



Christina Tosi
photographed by Neil
Wilder for Observer
Food Monthly in
Momofuku Milk Bar,
Brooklyn, New York,
6 March 2012.

—
INTERVIEW *Ariel Leve*

LIFE IS SWEET

Christina Tosi was an engineering student with a passion for baking. Now, with her fifth Momofuku Milk Bar open in New York, she's a culinary superstar

Long before Christina Tosi was revered for her outrageous food combinations, she loved making crazy, sometimes gross concoctions in the kitchen of her parents' suburban home. As a teenager she would eat ranch salad dressing with lima beans. Or mayonnaise and brown sugar with Doritos. Even though she was a "picky" eater – living mostly on hot dogs, pizza and Kraft macaroni and cheese until she was 18 – she would reach for whatever was in the cupboard and mix it into her food, never considering that she was shaping her point of view as a future culinary superstar.

On the morning I visit her at the

11,000sqft storefront and warehouse that she took over two years ago in Brooklyn, she's eating her favourite breakfast: a cornflake chocolate chip marshmallow cookie with a cup of coffee. "I just turned 30 and my diet was crazy for the first 27 years of my life," she says, breaking off a piece of cookie. "I was eating a slice of candy bar pie for breakfast, and sometimes for dinner. That's what I loved and craved. Maybe I'd have a piece of cheese in between."

Having reached the point where her body "felt like shit", recently Tosi has begun to moderate her sugar intake, restricting herself to just a single cookie a day, as opposed to the two or three



Christina Tosi

she used to eat before 6am. When asked if she ever needs to detox, she shakes her head in horror. “Detox is having a bowl of cereal before noon but they’re not Frosted Flakes.”

You wouldn’t guess Tosi’s diet from looking at her. Her lanky, runner’s frame is evidence of a heroic metabolism. Her straight hair is pulled back in a choppy ponytail with a rubber band and her gold stud earrings and single gold bangle stand out against her pale skin. Unflappable and focused, she describes her work ethic as “hardbody”, meaning long full days, no excuses, no complaining and never considering the job a chore. It’s one reason why, at only 30 years old, she oversees 60 employees as chef/co-owner of Momofuku Milk Bar, bakeries which have five outlets in New York and ship across the US. The other is innovation, with Tosi’s sense of adventure recently helping her win a James Beard Award nomination for rising star chef of the year. The popularity of the Milk Bar’s compost cookies and crack pies is down to her anything goes approach to deliciousness. The cookie contains crisps, ground coffee and mini pretzels. The pie makes use of freeze-dried sweet-corn powder.

Tosi is a protégée of the Momofuku empire’s visionary owner, David Chang. Oddly, he initially employed her to write his food safety plan but quickly realised she had more offer. “She’s a born leader. I would throw things at her to keep her busy until I realised she needed to be her own boss,” he says. “Christina had an insatiable desire to learn. She just gets shit done.”

That they are kindred spirits is clear when Chang playfully describes the nature of their relationship, saying: “I’m like her older brother and she’s the more successful sister.” Then, with genuine sincerity, he adds: “There are very few people who have the freedom to do what they want in the company. She does. I trust her completely.”

This is all the more impressive when you learn that, when Tosi was hired, there was no dessert on the menu. For Chang it was a case of “I have these two restaurants – and we’re going to grow and it seems like you’d be a good fit.” Tosi asked: “What am I gonna do?” And he replied “I don’t know, we’ll figure it out.”

The first thing she made for Chang was a strawberry shortcake for his Ssäm bar. The first Milk Bar opened in November 2008 in Manhattan’s East Village, the fifth, in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, just three weeks ago. Here in Brooklyn, the exposed brick and concrete floor give the place an industrial feel that’s not cold thanks to the intoxicating smell of freshly baked cookies. On the blackboard, items

range from franken pie (a gloriously over-the-top composite of two slices of candy bar pie, two slices of cinnamon bun pie, and four slices of the famous crack pie), to cereal milk ice cream with cornflake crunch topping.

Born in Ohio but raised mostly in Virginia, Tosi grew up in a home where she was raised to follow the familiar route to success: good grades, university, solid profession. Even then she was focused and results driven, aiming for straight As, learning Italian and Spanish because it would look good on her college application but not bothering with art, a “wasted class” that was of no use to her path into higher education.

All the women in her family baked – her mum, her aunts, her grandmother. She credits her mother, a managing partner in an accountancy firm, for instilling in her the mental toughness required to be such a self-starter. Her father was an economist who worked for the US department of agriculture’s dairy division.

