



FAT + FLOUR... AND CHOCOLATE

By **Nicole Rucker** and **Donald Wressell**

Nicole Rucker is a two-time James Beard Award nominated author and pastry chef and the owner of Fat + Flour, a pie shop and bakery with two locations in the Greater Los Angeles Area. She published her first cookbook *'Dappled: Baking Recipes for Fruit Lovers'*, in 2019 and her next cookbook is coming soon – and we are excited to hear that it has a Chocolate Lovers section and a whole chapter dedicated to brownies (read six brownie recipes!). Guittard Pastry Chef Donald Wressell had a chance to spend an afternoon with Nicole at the Guittard Chocolate Studio, just a few blocks from Fat & Flour's Culver City location. Donald spoke with Nicole about the challenges of being a business owner in today's landscape, how she chooses her ingredients and of course how she works with chocolate.

Donald Wressell: Nicole, how did you get your start in pastry?

Nicole Rucker: Growing up, I was drawn to creative arts, because baking and cooking wasn't viewed as much of a valid career path in the 90s like it is today, so I went to the San Francisco Art Institute to study photography, photos and film. I baked a lot at home as a teenager and watched a lot of public TV cooking shows, which piqued my interest in culinary arts. In college I started baking for art school critiques and friends. I was in a band and my bandmates pooled together to get me my first Kitchen Aid Mixer, a sign of what was to come from me. I got my first baking job at a café called Influx in San Diego as a morning baker. I fudged my resume a bit to get the job, so I was inexperienced, but I was trainable and showed up to my 3 a.m. shifts, so I think they were happy to have me. From there I

trained on the job and did a lot of self-training at home. I also collected cookbooks and started considering the things I was eating while eating out at every restaurant to learn to pull apart and notice ingredients.

DW: What are your favorite things to make?

NR: I like to make very simple things that are focused on flavor combinations and textures. Right now - pastry related – it's brownies. I don't get to make them very often, but when I do, I love the process. There are four different textures within a pan of brownies – the corner, the edges, the baked and gooey sides, and the gooey center cut – and ideally each of these in your pan is distinct and gives the brownies dimension. Getting the chocolate right is one of the most crucial elements to an intentional brownie.



When working with chocolate, I try to taste as many things as possible. I look for sweetness levels, flavor notes like fruitiness and acid, and consider how that profile will combine with the ratio of eggs and sugar I want to use. In my upcoming cookbook I have six different recipes for brownies made with three different bases – a white chocolate base; a milk chocolate base, and a dark chocolate base – and each one has some add-ins and flavor combinations. I also have a Banana Cream pie on the menu at Fat + Flour that has Guittard Creme Francaise in the eggless pudding base to give it body and flavor that I love to make. One of the most critical elements to get that recipe right was the white chocolate – it needed to be harmonious with the bananas, whipped cream

and vanilla and I spent a lot of time tasting and combining to get the proportions and flavors just right.

DW: What has changed in the food world the most since you got started?

NR: The internet has created a lot of change in our industry with the amount of inspiration and information at our fingertips - for better and sometimes for worse! When I got started, I didn't have Instagram and Food TV was just getting popular. I was looking into and learning about food through constant deep research, by eating different foods, by trial and error in the kitchen. So, I spent a lot of time varying ingredients to see what works best. Thanks to social media, and so many people interested in food content – a lot gets copied and looks and tastes the same. Styles and tastes also come and go so much more quickly now.

DW: Being the owner and head chef of Fat + Flour, how do you embrace what today's customer wants and stay true to your roots as a pastry chef?

NR: One of the good things about the prevalence of food content is that it creates curiosity about food and interest in trying new things. And I think our job in small food businesses is to help people create a taste for new things and set trends. People don't need chocolate or a dessert, but it is such a reward. I want to live up to that treat moment and change people's minds about what good tastes like. Even for something as simple as a chocolate chip cookie – by using good brown sugar, salt and good chocolate in a ratio that creates texture and flavor beyond the classic Tollhouse bag recipe, I get to create something unique for customers, and put it out there - with the hope that they are willing to pay for it and come back for more.

