

Cafe Momentum to host PG's annual Holiday Cookie Challenge

By Gretchen McKay
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There's something about Christmas cookies that just make you feel *good*, whether you're the one who makes them or the person who simply gets to enjoy eating them.

Most bakers love to share the fruits of their sugary labor with friends and family, and gifting a plate or two during the holidays to others who aren't as fortunate — say, a local food bank, nationwide program like Meals on Wheels or a senior center — helps keep us connected as human beings.

Cafe Momentum Pittsburgh, which opened just off Downtown's Market Square in March, is also about building community relationships. Since its inception in Dallas in 2015, the upscale restaurant and professional training facility has provided youth exiting the juvenile justice system with a fresh start through paid culinary job and life skills training that includes individual and group therapy and educational assistance, all in a safe environment.

To date, the nonprofit has worked with more than 1,000 at-risk teenagers at its three locations in an effort to break the cycle of incarceration and violence and help

them become productive members of society. That number includes around 70 teenagers in Pittsburgh who entered the free training program over the last year.

"It has, for the most part, worked as expected," executive director Gene Walker reports, with "steady interest" from youth in the paid internships. The restaurant currently counts 24 active interns at its Forbes Avenue location, with a new cohort of around 10 students entering the program every 8-10 weeks.

Since the Post-Gazette's annual Holiday Cookie Challenge includes a philanthropic component — all the leftover cookies are donated to a local nonprofit — the PG food team is delighted to partner with Cafe Momentum Pittsburgh on the 2023 contest.

Not only will the restaurant host the blind taste-test, but Walker, who for many years worked for The Pittsburgh Promise and currently is a member of the Pittsburgh Public Schools' board of directors, will be among our celebrity judges along with WQED's Rick Sebak. Two current students will also get to vote on the top three recipes in four categories.

As for the restaurant, RK Mellon, Piatt Family and Pittsburgh foundations, the



An array of cookies from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's 2022 Holiday Cookie Challenge. Extras went to Meals on Wheels.

Pittsburgh Pirates and Steelers and corporations including PNC Bank have been essential in its growing success, says Walker, contributing nearly \$3 million to help the eatery get established — no easy feat when you're starting a nonprofit with a tight budget at the same time.

With support from more than a dozen local farms, business has been good enough that the restaurant just launched a catering division for in-house holiday events, traditional catering at home, "or anything in between," says Walker. It's also planning a holiday brunch in December to acquaint more Pittsburghers with its offerings and will build on its monthly dinner series.

"We're laying the foundation for stability," he says.

The best contests offer great prizes, and this challenge is no exception. The restaurant, which is open for dinner Wednesday-Saturday, will award the top contestants with a gift certificate so they can experience firsthand the tasty and important work being done in the kitchen under the careful eye of chef de cuisine Peter Henry.

The cookie ranked the highest on a 5-point scale at the restaurant in early December will be named Holiday Cookie Challenge Champion, an honor that comes with both \$150 and a



Gene Walker, executive director of Cafe Momentum, at the nonprofit café and culinary training center.

\$150 gift certificate to Cafe Momentum. The other three category winners will walk away with \$100 and \$100 Cafe Momentum gift certificates.

After judging, the

leftover cookies will be bagged up and loaded into boxes for distribution to The Pittsburgh Project and a few senior citizen centers across the city with the

support of the Area Agency on Aging, which helps older Allegheny County residents live safe and healthy lives. Last year's remainders were donated to our neighbors at Meals on Wheels Southwest Pennsylvania.

"We believe that food connects people, and what better way to connect than through cookies and service?" says Walker.

Feeling inspired? Online entries to the contest are being accepted through 11:59 p.m. Nov. 27. (Categories include chocolate, iced, bar and family recipe. Official rules at www.post-gazette.com/life/.) The top three finalists in each category will be invited to attend the judging. Winners will be announced on or around Dec. 14 and be featured in the PG Food section.



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette photos
Brashear High School students Nevaeh Hollis, 16, and DaShaun Bane, 17, cut tangerines at Cafe Momentum.

Keep things convivial at Thanksgiving

WINE, FROM E-1

offers a veritable fruit bowl of aromas — ripe apples, pears, peaches and light floral notes. On the palate, fresh, clean fruity flavors with zesty acidity balance the crisp, dry finish, which has a pleasant touch of creaminess.

For a pleasingly fruity and soft yet dry white to serve with the meal, try the 2022 Winery R&A Pfaffl, "Vom Haus" Muskateller, Niederösterreich, Austria (\$15.99, PLCB Code 88705). It's a pity the muskateller grape rarely travels outside of Austria and Germany; the grape is capable of rendering a vibrantly aromatic and flavorful wine like this one.

It makes a perfect eye-opening white worthy of discussion at Thanksgiving. "Vom Haus" refers to a family "house wine" that is easy to drink with a variety of foods and flavors. The wine's pale, straw color offers fragrant grapefruit, honeysuckle and brown spice aromas. On the palate, crisp grapefruit and quince flavors with a touch of ripe peaches balance with vibrant, uplifting freshness. The fruity, dry finish is refreshing and beautifully balanced.

For a pleasant, slightly off-dry, i.e. sweeter, white, try the 2021 Domaine Alain & Christophe Le Capitaine, Vouvray "Cuvée Adrienne," Demi-Sec, France (\$16.99, PLCB Code 87117). Made from 100% Chenin Blanc grapes grown in the eastern Loire Valley, the wine carries a relatively modest 12.5% alcohol by volume, making for easy drinking.