College, in Virginia, was a revelation in

‘I ate candy bar pie for breakfast, sometimes for dinner. It’s what I loved and craved’

food terms. Her voice rises an octave as she remembers a particularly adventurous meal. “One day I thought, I’ll have a BLT for lunch. At the time, that seemed very out there to me. Maybe that’s part of the interest and excitement for food, it’s still somewhat new.”

Tosi tried several different paths at college, none to do with food. Having initially studied mechanical engineering she switched to applied mathematics, then spent time in Florence as she thought she might want to be a translator. She just knew she wasn’t keen on pursuing a “regular” job. Baking was her hobby but having spent a couple of summers working in a New Hampshire bakery, she moved to New York after graduation to enrol in the French Culinary Institute’s pastry arts programme. In her spare time she worked as a restaurant hostess, food stylist and caterer to pay the bills and explore her interests.

FCI alumni include Chang and Wylie Dufresne, chef patron of New York’s highly regarded WD-50, which is where Tosi worked, initially offering her services for free, as a pastry chef. Dufresne made his name as one of America’s lead-





Above: Tosi with some of the team from Milk Bar.

ing exponents of molecular gastronomy, for dishes such as carrot-coconut sunny-side-up, where the carrot and the coconut look just like the white and yolk of an egg. She describes him as “my biggest mentor” and while under Dufresne she honed a sense of adventure without forgetting that experiments need a purpose. “I was a diner there before I was a cook,” she says. “I remember the dishes I had that were a hit and the ones that were a miss.”

She still goes too far sometimes. A good example being the time she tried out barbecue-flavoured soft ice cream at Milk Bar. She enjoyed it more than the customers did. “I thought summer barbecue flavours would be fun. And I thought it was so delicious. It was meant to be an experience – not that I thought everyone will come in every day for barbecue ice cream.”

While we’ve been chatting, Tosi’s BlackBerry rests on the table, just out of reach. She’ll have received about 100 emails but doesn’t seem anxious or flustered. “I get stressed out about the dumbest things. I’m infamous for focusing on the smaller problems so that they never get to be bigger problems.”

One way she deals with pressure is to make sure she always leaves work in a good frame of mind, rather than angry or

frustrated by the day’s events. If there’s a problem, she’ll stay as late as she needs to work it through.

Tosi likes to talk about her team and a significant amount of her introduction to the Milk Bar cookbook is devoted to celebrating the individual contributions made by what she calls her “family”. She encourages group discussion and she prefers the staff to have their own point of view. She puts her own thoughts in a notebook, which stems from her time at WD-50, where she was handed one along with her apron. And she found herself returning to the notebooks when she started at Momofuku.

When we head downstairs there are about 12 employees in the warehouse kitchen, scooping, mixing and baking. There’s a smattering of wool beanie hats, tattoos and interesting facial hair. Everyone seems focused but relaxed. Young, driven and devoted they’re very much in the Tosi mould. One woman is grinding down peanut brittle. At another station, a guy is making cake truffles from scraps. Tosi tells me he’s also a mixed martial arts competitor.

Tosi says she is careful when hiring, keen to separate those who only want to work for her because of the hype from those seeking an opportunity to improve their skills and learn something new.

She shows me around. There are two huge refrigerated walk-in freezers, vats of crumbs and crunches, override bananas, crack pie filing, all of it in various stages of production. There are giant mixers humming along – a 20-quart, an 80-quart, and two 140-quart mixers. She points out a small group she calls the “et cetera” team – their job being to do anything and everything that might be required.

Once a month, there is a team building activity such as movies or ice skating. Courtney, the kitchen operations manager, is 31 and making the team meal that day – cold sesame noodles with kimchi-kale slaw. She came to New York from Texas and speaks about how much she feels a part of a family.

“Milk Bar is very personal to me,” Tosi says, as we walk out towards the store front past giant bags of sugar and flour. “I built it – but it belongs to all of us.”

Christina Tosi seems very comfortable being the boss. What’s interesting is, she never really thought of herself as creative or artistic. “I have a very sweet tooth and so I think I always saw that as something fun,” she says, thinking back. She isn’t one to ruminate too much on the past, though, and quickly snaps back to the present. “I mean, at the end of the day, I’m just doing it to eat cookie dough.” **OFM**

Turn over for a recipe from Milk Bar >>

Milk Bar's Chocolate-chocolate cookies

MAKES 10-15 COOKIES

butter, at room temperature 225g
sugar 300g
glucose 100g
egg 1
vanilla extract ¼ tsp
55% chocolate, melted 60g
bread flour 200g
cocoa powder, preferably Valrhona 100g
baking powder ¾ tsp
bicarbonate of soda ¼ tsp
kosher or sea salt 1¾ tsp
Chocolate Crumb (see below) ½ recipe

DIRECTIONS

Combine the butter, sugar and glucose in the bowl of a free-standing electric mixer fitted with the paddle or flat beater attachment and cream together on medium-high for 2-3 minutes. Scrape down the sides of the bowl, add the egg, vanilla and melted chocolate and beat for 7-8 minutes. (See notes below on this process.)

