

BAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT

Immigrant women on the rise at Hot Bread Kitchen.

BY CAROLINE POTTER

It's no coincidence that Boerum Hill's Jessamyn Waldman sounds more like a human rights advocate than a baker. Sure, she's the founder of the nonprofit bakery Hot Bread Kitchen. And, yes, she works as a baker at Restaurant Daniel. But her extensive background in and zeal for immigration activism is as impressive as her kneading know-how. In fact, says Waldman, "I had the idea for Hot Bread Kitchen long before I was even a baker."

A bakery that preserves traditional recipes from around the world while training and empowering immigrant women, Hot Bread Kitchen is a dream more than 10 years in the making. "I'd been working in social services and human rights, advocating for women and immigrants. Then I had this notion to meld my love of bread with the professional track I'd taken. But," she admits, "I didn't know if I was actually going to make it happen." After working for the United Nations and various human rights organizations, earning a baking certificate from the New School to complement her masters of public administration from Columbia University, and an apprenticeship at Daniel, the Toronto native finally had enough experience in both baking and policy to found Hot Bread Kitchen. "I originally thought I might do this in Toronto," she admits, "but when I moved to Brooklyn, I realized this is a vibrant, multicultural, community-based city and that it would work really well here." The business launched last May.

While she's an advocate for all new Americans, Waldman noticed that women had even fewer professional opportunities. "Immigrant men can work in construction and, traditionally, they get most of the kitchen jobs. But it's much harder for refugee and immigrant women to get good jobs," reports Waldman, who doesn't draw a salary for her work with Hot Bread Kitchen. Rather than see her fellow females relegated to only childcare and housecleaning, she's helping them forge new professions in the baking business, paying them for their time in the kitchen as well as for time spent learning English, while keeping alive the culinary traditions of their native countries, which include Afghanistan, Mali and Mexico.

Hot Bread's first hire was Elidia Ramos, the "tortilla queen of Puerto, Mexico," according to Waldman. "In Guatemala I had fresh handmade corn tortillas—and it changed my whole perception on the tortilla. So I always knew we were going to make them." Rather than the just-add-water masa harina that everyone in New York uses to make tortilla dough, she imports whole organic





Photographs: Michael Harlan Turkell



Waldman's helping immigrant women forge new professions while keeping alive culinary traditions from Afghanistan, Mali and Mexico.

kernels of heirloom Mexican corn—but it needs to be turned into meal. “It’s been a little obsession of mine. I had this inspiration to get a bike that could grind corn. It’s very green, which is congruent with our organizational mission, and I thought it would be a really neat thing!” Her quest led to a phone conversation with architect Peter Brock of Berkeley, CA. “I spoke with him once, and a few months later, in September 2007, this box arrived at my door and in it was a corn-grinding bicycle with beautiful blueprints on how to assemble it. Not that I’d lost faith, but in a little way, it restored my faith in humanity.” The one-of-a-kind creation was christened the Jessa-Molino 2000, a mash-up of Jessamyn and the Spanish word for grinder with a nod to the millennium.

In addition to baking blue, red and white tortillas and the Armenian flatbread lavash (both of which *The New York Times*’s Peter Meehan recently called “some of the best in the city”), Waldman and her crew of four bake European-style breads and focaccia once a week at a local commercial kitchen, well into the wee hours. “I’ve had to think strategically about what we’re going to sell, and how,” she admits. “I don’t think our competitive advantage is in European breads. We offer breads people can’t get otherwise,” the recipes for which come from her bakers. “Sometimes they required a little tweaking for large scale or taste, putting a different seed on the bread, but those breads are dictated by the women,” she says proudly.

Waldman, recipient of the 2007 Eileen Fisher Business Grant for Women Entrepreneurs, has big plans for 2008. “I want to bake five nights a week and have a full-time staff of bakers working with leadership development to train other women on a large scale,” she says. With hopes for a production and retail facility in the future, and rave reviews in the here and now, Hot Bread Kitchen is on the rise. 🍞

Hot Bread Kitchen’s products are available at Get Fresh, Greene Grape Provisions, Marlow & Sons, Urban Rustic and Brooklyn Flea.

