

VAIL GOURMET COOKIE COMPANY

AS FEATURED IN

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**COLORADO
COUPLES**

**VAIL MANSION:
\$21 MILLION**

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HOUSES**

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CHOCOLATE**

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AS APPEARED IN THE
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COLORADO
expression

VAIL

ACCOUNTANT-TURNED-BAKER

PUTS TOP INGREDIENTS

TO WORK,

PRODUCING FRESH,

ORIGINAL COOKIES

IN THE HIGH COUNTRY.

Most of the time, cookies are limited to flavors such as chocolate chip, peanut butter and oatmeal raisin. But to the owners of the Vail Gourmet Cookie Company, those old standbys are just a little too boring. Instead, they're making a name for themselves with unusual varieties—cranberry chocolate, organic fig and chocolate toffee macadamia nut, for starters. And, if the Summit County-based company's recent growth is any guide, it's an approach that is working.

"Our philosophy is that our cookies need to be gourmet and they need to be something that you can't get anywhere else," explains co-owner and head baker Barbara Patai. "I have used old-time family recipes—some of them are over 100 years old, they came from my grandmother—so they're different. They're not your typical cookie."

PHOTO: MICHELLE JUREK

GOURMET COOKIE COMPANY

BY TIMOTHY SPRINKLE

HOME IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

Founded just over two years ago, the Vail Gourmet Cookie Company is fast becoming one of the high country's signature businesses. It all started when Patai and her husband John began selling their homemade creations to friends and neighbors at the Vail farmers' market. Named after mountain-related activities such as Dark Mogul and Snowshoe Granola to drive home the Colorado connection, the treats were a hit with the locals. So the new entrepreneurs quickly expanded their outlets to include online sales in early 2005.

Patai and Co. now bake nearly 400 cookies every week—double that during the holiday season—and regularly ship orders all over the country. In fact, they recently moved their operation into a large commercial kitchen near Vail Village to keep up with the demand.

"We think there's a lot of potential with the business," says Michelle Jirenc, who handles the company's sales and marketing efforts in addition to her baking duties in the kitchen. "The growth in the last year has just been phenomenal. That's actually one of the reasons that we moved

into this new kitchen. And we have so many things already lined up for the ski season it just makes sense to be centrally located here in the Village."

So, aside from unique flavors and new varieties, what exactly goes into making a cookie "gourmet"? It's all in the ingredients, says Patai. "We just want to make sure that, number one, we have a really quality product. So we use all the best ingredients; no preservatives or artificial flavors or chemicals."

GOING TO THE DOGS

High-end cookies aren't the only things coming out of the Vail Gourmet Cookie Company's kitchen. They've been baking all-natural dog treats since the beginning.

"We figured that if you're going to order cookies for yourself, if you have a pup, you've got to have something for them, too," says Patai. "So we have gourmet dog bones—one with garlic and parsley like a pizza, and a dessert one with carob chips and ginger. We spend a lot of time on the dog bones, but we're really tickled with them."

MIDNIGHT TELE BISCOTTI

MAKES ABOUT 24

- ½ cup butter
- 1 cup sugar
- 4 eggs
- 4 tsp vanilla
- 2 cups flour
- ½ cup cocoa
- 1 Tbs cinnamon
- 3 tsp baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup hazelnuts, chopped
- 1 cup semisweet chocolate chunks

Preheat the oven to 350F.

Mix together the butter and sugar, then whip until light and fluffy. Add the eggs and vanilla while blending.

In a separate bowl, blend together flour, cocoa, cinnamon, baking powder and salt. Slowly introduce the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients while the mixer is on. Once blended, fold in the hazelnuts and chocolate chunks.

Remove the dough and form it into 2 logs. For a shiny finish, brush the tops of the dough logs with a glaze made from 1 egg white beaten with 1 teaspoon of water.

Put the logs on a greased cookie sheet and bake for 30 minutes at 350F. Let cool for 15 minutes, then cut into ¾-inch slices. Return to the oven and bake for 20 minutes at 275F.

Take the biscotti out, flip them over, and return to the oven for 20 more minutes. Cool for 15 minutes before serving. They'll last about three weeks in an airtight container.



TRY SOMETHING NEW

Recently, the company added several new breads and a number of different biscotti cookies to the mix. Plus, they're constantly adding new flavors to the cookie menu, expanding their selection while introducing fans to new flavor combinations and tastes. This year, for example, they introduced the espresso-laced "mocha mountain" brownie and, in response to customer requests, a fig treat called the "back country bar" that's made with organic Turkish figs and a brown sugar crust. It proved popular with the farmers' market crowds this past summer, and it's about as healthy as a cookie can get, laughs Patai.

ORDER ONLINE

At the moment, Vail Gourmet's cookies are only available direct from the kitchen via the company's website, though Jirenc says more local farmers' market appearances are likely for next summer. As far as orders go, however, the web-only arrangement works out great for the customer. Since the company doesn't fill

orders until they're ready to ship, just about everything on the menu—from the gift baskets to the combo packs to the bulk cookies—can be customized to fit any request. After all, personalization is the name of the game when it comes to gourmet foods.

"We don't profess to be a caterer, but we will customize our cookies for whatever people want. We're flexible," says Jirenc.

THE COOKIE EXPRESS

Since freshness is so crucial to the enjoyment of their products, these cookie cooks will only ship their carefully packed and sealed wares express—and only over limited distances. So far, the farthest they've sent a box is London, and they're wary to try anything further, worried about the effect that the travel time might have on the overall quality of their cookies. Locally and in Denver, however, they'll even hand deliver.

For Patai, who spent the better part of

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Company make them for you.

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information or to place an order.

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Favors and more while you're at it.

her career working as an accountant in Denver, baking cookies for a living just makes sense.

"I love to bake," she says, "and my mother did wedding cakes so I think I came by it naturally. It's basically something that I've wanted to do for a very, very long time, and it just kind of felt right. This is what I want to do for my retirement—bake cookies."

Timothy Sprinkle is a Denver-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Outside*, *Wired* and a variety of other national publications. A dedicated home cook, he's been busy sampling food for you.