



Stella Parks' contemporary riffs on classic desserts include, from left, fig newtons, red wine velvet cake, and maple panna cotta.



SARAH JANE SANDERS (BRAN TART (FIG NEWTONS, RED WINE VELVET CAKE), ROSCO WEBER (MAPLE PANNA COTTA)

Her **JUST** Desserts

Lexington pastry chef Stella Parks earning national acclaim

By Cynthia Grisolia



SARAH JANE SANDERS/BRVAVETART

Milk and cookies never tasted so good, especially when the cookies are loaded with high-quality chocolate.

For foodies living in Lexington, here's a tasty tidbit: Down on West Short Street, along the corridor between Jefferson and Limestone streets, a gastronomic revolution is under way. A string of new restaurants, many manned by chefs wielding recipes for haute cuisine not hot browns, is raising the city's gourmet profile. Among the leaders of the appetizing uprising is Stella Parks.

As the pastry chef at Table 310, the West Short Street eatery whose small-plate menu and industrial ambience have been attracting Lexingtonians since 2010, Parks is the maker of heavenly desserts, many with very earthly origins. She's become known for her from-scratch takes on such American childhood favorites as ice-cream sandwiches, Fig Newtons, Animal Crackers — even Pop Tarts (all sans chemicals and preservatives but with taste sensations intact). Meanwhile, she's equally adept at whipping up a little something elegant, like maple panna cotta adorned with delicate pear slivers or a dreamy red wine velvet cake, this one made with actual Zinfandel. "I focus on making extremely well-executed desserts that don't stray too far from the familiar," said Parks, "but they still have



SARAH JAKE SANDERS/BRUNETART

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the ability to surprise.” **Oatmeal cream cookies**

In the past year Parks’ whimsical style and upscale versions of star-spangled treats have helped catapult her into a culinary stratosphere: In 2012 *Food & Wine* magazine named her one of the “Best New Pastry Chefs in America;” *The New York Times* called her Faux-reos “the best homemade Oreos by far;” and by year’s end she could be seen frosting a towering brown sugar, pear, and pistachio cake on TV’s *Fox & Friends*.

Her career trajectory, however, hasn’t followed a conventional recipe for success. It took a trip to the Far East to inspire her to begin reinventing the recipes of the West. Born and raised in Lexington, Parks started in the restaurant business as a teenager. But making a living behind the stove was not her grand aspiration. “I never thought of it as a career,” said Parks. “I thought I was going to be a novelist. Then sometime in high school I realized wanting to be a novelist is the intellectual equivalent of wanting to be a movie star.”

Instead she went to the Culinary Institute of America (aka the CIA) in New York and specialized in baking and pastry. After graduating, she came back to the Bluegrass and spent a year at the now-closed restaurant Emmett’s. From there she went to the popular Midway café Wallace Station, owned by famed chef Ouita Michelsand her husband Chris.

Then Parks had what she likes to call a “quarter-life crisis.” Worried about the long-term earning potential of a chef, she felt she had to cook up a backup plan. “I was interested in translation work,” said Parks, “so I went to Japan and enrolled in



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language school.” But after two intense terms of study, Parks’ intellectual pursuits were interrupted when, on semester break at home, she met John Parks, a Lexington musician who owns the Saint Claire Recording Co. “Oh, classic story,” she laughed. “Hopes, dreams, ambitions — out the window. I’m in love! I decided to not do a third term and got married right away.” And got back into the business of baking.

Stella Parks spares no expense when it comes to the chocolate she uses.

While attending school in Shinjuku, one of the 23 municipalities of Tokyo, Parks discovered the Japanese weren’t necessarily satisfying their sweet teeth with just sweet bean paste; they were hooked on French pastry. “It was fun because they are into obscure pastries,” said Parks, “like Mont Blanc” (a luscious caramel creation that Parks counts as her all-time favorite dessert; see sidebar). “But I kept thinking, where are the Japanese desserts?” It made her realize, too, that being American and obsessed with, say, crème brûlée was also odd. “Why aren’t we eating American desserts?” thought Parks. “That opened my eyes to this whole concept. American pastries, cakes, pies — it’s a really strong tradition. We invented angel food cake. Layer cake with butter cream is unique to us. So I came back from Japan wanting to focus on what I’d been ignoring because I was so Francophile.”

But it turned out Parks’ instincts were right: The chef gig is not always an easy one. After returning from Japan, she worked on and off at Lexington’s Bluegrass Baking Co., and eventually the Michels invited her to work for them again, this time at their exemplary Holly Hill Inn in Midway. But not long after Parks decided to leave Holly Hill, she found herself unemployed. It seems, while a savory chef is imperative to any restaurant, a pastry chef is an extravagance. “I must have dropped off résumés at every worthwhile restaurant in town,” said Parks, “and some right out told me, ‘we can serve our customers desserts right off the [food distributor] Sysco truck and they don’t care. Why would we pay you?’ ”

MOUNTAIN DO

She dazzles patrons nightly with her sweet successes at Table 310, but what amazes Parks' palette? "My all-time favorite dessert is Mont Blanc," she said without hesitation "It's a classic French dessert, which I had never had until I went to Japan." Typically a puree of chestnuts and whipped cream piped like spaghetti, piled high and dusted with powdered sugar to resemble the snow-capped European Alp, Parks' version is a symphony of chocolate, caramel, and Chantilly cream with a roasted chestnut at its apex. "I love chestnuts; they are an underutilized dessert," said Parks. "And I love the texture of this because it's all these individual strands that your tongue can feel for a split second and then they all melt." Yummy just doesn't seem to cover it.

