

July 31, 2023



Pastry-loving Coop members might have noticed a profound absence in recent weeks: the brownies, loaf cakes, tarts and vegan muffins from Margaret Palca Bakes are no longer on our shelves. After 40 years as a baker Margaret Palca retired in July, closing her long-standing bakery by the Columbia Street waterfront and ending a three-decade long relationship selling her baked goods to the Coop. The *Gazette* spoke to Palca about her career, her time supplying to the Coop and her future plans.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

Popular Coop baked goods supplier Margaret Palca Bakes has closed.

“WE’D BEEN WORKING ALMOST SEVEN DAYS A WEEK FOR AT LEAST 35 YEARS.
AND THAT TAKES ITS TOLL ON YOU.”

Palca, a native New Yorker, never planned on becoming a professional baker—she graduated from Barnard with a degree in art history—but the craft has always been a part of her life. She began learning from her grandmother as a small child, shadowed a pastry chef for a brief internship during her senior year of high school, and spent two months cooking in Paris during the summer before college. And while at Barnard, she was still baking: “Even while I was in school, I would start making a lot of something and then see if I could sell it to somebody.”



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

Margaret decorating one of her famous red velvet cakes.

Her professional life as a baker started with madeleines and expanded quickly. “I’d bring my madeleines to a store and they’d say, ‘This is delicious, but could you make brownies?’ So the next day you’re making madeleines and brownies.” Her first “real, serious job in the food business” was at Fraser Morris, a purveyor of gift baskets and fine foods on Madison Avenue. Palca started at a counter selling pre-made cookies, but the store runners liked the home-baked goods she made so much that they built her a kitchen and promoted her to being the store’s full-time, in-house baker.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL HARLAN TURKELL

Chocolate-chip brownies were a big seller.

Palca spent five years at Fraser Morris before striking out on her own again: “I decided that if I was getting to work at five o’clock in the morning and killing myself for 12 hours a day, I might as well do it for myself.” She started by baking rugelach (one her

most popular items throughout her career) in her home, to supply to Dean and Deluca and Balducci's. Fraser Morris had no need for a bakery without her, so they allowed her to keep all of the kitchen equipment for her own business, and in 1989, Margaret Palca Bakes was founded in Brooklyn. At the time, the Columbia Street Waterfront District was not the bustling neighborhood it is today: damage from large-scale infrastructure projects meant many buildings in the area were knocked down and vacant lots abounded. But construction also ended up being the bakery's saving grace: "All the workers came to buy stuff from us every day, so we had a steady clientele. They loved having a place to come for breakfast and lunch, to get a snack and coffee. That's what kept us going on a side street in the middle of nowhere in Brooklyn."



Margaret Palca with the tools of her trade now in storage at her home.

But the neighborhood and the business both grew, and in the early 1990s, a visitor to the bakery let her know that the Park Slope Food Coop was looking for a muffin vendor. And so began a long and successful partnership. Over the years, Margaret Palca Bakes adapted their offerings to the needs of the Coop and shifting attitudes about food—supplying full-fat and low-fat baked goods, conventional and vegan muffins. According to Lisa Hidem, the Coop’s bread buyer, the vegan muffins became so popular

during the pandemic that the Coop asked Palca if she could expand her selection, which went from one vegan carrot muffin to cranberry and banana as well.

In addition to muffins, loaf cakes and brownies, Palca supplied the Coop with about 200 Thanksgiving pies (apple, pumpkin, mixed berry, and cherry) every year. Reflecting on her experience, Palca noted, “There’s a lot of pressure around the holidays, but it’s also exhilarating. I do feel I’m letting people down for Thanksgiving this year, and I hope they’ll find a pie they like.”

“I’M SO GRATEFUL FOR ALL THE PATRONAGE AND THE LOYALTY THE SHOPPERS AT THE COOP HAVE GIVEN ME.”

While Colson Patisserie will be providing vegan, gluten-free muffins as well as loaf cakes (one of which is gluten-free, though still baked in a facility that processes gluten), the Coop is still searching for vendors to replace Palca’s pies and the rest of her product line. And that can be a complex task considering the Coop’s logistical needs.

Packaging presents a particular challenge, Hidem explained. In an independent bakery or conventional store, permanent staff are able to recognize and price unlabeled baked goods, but the Coop’s member-labor model makes that much more difficult. Products need to be clearly identifiable for members who are unfamiliar with them to stock and ring up correctly. Thus, a prospective vendor would need to be equipped to provide appropriate packaging, labeling and UPC codes. Volume also presents an issue—if an order is too small, it will often incur a delivery fee, raising the price of the items. And many bakeries have large minimum orders, which can create waste and lose money if their products don’t sell well. “We need to make sure it’s worth our time and the vendor’s time,” Hidem said. “It’s a tricky balance.”

While those logistical considerations were challenging at times, the relationship was

well worth it to Palca. She expressed particular gratitude for the Coop's thoughtfulness regarding packaging and environmental concerns: "I appreciate the Coop because they think about everything—packaging, food waste.... We talked about selling pies in window boxes rather than plastic clamshells because it's better for the environment, and they agreed, even though it's more expensive. It's hard to find another business that cares that much." And overall, she said, "I'm so grateful for all the patronage and the loyalty the shoppers at the Coop have given me."



Margaret Palca's bakery and cafe on Columbia Street sadly now stands empty.

On June 23, Palca threw a retirement party in her shop to celebrate and say farewell to the bakery. It was packed with customers, long-time employees, and friends sharing their stories about the special place the bakery held in the neighborhood and their lives.

Since retiring, Palca has been focusing on projects she didn't have time for, including repainting her house and fixing up her basement. And she's been thoroughly enjoying newfound free time: "We're a little topsy-turvy, but very happy," she said. "I love what I did, but we'd been working almost seven days a week for at least 35 years. And that takes its toll on you." Baking, she acknowledged, has been a tough business: "It's really labor intensive, long hours, hands on all the time. And the profit margin is so small."

She is still baking, of course, though on a much smaller scale: "I make myself cookies all the time because I like to eat cookies for dessert, and I made muffins one morning." She and her husband, Paul, also plan to keep a yearly gig making gingerbread houses for a longtime customer at Christmas time. And with her less hectic schedule, Palca is now considering Coop membership herself.



Margaret relaxing at home with her husband, Paul Kalin. Paul is Vice President at Margaret Palca Bakes.

At the Coop, customers have been missing her offerings. Palca's goods were beloved not only for their quality, but also their reasonable pricing, especially for a local, artisanal bakery, Hidem told the *Gazette*. "We tried warning people—we shared her retirement announcement on Twitter." But the news hasn't made its way to everyone, and plenty of shoppers have asked where their favorite brownies or vegan muffins have gone. "They're always sad, but everyone agrees that Margaret's earned her retirement after so many years."

The
Margaret Palca
BAKES
Cookbook

**Cakes, Cookies,
Muffins, and Memories
from a famous
Brooklyn Baker**

"Margaret Palca has
all the qualities I look for in a baker:
the soul of an artist,
the heart of a nurturer, and
an obsessive perfectionist streak."

—**Ed Levine**, founder of
SeriousEats.com

Margaret Palca
Photography by Michael Harlan Turkell

Margaret's cookbook is available at Barnes & Noble and Amazon for around \$20. And Coop members who really miss those brownies can always try baking them with the help of the 2018 Margaret Palca Bakes Cookbook.

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