. Cold fermentation is crucial to flavor development.

**Tip:** Always clean as you go. Laine is constantly washing pans before the dough can dry.

**2 P.M.** Laine cuts the dough into loaves, reshaping the San Francisco, rye and wheat into miches, large and rustic loaves that were traditionally meant to feed a family for several days. After they have rested, he scales them into 900-gram balls before knitting them into 2-pound boules. "This

is the most skilled aspect of baking — the balls must be tight to hold form, but not so tight they lose volume when the dough doesn't produce gas," he says.

**Tip:** Dust dough with rice flour, rather than wheat flour, Laine advises. "Rice flour has no gluten," he says. "It's dry and absorbent. It's good for managing dough."

**2:30 P.M.** The timer goes off. Laine removes the nissu from the oven and sprinkles it with sugar. "I have never had a job where time goes so quickly," he says. "I'm baking on demand. We have hot bread all day."

**5 P.M.** Laine lights up the sourdough sign outside. The shop closes at 6 p.m., but often stays open later. Laine cracks the door, and the full, yeasty scent of hot bread stops pedestrians who almost always turn back and buy a loaf.



Customers visiting the Shockoe Bottom bakery

# In Treats We Trust

Three area bakeries share the story of their rise / Eileen Mellon



## **MONTANA GOLD BREAD CO.** 3543 W. CARY ST., 804-359-7700

"I never baked a loaf of bread in my life," says Rich Lahvic, 73, who, with his wife, Sher, opened Montana Gold Bread Co. in the International Shopping Center in Carytown in 1994.

Unlike many bakeries, the shop didn't stem from the owners' deep adoration for watching dough stretch or naming starters, or from folding pages of cookbooks with flour-dusted fingers. Rather, the bakery was born from a desire to pursue a business with both a past and a future.

"You're looking at the second-oldest profession in the world," Lahvic says. "Bread has been around forever."

Traveling to 30 bakeries and 20 states, Lahvic researched and explored potential locations. With years of experience in restaurant marketing, he saw bread as a venture that would succeed financially. He uprooted his wife and two daughters from Florida to start Montana Gold in Carytown, drawn to

the area's walkability, the surrounding neighborhood and its proximity to a nearby grocer.

Taking notice of a shift toward more health-conscious options in the industry, he sought out baking lessons from a friend while also reading books and learning along the way.

"Healthy, whole-wheat bread seemed like a good business," Lahvic says.

That belief has proven to be true.

When they first opened their doors Lahvic says, "We were overwhelmingly successful — we could barely keep up."

To bake bread each morning, a small team mills wheat in a stone burr mill. They source wheat from the same supplier they have used since the bakery started, Montana Wheat Farms. The breads that sell the quickest are honey whole wheat, cinnamon swirl and Lahvic's favorite, nine-grain.

"It's an honest, steady, hardworking business," Lahvic says. "Almost every day, one of us, my wife or I, is there, and it's intrinsically rewarding."



Tony Dean of The Treat Shop

### THE TREAT SHOP

6114 JAHNKE ROAD, 804-918-5125;  
14736 VILLAGE SQUARE PLACE, 804-608-0181

With a wide variety of offerings, each of The Treat Shop's two area locations has multiple identities, serving as a cafe, an ice cream parlor and an eatery. But when asked about the most sought-after item from the bakery, Tony Dean, vice president of public relations, doesn't hesitate: "Our doughnuts," he says.

"They take the center stage," he continues. "Particularly the maple bacon and cinnamon bun," the latter of which Dean says he directs every customer to try when they visit.

Owned by husband-and-wife team Shawn and Essie Davis, The Treat Shop first began emitting the scent of deep-fried dough at its original Jahnke Road location in October 2014. The Davises, Richmond natives, wanted to offer a one-stop carnival-themed shop, offering amusement park fare such as fried Oreos, funnel cakes and candy apples.

The Treat Shop sells more than a dozen varieties of cake and yeast doughnuts, made fresh throughout the day. The menu features everything from hot dogs and a Jahnke Road burger to breakfast sandwiches and 32 flavors of Hershey's ice cream.

Open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. six days a week, the neighborhood fixture has experienced double-digit growth each year. "Between the two stores, there are over 200 customers a day on average," Dean says.

Customers are known to swing by two to three times a week. One of their longtime patrons, Walton Marcy, encouraged their expansion into Woodlake in January.

"He told us about [Woodlake] and said they wanted us to be in their neighborhood," Dean says.

### PEARL'S BAKE SHOPPE

5811 PATTERSON AVE., 804-285-2253

When Laurie Blakey speaks about her late grandmother, Pearl, her Southern-tinged voice is filled with adoration.

"I saw people melt in her hospitality," says Blakey, the owner of Pearl's Bake Shoppe. "I started this because my grandmother bought so much joy to people."

When Pearl's family's farm was in danger during the Great Depression, she ensured its survival by selling meats, butter, yogurt and produce. While working at a voter registration center in Charlottesville, she enticed people to sign up by serving three hot meals — biscuits with jam, chicken salad and iced tea for lunch, and fried chicken for supper — from a little stove.

Working in real estate, with plans to retire from the industry at age 50, Blakey was looking for a new project. As she studied businesses that started during the Depression that are still viable today, she noticed they all had one thing in common. "They were low-cost luxury items," Blakey says. "Something that made people feel good."

Enter cupcakes, inexpensive handheld indulgences that are an ever-changing vehicle for flavors and serve as the foundation for Pearl's Bake Shoppe, which Blakey opened as Pearl's Cupcakes in March 2010 with a partner before taking sole ownership three years later.