The wine's golden color offers lovely white flower and citrus aromas. In the glass, juicy ripe peach and orange flavors balance with fine, fresh acidity to invite another sip. The fruity finish lingers pleasantly with just a soft kiss of sweetness. Another sure-fire crowd pleaser!

Red wines

The 2020 Domaine Paul Durdilly et Fils, Beaujolais "Les Grandes Coasses," France (\$14.99, PLCB Code 862572) comes from Gamay grapes grown by a team of father and son vignerons working in high altitude vineyards in southern Beaujolais. Their vineyards have more limestone and granite than lower altitude sites, which adds to the wine's freshness.

Many of the vines are also over 70 years old and the average age is 40. Older vines provide fruit with in-



Serve white wines from the Loire Valley, left, and southern France with Thanksgiving dinner and dessert, respectively.

triguing aromas and flavors, as this lovely wine demonstrates. Aging occurs in older, large foudre casks and steel tanks, so the fruit shines through without woody notes.

The deep ruby colors offer aromas of ripe raspberries with a touch of spiciness. On the palate, flavors of ripe red and blue fruits balance with zesty acidity and a touch of fine tannin grip. The French call this a gouteyant red — an easy drinking, supple delight that's fun and fruity.

The 2021 Christophe Lepage, "Cuvée du Tonnelier Gourmet," Pinot Noir, Vin de France, France (\$19.99 at Leon and Sons Wines in Brooklyn, leonandsonwine.com) comes from pinot noir vines cultivated in Bourgogne's northernmost reaches, near the town of Joigny. Vines have been grown there since the Middle Ages, when Benedictine monks discovered the best sites to use through trial and error.

Winegrower Christophe Lepage was a favorite of the late Becky Wasserman, whose sons, Paul and Peter, still represent Domaine Lepage for exports to the United States.

"The area around Joigny was planted with vines with great success prior to the phylloxera blight in the 19th century," Wasserman noted in an interview in 2019. "We were looking for a producer to represent there and were really touched when we visited Monsieur Lepage and his son, Christophe. The wines are awesome and have a personality that cheers you up."

This is certainly true of the 2021 Lepage Pinot Noir. Its deceptively pale, light ruby color packs plenty of delicious flavors and aromas of red raspberries and red currants. On the palate, surprisingly full-bodied flavors of red fruits layer with bright, earthy acidity. Terrific wine!

The 2019 Domaine Allendorf, Assmannshäuser, Spätburgunder

Trocken, Rheingau, Germany (\$24.99, PLCB Code 86885) comes from pinot noir grapes grown in Germany. Yes, red wine from Germany — and it's delicious.

Germany ranks third in pinot noir plantings with 11,800 acres, according to Wine Anorak Global Wine Journal. The grape has been grown there, where it's known as Spätburgunder, since the fourth century.

This delightful red is categorized as an ortswine, i.e., "village," wine where all the fruit comes from the village of Assmannshäuser. The town lies on the Rhine River and features steep slopes with slate rich soils. The Allendorf family, which has lived there since the 13th century, today cultivates over 75 acres, making it the largest family-owned winery in the area.

The wine's light ruby color offers aromas of black cherries and earthy notes. On the palate, the medium-bodied fruit offers classic flavors of red fruits and spice with terrific freshness and balance. It finishes trocken, i.e. dry.

Dessert wine

To cap the meal when the pumpkin pie is on the table, serve the 2022 Clos du Gravillas, "Douce Providence" Muscat St. Jean de Minervois, France (\$18.99 at Chambers Street Wines, chambersstreetwines.com). "Douce Providence" means sweet providence, and this unique wine style is indeed a sweet gift from nature.

Winegrowers Nicole and John Bojanowski use muscat à petits grains grapes grown in Languedoc in southern France near the Mediterranean Sea. For this wine — which is categorized as a vin doux naturel — fully ripened grapes begin fermenting before neutral spirits are added before the end of fermentation. This leaves a wine with marvelous natural sweetness and a potent 15% alcohol by volume. But you'll be hard pressed to know it, given the wine's terrific balance.

On the nose, seductive aromas of orange blossoms, honeysuckle and citrus lead to lush fruity flavors in the glass. Flavors of ripe apricots and peaches balance with refreshing acidity and a touch of fine tannins. The freshness and tannins provide beautiful balance for the ultra sweet finish. Without a doubt, this wine will draw appreciative attention at Thanksgiving to keep tedious discussions of politics and sports at bay.

Cheers!

Dave DeSimone is a certified French Wine Scholar who has been writing about wine, food and travel for over thirty years both in Pittsburgh and for publications including the Circle of Wine Writers Circular in England, The Wine Enthusiast magazine and Glass of Bubbly online. He also has conducted wine and gastronomic tours. For more information see his website, www.daveswinecellar.com.



Dave DeSimone
Red wines from the Bourgogne region of France, left, Rhine River in Germany and Beaujolais in France will liven up Thanksgiving dinner.

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Holiday Cookie Challenge

2023

Calling all cookie bakers!

We're looking for the best cookie recipes to compete in the following categories:

Chocolate	Iced	Bar	Family Recipe

Along with bragging rights, the Holiday Cookie Challenge winners will receive Cafe Momentum gift cards and cash prizes! For details, visit post-gazette.com/cookiechallenge.

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