

PHOENIX

Julia Baker

JULIA BAKER CONFECTIONS

The aptly named Julia Baker didn't start out in her chosen field. Her palate developed while she traveled the world working as a statistician for a software firm.

"I really fell in love with Wolfgang Puck and Charlie Trotter and knew that was what I wanted to do," she says.

She moved to Paris in 2000, trained at Le Cordon Bleu and worked at the lauded Lasserre and Le Grand Vefour restaurants before moving to Paradise Valley for love. The relationship fizzled, but a new business bloomed.

After getting a gig making chocolate amenities for VIPs at Sanctuary Resort and Spa, Baker's work caught the eyes of celebrity guests, and she started creating custom chocolates and cakes for stars such as Bono, Britney Spears, Alicia Keys and Paris Hilton.

She launched her retail chocolate line in December 2007 and went national in February 2008, getting attention for her eye-catching, faux Louis Vuitton handbag packaging.

"My other passion in life is couture," she says. "Even the cakes I do are highly influenced by fashion designers."

But Baker knows that while creative design is important, taste is *numero uno*. Her artisan chocolates are made with top-notch ingredients and no preservatives.

People appreciate quality even in a down economy, she says, but she has modified her price plans: She now offers two-piece truffle boxes at AJ's Fine Foods for \$5, instead of only larger boxes. Wedding cakes have been downsized, too, averaging \$2,500 per cake instead of \$5,000.

Baker's next move is to market a chocolate bar for \$5 or \$6 to allow her to go mainstream. But her specialty market is still strong: At press time she was set to open a "real Parisian chocolate shop," selling individual chocolates, pastries and drinking chocolates, in the InterContinental Montelucia Resort & Joya Spa.

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PM

Peter Kasperski

FnB

Keeping up with Peter Kasperski in 2009 was like riding a roller coaster. We watched him close his famed Sea Saw omakase salon in June, then shutter Digestif in July, reopening the Italian eatery 10 days later as a scaled back operation within the old Sea Saw space. His Cowboy Ciao and Kazimierz World Wine Bar were – and still are – doing great, but at the same time, we gave up waiting for him to open his planned Mexican Standoff, Shell Shock and Confection, all slated for SouthBridge.

Kasperski had already suffered crippling staff changes throughout the spring. His Cowboy Ciao founding chef Bernie Kantak departed in April to work on a restaurant of his own, while celebrity

chef Payton Curry had split, lured away to completely revamp Caffè Boa in Tempe. Digestif closed again, then revived for just a few days in a last-gasp gastropub called DG.

Kasperski is nothing but resilient. For FnB, he took on a new role as a behind-the-scenes backer to general manager Pavle Milic and chef Charleen Badman.

Call it a labor of love. Milic left Prado's cushy resort setting at the Montelucia for what Milic conceded was "a starving student, grassroots budget," while Badman gave up the security of the 16-year-old superstar eatery Rancho Pinot. Rather than complicated culinary tricks, the team counts on what Milic calls "honest, unpretentious" food and the aromas of roasting meats and simmering sauces to lure customers.

"We wrote several business plans and were told by investors, if we'd asked for the money before the downturn, we would have gotten it without any business plan at all," says Milic, who now doubles as a server to trim the operating budget.

"But the timing worked anyway," Milic adds. "Charleen wanted to do her own thing. For me, Prado was like being paid to learn, but I wanted my own dream. And Peter is the patron, giving us all a chance."