Another way I stay true to my roots is having a balance of consistent menu staples as the base of the offering, and a steady flow of seasonal specials to keep the menu fresh and interesting for regulars and people who are just discovering us. This also allows me to try interesting new ingredients, and weave in components from some of my fave CPG brands and test flavor combinations, it's also a great way to limit any waste of quality ingredients. In our Culver City shop, I have a small retail section to honor some of these brands I work with. It is another iron in the fire for the business that also delivers revenue, and I really like to work with people and brands who are on a smaller scale that you can create real relationships with. I think today's customer is also interested in knowing more about the ingredients and brands that chefs work with.

DW: Tell us about this beautiful and decadent pie you have worked on here in our Chocolate Studio.

NR: This Chocolate Chess Pie with Peanut Butter Meringue and Sea Salt was just put on the menu as a special a few weeks ago. It is a twist on our Chocolate Chess Pie that is a mainstay on our menu. It is an all-butter pie crust with a chocolate chess filling made with 72% and 55% Guittard Chocolate, butter, eggs, brown sugar, cocoa powder all topped with a scoop of One Trick Pony Peanut Butter. I then top it with a Swiss meringue and put it back in the oven to bake and crisp it up. Lots of chefs use a blow torch, but I prefer to bake it to get a crunchy textural layer. Then I top it with more peanut butter and cocoa powder and a generous sprinkling of Jacobsen's sea salt. I made it on a whim one day because I had all the ingredients – and everyone freaked out.





Chocolate Peanut Butter Pie with Meringue

By **Nicole Rucker**, Owner & Head Chef,
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he classic combination of chocolate and peanut butter gets even more indulgent with

the addition of toasted meringue in an irresistible pie from Chef Nicole Rucker. The dark chocolate chess filling is a rich and sturdy base, and it holds its own here against the layers of peanut butter and sweet meringue.

Yield: 1 9-inch pie

EQUIPMENT

- 9-inch pie pan
- Heatproof bowl
- Medium pot
- Large mixing bowl
- Stand mixer with whisk attachment

CHOCOLATE CHESS FILLING

- 140 g 72% Guittard Chocolate, chopped
 - 56 g milk chocolate chips
 - 226 g unsalted butter
 - 213 g packed dark brown sugar
 - 2 Tbs Dutch-processed cocoa powder
 - 200 g large eggs (4 large eggs)
 - 1 tsp Diamond Crystal kosher salt
1. Fill a medium pot one-quarter full with water. Set it over medium heat and bring the water to a simmer.



2. Combine the 72% chocolate, milk chocolate and butter in a heatproof bowl and place it over, but not touching, the simmering water to create a double boiler. Stir gently until the butter and chocolate are melted and completely incorporated.
3. Remove the bowl and place it on a dry towel.
4. In a large mixing bowl, combine the brown sugar, cocoa powder, eggs and salt. Beat vigorously with a whisk until the mixture is lighter in color and very creamy looking.
5. Add the warm chocolate mixture and whisk to combine everything.

MERINGUE TOPPING

- 99 g large egg whites (3 large egg whites)
 - 200 g granulated sugar
 - 1 tsp apple cider vinegar
 - Pinch of Diamond Crystal kosher salt
1. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the egg whites on medium-high speed until stiff peaks form.
 2. Slowly add the sugar and beat until all the sugar has dissolved and silky peaks of meringue have formed.
 3. Add the vinegar and a small pinch of salt and beat for 1 additional minute to combine them.

ASSEMBLY

- 1 parbaked 9-inch pastry crust
 - ½ cup natural peanut butter
 - 1 Tbs Dutch-processed cocoa powder
 - Flaky sea salt
1. Position a rack in the center of your oven and preheat to 350°F (176°C). Place your parbaked pastry crust on a lined baking sheet.
 2. Transfer the batter to the prepared crust and smooth the top.
 3. Bake for 40 minutes, rotate the pan and continue baking until the batter forms a shiny crust on the surface and jiggles a little bit in the center when tapped, 50–60

minutes. The custard may soufflé around the edges during baking; it will collapse once it cools, which is totally normal.

4. Spread 1/3 of the peanut butter over the surface of the baked chocolate filling.
5. Top the pie with the meringue, swooshing it to create swirls.
6. Return the pie to the oven and bake for an additional 10-15 minutes until the meringue is shiny and lightly browned. As it cools, the meringue will be slightly crunchy on the surface and soft inside.
7. Chill the pie for at least 2 hours before slicing it. Just before serving, scatter the remaining peanut butter and sea salt over the meringue and dust it with cocoa powder. Slice it using a warm knife. Store any leftovers in the fridge. They will keep for about 3 days.