Inside the bakery, a display case holds a rolling pin and cookbooks from Pearl with personal inscriptions, while her table holds cakes and pickup orders. From family photos on the wall to a namesake cupcake inspired by Pearl, Blakey keeps the memory and spirit of her grandmother alive and well.



Laurie Blakey of Pearl's Bake Shoppe



# Less Is More

A vegan and gluten-free baked goods guide to satisfy both sweet and savory cravings / Bird Cox



**ANNA B'S GLUTEN FREE**  
7429 BRANDY CREEK DRIVE,  
MECHANICSVILLE

### Mini vegan chocolate Bundt cake

Sisters Angela Eby and Kimi Brown own and operate this prolific, fully gluten-free gem that produces a whopping 50-plus products, all with dairy-free and egg-free options. Anna B's proprietary base blends gluten-free flours, oils, xanthan gum and flax and excludes soy and peanut ingredients, making the shop a treat mecca for allergy sufferers. Their bread can also be found at Ellwood Thompson's, Whole Foods and Libbie markets and it is used for gluten-free sandwiches at Garnett's, Crossroads, Ipanema, The Continental Westhampton and Urban Farmhouse.

**Other go-tos:** *Gluten-free cranberry-chocolate biscotti, gluten-free garlic baguette*

**IDLE HANDS BREAD COMPANY**  
407 STRAWBERRY ST.

### Vegan 'everything bagel' croissant



Jay Metzler's "dream of a French-inspired bakery using only 100% sourdough and never commercial yeast" came true in 2015, has won hearts and bloomed into something magical beyond his initial vision: Idle Hands Bread Company has become a pastry haven for both butter-eaters and those who follow plant-based diets. "I went through several different mainstream dairy alternatives, and some local, and finally decided to try and come up with something made here that would work for us," Metzler says. "For the past 18 to 24 months, I've been making all of our plant-based dairy alternatives in-house."

**Other go-tos:** *Vegan cruffins, gluten-free scones*

**WPA BAKERY**  
3414 SEMMES AVE.

### Gluten-free canelés



The Well-Made Pastry Alliance is an apt moniker; the meticulous care put into recipes and presentations is visible in everything that comes out of the WPA kitchen. Owner David Rohrer honed his skills baking desserts at Ipanema Cafe, so when the time came to open a bakery, his love for the Works Progress Administration's posters and murals inspired the name and logo. Experimentation with gluten-free and vegan ingredients including starches, gums and "milks" has resulted in some of the most delightfully fluffy baked goods in town.

**Other go-tos:** *Vegan cherry-almond sticky buns, vegan biscuits with tofu scramble patties*

**BUTTERMILK BAKE SHOP**  
257 E. BANK ST., PETERSBURG

**Vegan cinnamon-sugar doughnuts**

Happy, colorful, sugary creations wink at you from behind Buttermilk's glassy display case – perhaps none more enticing than the doughnuts. While this is a traditional bakery, owners Laura Boehmer and Ben Cronk include vegan and gluten-free options in their baking plans each day, with special orders, such as vegan tiramisu, available. The duo opened Buttermilk in 2014, wanting to bring a from-scratch bakery to Petersburg – although a little road trip from Richmond for pastries and antiques makes for an excellent Saturday.



**Other go-tos:** *Gluten-free flourless chocolate cupcakes, vegan birthday cake macarons*

**WONDER CITY BAKERY**  
245 E. BROADWAY AVE.,  
SUITE 2, HOPEWELL

**Gluten-free chewy ginger-molasses cookie**

Wonder City owner and baker Trish Honaker worked under WPA's Rohrer before opening her adorable spot in Hopewell at the beginning of 2020. Honaker, along with her husband and fellow co-owner, Scott, supports the revitalization of the city's historic downtown and relies on local products such as Wade's Mill flours and Richlands Creamery dairy in the recipes. Many of Trish's offerings are naturally gluten-free or vegan. When a wheat substitute is required, she likes a blend of rice flour, potato and tapioca flour. She prefers coconut oil to replace butter and uses flax as an egg stand-in.



**Other go-tos:** *Gluten-free Fruity Pebbles crispy bars, gluten-free tiramisu*

**SUNFLOWER GARDENZ**  
SUNFLOWERGARDENZ.CO

**Gluten-free and vegan cinnamon swirl shortbread cookie**

Owners Melanie "Mo" Monji and Kam Allen whip up a hefty selection of killer vegan and gluten-free offerings in their Randolph ghost kitchen, with snacks from the Black- and queer-owned bakery available to order online. While gorgeous desserts are at the heart of the business, their lunch and weekend brunch lineups feature gasp-inducers for restricted diets such as gluten-free, vegan fried fish or bacon, egg and cheese sandwiches. Lifelong vegans, Monji and Allen are experienced designers, so expect everything from the packaging to the cake decoration to be beautiful.



**Other go-tos:** *Upside-down blood orange-turmeric cake, pride flag-inspired breads*

**MINGLEWOOD BAKE SHOP**  
3337 W. CARY ST.

**Gluten-free and vegan cosmic brownie**

Minglewood was inspired by homeschool baking classes that the Sheehy family taught their daughter, Corri, who has wanted to open a bake shop ever since. Corri's parents, Shannon and Chris, decided to take the leap with her, and in October, the team took over the former Guitar Works space in Carytown and put their 25 years of veganism to work. Find a massive case stocked with vegan cakes, brownies, scones, hand pies and cookies, as well as a smaller rotating selection of vegan morsels that are also gluten-free. Bonus: They offer vegan soft serve, milkshakes and espresso drinks. **R**



**Other go-tos:** *Vegan frosted fruit hand pies, vegan triple chocolate cookie*