

The Oakland Tribune

Biscotti a recession-recovery

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Section: My Town

September 13, 2009

Victoria Bianchi needed a recipe for survival when she became yet another employee casualty of the recession. And the recipe she came up with involved a dash of ingenuity, a pinch of heritage and a full cup of passion.

She literally created a recipe — a winning recipe — known as Biscotti di Bianchi, which 10 months later lifted her out of the unemployment line and into a redirected career.

It's a remarkable story, and it couldn't have happened if AAA hadn't laid her off as an auto repair estimator in the Oakland area after 18 years of service. She was crushed to be downsized, but AAA handed her a generous severance check while she contemplated her next move.

She decided to follow mom's cooking. Her mother made biscotti, an Italian biscuit, in their Daly City home, and Victoria went into the biscotti business in November 2008.

Her progress far has been amazing. She is selling biscotti at local farmers markets, and Piedmont Grocery, Star Grocery and The Pasta Shop are carrying her packaged product.

"It's kind of taking off," she said Friday at a farmers market in Old Oakland. Victoria, 45, is fourth-generation Italian, so she knows all about biscotti. Her biscotti, however, is softer than most biscotti, which are rock-hard.

"It's not a pliable soft, but a crispy, melt-in-your-mouth soft," she said.

Her biscotti comes in varied flavors — the traditional almond-anise flavor (preferred by her mother), chocolate-dipped, cranberry chocolate chips, chocolate hazelnut and cranberry pistachio.

The ever-creative Victoria has two more recipes — lemon zest with whole almonds, and a cranberry orange zest — she's experimenting with. But she might adjust and add white chocolate to the lemon.

The almond-anise biscotti is her biggest seller.

"My mom tells me I've perfected the recipe," she said proudly.

With biscotti lovers, it all comes down to anise.

"People either love it or hate it," Victoria said. "There's no middle ground."

She envisions this new career leading her into the wholesale business, supplying retailers. Sort of what she's doing currently, only on a larger scale.

Now living in San Rafael, she commutes to farmers markets all over the Bay Area and beyond, and must acquire a health permit in each county. She sells her biscotti at as many as six markets a week. Today she'll be at the Montclair Jazz and Wine Festival in the Oakland hills.

Besides all that driving, plus the baking and packaging she does at home, she must be creative to find time to spend with her 9-year-old daughter, Madison.

"I'm balancing work and home right now," said Victoria. "It's labor intensive. I take Mondays off. That's when I get my paperwork done."

There's also the shopping for her biscotti ingredients.

"I'm running low on chocolate dip," she said. "You can't ever get enough chocolate dip."

Victoria wouldn't call herself financially successful, but she's getting there. She's learned the "modern-day bartering system" of trading goods with other sellers at farmers markets as a means of cutting costs.

Reflecting on her forced career change, she marvels at how life sometimes has hidden treasures ready to spring unexpectedly. It has to be the right treasure, however.

After she was a victim of a AAA mass layoff, Victoria considered opening a cafe. Then she remembered the recession hadn't gone away, and she decided to follow her family's roots.

"I'm much happier now," she said. "I loved what I did before, going into the body shops, learning a lot about cars. But I've always loved to cook; it's a stress reliever." So although the economy knocked her down, she came up swinging — and baking. "I was forced to reinvent myself," she said. "A lot of people have been, but this was my way of avoiding (a job) interview. Now I get to do my own thing."

She can only say grazie.

Photo: Giovanna Borgna/Staff

Victoria Bianchi sells biscotti made from scratch Friday at the farmers market on Ninth Street in Oakland. Bianchi used a family recipe to start a business.

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Record Number: 13325357