

IMMIGRATION: Working in America

Susan Limb: Pastry Chef, Restaurateur

by Becki Young

One day I was surprised to hear Bethesda pastry chef Susan Limb speaking in Korean with one of my legal assistants.

It turns out Susan was born in South Korea; her parents, who are from Seoul, had immigrated to the US as young adults, but her mother returned to Korea when she learned she was having twins. She returned to Los Angeles (with Susan and her twin sister) two years later.

Susan remembers visiting Korea during the summers as she was growing up. She learned to cook traditional Korean dishes from her grandmother, and came to appreciate the wide variety of fresh food available at the local market. In those days there were few farmers

markets in the US, so the markets in Korea were a real novelty.

Her culinary curiosity was stoked by family trips to China (well before Westernization in that country), South America, and Europe, and she thought there was no food that could surprise her until, on a trip to Mexico, she was served authentic local tacos filled with grasshoppers, “eggs of an ant that lives on agave cactus,” and tequila worms.

In the 1990s Susan landed in DC to pursue a Master's degree in Liberal Studies at Georgetown. Since (as she says) she had some extra time on her hands, she decided to also pursue a diploma in Pastry Arts at L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg.

After completing the nine month pastry program, she worked at the school as an assistant to Program Director Mark Ramsdell (an award-

winning local pastry chef), while finishing her Master's program.

At the time, Chef Ramsdell was assisting White House executive pastry chef Roland Mesnier, and he asked Susan to lend a hand. She worked in the White House pastry kitchen on a contract basis during the summer of 1998 (and continued on an “on call” basis until 2005). The pastry department was staffed by seven or eight chefs and cooks (two full-timers – Mesnier and his assistant – and five or six part-timers), who prepared pastries for one to two functions per week. Working with chef Mesnier, Susan says, was a surreal experience at first. Because it was the White House, you “got to see a lot of things that you wouldn't normally see” in a pastry kitchen.

At the White House Susan met fellow pastry chef Patrick Musel, with whom she has collaborated ever since.

Patrick was then the executive pastry chef for Marvelous Market, the DC food emporium that bills itself as a “gourmet convenience store.” Susan joined him there, and they worked out of the company's Bethesda location, producing pastries for the company's then seven locations.

When Patrick left Marvelous Market in 1999 to open a consulting business, Susan went with him; then in 2000 they were hired by Georgetown's Filomena Ristorante. Owner JoAnna Filomena put a strong emphasis on quality and wanted to build a successful pastry program. The two chefs were given their own pastry kitchen, and in the five years they worked at Filomena they elevated the restaurant's dessert program.

Susan and Patrick began looking for a space to open their own pastry shop in the early 2000s, but for several years they met with nothing but disappointment. Time and time again they heard that “nine out of ten restaurants fail in the first year;” it seemed that every time they found a space they liked, they lost out to another business (such as a dance studio, a furniture store, or a bank) which didn't require the extensive renovations that a pastry shop would.

Finally, they found a space in the former Little Falls Mall in the Fort




Susan Limb

Sumner neighborhood in Bethesda. In 2002-2003 the mall, which has existed for decades, underwent a complete renovation and was renamed The Shops at Summer Place. Susan and Patrick initially wanted to open a bakery with limited carryout/ savory foods to go, but the landlord wanted a full-service restaurant. Ultimately, they created a space with a pastry kitchen and shop on the first floor, and a restaurant kitchen and dining room above. They signed a lease in 2004, and in 2005 they hired a contractor to build out the restaurant. Susan personally oversaw the construction project, which was completed in 2006, and Praline Bakery opened in April of that year.

The restaurant and pastry shop has since become a local favorite, and Susan Limb and Patrick Musel have received substantial accolades for their efforts. Most recently they were nominated for the honor of “Best Pastry Chef” by the Restaurant Association of Maryland in 2010.



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