Reduce the speed to low and add the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda and salt. Mix just until the dough comes together, no longer than 1 minute. (Do not walk away from the machine or you will risk overmixing the dough.) Scrape down the sides of the bowl with a spatula.

Still on low speed, add the chocolate crumbs and mix just until incorporated, about 30 seconds. Using a 70ml capacity ice cream scoop, portion out the dough on to a parchment-lined baking tray. Pat the tops of the cookie dough domes flat. Wrap the baking tray tightly in cling film and refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or up to 1 week. Do not bake your cookies from room temperature – they will not bake properly.

Heat the oven to 190C/gas mark 5. Arrange the chilled dough a minimum of 10cm apart on parchment- or silicone-lined baking trays. Bake for 18 minutes. The cookies will puff, crackle and spread. It's tough (kind of impossible) to gauge if a cookie that is this dark with chocolate is done. If after 18 minutes, the cookies still seem doughy in the centre, give them another minute in the oven, but not more. Cool the cookies completely on the baking trays before transferring to a plate or an airtight container for storage. At room temperature, the cookies will keep fresh for five days; in the freezer, they will keep for 1 month.



In order to achieve the improbable crispy-on-the-outside, fudgy-and-slightly-underbaked-in-the-centre defining texture of a Milk Bar cookie, a serious creaming process is required. I will go so far as to say it is the most important step in making a Milk Bar cookie. Mixing the cookie dough is the first thing any of our cooks learn how to do. The basics are as follows: use a free-standing electric mixer with the paddle or flat beater attachment. Make sure both the bowl and paddle are at room temperature (not hot out of the dishwasher or washing-up water). Use room-temperature butter (18C-21C). Butter that's too warm will make butter soup; butter that's too cold will take twice as long to cream properly. Beat the butter and sugar(s) together on medium-high for 2-3 minutes. (If the recipe calls for glucose, add it with the butter and sugar.) This dissolves the sugar while incorporating small pockets of air into the mixture. The air pockets develop as the sugar granules cut into the butter. This creaming process seals the hardbody bond between your butter and sugar.

Use either cold or room-temperature eggs; room-temperature ones will

Take this seriously. Magic doesn't just bake itself in an oven

incorporate more quickly. Add the eggs one by one, waiting for each one to be incorporated before adding the next. Then paddle on high for 7-8 minutes. The eggs help to strengthen and emulsify the bond. If the recipe calls for vanilla extract, add it with the eggs.

If the butter ever begins to separate or turn into soup, throw everything into the fridge for 5 minutes, let the butter firm up, and try again.

Signs that things are going right: the butter mixture is a very pale yellow (with a hint of brown if brown sugar is in the mix). The mixture has doubled in size and looks like a cloud: puffy and voluminous, with soft peaks. The mixture is slightly shiny and homogenous, with just a little grit from the sugar crystals.

Take this process seriously. Magic doesn't just bake itself in an oven. You can certainly make delicious cookies even without a mixer, melting the butter and mixing the dough with a wooden spoon. But not these cookies.

CHOCOLATE CRUMB

MAKES ABOUT 350G

plain flour 105g
cornflour 1tsp
sugar 100g
cocoa powder, preferably Valrhona 65g
kosher or sea salt 1tsp
butter, melted 85g

Heat the oven to 150C/gas mark 2. Combine the flour, cornflour, sugar, cocoa powder and salt in the bowl of a free-standing electric mixer fitted with the paddle or flat beater attachment and paddle on low speed until mixed. Add the butter and paddle on low speed until the mixture starts to come together in small clusters.

Spread the clusters on a parchment- or silicone-lined baking tray. Bake for 20 minutes, breaking them up occasionally. The crumbs should still be slightly moist to the touch at that point; they will dry and harden as they cool. Let the crumbs cool completely before using in a recipe.

Stored in an airtight container, they will keep fresh for 1 week at room temperature or 1 month in the fridge or freezer.

This is an extract from Momofuku Milk Bar published by Absolute, RRP £25. To order a copy for £20 with free UK p&tp, go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6846