—CG



MONT BLANC

Here's a peek at the luscious ingredients, but for complete details and baking instructions visit www.bravetart.com.

Ingredients

½ batch chocolate tart dough
10 ounces dark chocolate, melted
½ batch pastry cream
6 ounces chestnut puree
5 ounces of caramel
5 ounces heavy whipping cream
18 whole chestnuts, roasted and peeled

A batch of hard caramel, prepared at the last minute

Makes nine 4-inch tarts.

While not at a restaurant, Parks used her time to good effect: She started a food blog — the now well-visited bravetart.com — with her friend and photographer Stephen "Rosco" Weber. The blog was, at first, an outlet for Weber to

practice food photography. But soon bravetart.com began spotlighting local eateries, one of which was Wine + Market, the stylish deli in downtown Lexington then owned by Andrea Sims and her restaurateur husband, Krim Boughalem. "Stella used to come in and talk about Japanese things," said Sims, "and we just kind of clicked."

Parks also began baking for Wine + Market. So when the couple began preparing the launch of their new restaurant just a few doors away at 310 West Short St., the French-born Boughalem — apparently able to think outside of the Sysco truck — invited Parks to head up the pastry department. Dessert, said Sims, "is a French tradition, you know? It's an important part of the meal. You have a good chef, good wine, and finish with a good dessert."

But even a great dessert — and a great chef — needs some good PR. And while it was television that once made celebrities of such chefs as Emeril and Rachel Ray, Parks is of a new generation raising its gastronomic profile through Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, and blogging. Along with bravetart.com, which now features many of the desserts served nightly at Table 310, Parks also blogs for the "foodie" website Serious Eats and the online magazine and market Gilt Taste, jobs earned, she said, via her addiction to tweeting. "I got my writing gig on Serious Eats; I got my appearance on Fox News. I've been in the *Wall Street Journal* twice, and both of those [reporters] are people I connected with on Twitter," she said. Even Parks' anointing by *Food & Wine* came because Dana Cowin, the magazine's editor-in-chief, tweeted: "Who are your small-town pastry heroes?" and Parks' blog followers answered in concert.

Doling out information in cheeky 140-character bursts aside, Parks is currently working on her greatest writing challenge yet: her first cookbook. Tentatively titled *Sweet Truths* (though "my editor hates that title," revealed Parks), and due from W.W. Nor-



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ton & Co. in late 2014, the book not only allows Parks to live her writer dreams but also casts her as a sort of Woodward and Bernstein of sugary scandal. Each entry will investigate the commonly told but often-untrue history of many of America's most cherished recipes. Readers can expect the down low on red velvet cake (no, it was not created at New York's Waldorf Astoria) and chocolate chip cookies (did Ruth Wakefield really invent Nestlé Toll House cookies in 1930?). The book will even explore how cheesecake came to play a role in the 1955 musical *Guys and Dolls*. "Every story ends with how the dessert entered into the collective pop culture," Parks added.

The idea, says Parks' editor, was too scrumptious to pass up. "I received her proposal, and I loved it," said Norton vice president and senior editor Maria Guarnaschelli, the driving force behind such seminal cookbooks as *The Cake Bible* and the arduously revised *Joy of Cooking*. "We have a tradition of great desserts — American women have had ovens longer than anybody. And we're involved in a time, in terms of food, where we don't want anything false," she added.

Guarnaschelli was impressed not only with Parks' creativity but also with her integrity. "Stella has a real education; she knows what she's doing. It means the recipes will work and they'll taste good," she said. "There are lots of people writing cookbooks, but few have this kind of training."

Indeed, Parks could easily match whisks with top chefs in New York or L.A. But Parks is happy to be making a difference right here in her own backyard. "My husband has said that Lexington bleeds talent; all the musicians just head to Nashville, head to New

At Table 310, Parks has developed quite a following.

York," said Parks. "That gave me a new perspective about putting my roots up here. This place raised me, took care of me. I thought I could do something in return."

With all of her outlets, from book to blog, Parks is hoping to make amateur bakers more comfortable exploring the art of dessert. Even in our food-focused world (where savory chefs can lure recreational kitchen dwellers into learning how to cure their own pork), baking still tends to instill fear, said Parks. "It constantly gets dumbed down. Oh, you can always use a store-bought angel food cake, slice it up, and put it into this thing," she said with a laugh. To make baking less intimidating, Parks crafts her recipes with what she calls a "screw-around aspect." There are the rules you must pay attention to, but "we show how you can play with it, too."

The name of her blog was even chosen for its plucky tone. "Rosco and I had been tossing around tart-themed puns — Owner of a Lonely Tart, The Tell-Tale Tart," said Parks. "Then my brother threw out 'bravetart.' It embodied everything I could have wanted in a name, encouraging people to get brave and have fun in the kitchen." Besides, she added, "Telling people I blog at www.totaleclipseofthetart.com would have been a real mouthful." 🐘



JONATHAN PALMER