

BAKING IN THE SUNSHINE

The sunny skies and pink sands of Bermuda is where Esther Hagen calls home these days. The Canadian pastry chef jumped at the opportunity to be Fairmont Southampton's executive pastry chef, heading up the baking and pastry division at the world-famous hotel in August 2011.

For a second career, Hagen has undoubtedly found her calling in life. It was eight years after graduating from the Alberta College of Art & Design in Calgary that Hagen found herself cooking and baking in a small café to supplement her income as a working artist. It soon became obvious that a career change was in order. While Hagen grew up baking intricate desserts like her Swiss father's favourite Linzer Torte, it had never occurred to her until this moment that perhaps she could make a career out of it.

The pastry-chef extraordinaire knew she needed some credentials, so she completed the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT)'s two-year baking and pastry arts program. In addition to her diploma from SAIT, Hagen also pursued four advanced certificates in ingredient technology from the American Institute of Baking in Kansas, providing her with a wealth of knowledge in the world of baking.

With an education under her belt, Hagen landed her first job at The Rimrock Resort Hotel in Banff, Alta., where she worked for four years as the hotel's pastry chef. She then moved on to the Fairmont Palliser in Calgary for another four-year stint. During this time, the Fairmont chain of luxury hotels was expanding internationally and Hagen had the opportunity to travel to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, helping to open the Fairmont Bab Al Bahr. "Never in a thousand

years did I think that Fairmont was literally going to send me halfway around the world!" she exclaims.

The international experience was well suited to Hagen's personality, providing a change in culture and new challenges professionally. After six weeks in Abu Dhabi, Hagen returned home to Calgary and her position at the Fairmont Palliser. Before too long, this globetrotting Canadian longed for another change in scenery. "I started to get itchy feet. I began looking around and found out that there was an opening in Bermuda. Fairmont's really amazing about encouraging its colleagues; especially if they get itchy feet, they want to keep them in the company. They provide an enormous amount of assistance when you choose to relocate because the idea is, 'Why lose a fully trained and valued colleague, when we can just move them to another property?'"

Esther Hagen landed the opportunity of a lifetime working as executive pastry chef at the Fairmont Southampton in Bermuda.



The hotel chain facilitated Hagen's move to the Fairmont Southampton in Bermuda, where she has happily settled into her pristine surroundings. As executive pastry chef, her daily responsibilities are daunting, but it's a challenge that Hagen is up for. She begins her day at 8 a.m. with a shift briefing to identify what tasks need to be accomplished that day as well as any potential challenges. She then hits the paper, dealing with payroll, daily requests for food, labour reports and e-mail inquiries. Since all food is flown in to the island, taking anywhere from five days to six weeks to arrive, Hagen has to be exact with the timing of orders and quantity of ingredients.

After her paperwork is complete, she walks the floor, observing what has been done, what needs to be done, and if her department is short on any orders. Meetings and tastings usually make up part of the day as well, with Hagen making a personal appearance for VIP clients' events and wedding tastings to ensure that all expectations are met. Although it's not unusual to work a 14-hour day, most days are eight hours in duration, culminating with a walk-through of the floor during dinner.

While a good portion of Hagen's days are eaten up by cheques and balances, part of her job is still reserved for creating scrumptious works of art. "At this level I get the fun stuff. I'm not in charge of making 800 cheesecakes that I need for a Friday night function anymore. Now I'm making the showpiece for that. I'm making the two wedding cakes for next Saturday. I'm making all the chocolate decorations . . . Now I get the really fun stuff, but I have to put up with the paper," she says laughing.

Although Hagen now lives and works far from home, her inspiration goes back to her days in the classrooms at SAIT where she avidly learned the ropes. "I would say my biggest inspiration was one particular person and that was Volker Baumann at SAIT. He is such a passionate baker, but he's a passionate educator too and I still hear his voice in my head to this day. He would say to me, 'Esther, the world doesn't need more bakers, the world needs better bakers.' He was always there for the students and the program and was just such a passionate educator and so patient. I don't know how many times I made that poor man late for a meeting with yet one more question, but he was always so incredibly patient with me and I like to think that I am also now a passionate educator," she says. "I'm a passionate teacher as well and that certainly rubbed off. He was inspiring. He set a



Even though much of her day is spent doing paperwork, Hagen still prepares showpieces and scrumptious works of art.

standard, not only for my professional knowledge but also for my professional conduct."

For students contemplating a similar career, Hagen says you should expect to

work hard. She warns that real-life baking is not always how it appears on television, however the industry is extremely rewarding and satisfying, which more than makes up for the odd hours and long days. / BJ

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