

Restaurants & Bars

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The artisan

Jo Brena Bleach

A former military cook gets herself into a jam.

By Julia Kramer
Photograph by Ben Reed

JUST PEACHY Bleach prepares her jams for the farmers' market.

Jo Brena Bleach's bags were packed for a U.S. military base in the Kyrgyz Republic when she had an epiphany. She was making cinnamon rolls in the kitchen of the Little Rock Air Force Base in Jacksonville, Arkansas, when it dawned on her: She had some talent when it came to pastry—and, more than that, her cooking skills could be her ticket out of the military.

Bleach entered the service as a front-desk clerk in 2004. After returning from Kuwait in 2005, she was assigned to the kitchen pretty much randomly. Although making tens of thousands of cookies and brownies wasn't exactly inspiring, she was given a surprising amount of room to experiment. For one birthday celebration, she eschewed the typical white-cake-and-frosting variety for a delicately layered opera cake. With a year left in her four-year Air Force contract—including that looming four-month stint in central Asia—Bleach nevertheless got to work planning her next steps. Before shipping out, she sent an application to the French Pastry School in Chicago and decided to save all her vacation time so she could end her service early.

At Manas Air Base in the Kyrgyz Republic, Bleach was promoted to dining-hall manager, supervising the production of 4,000 meals a day—and earning an achievement medal for making sure that 570,000 meals were smoothly delivered into soldiers' mouths. But the whole time she was overseas, Chicago—and pastries—was on her mind.

Bleach called the Pastry School once a week to make sure her application materials were in order and to ask whether she'd been accepted. Bleach remembers the reaction to her eagerness: "The admissions office kept saying: 'Why are you calling again? Just do what you have to do over there, and don't worry about this.'"



Watching Bleach (now a French Pastry School grad) make jam, it's not hard to believe she learned to cook in the military. She's meticulous with her measurements—dividing and multiplying ratios on a calculator, weighing her ingredients on a digital scale, and monitoring a thermometer to make sure nothing burns. It's all for good reason: "I was always burning stuff in the military—and I'm still burning stuff. People say to me, 'Jo Brena, you went to French Pastry School, how come you're still burning everything?'" Despite her doubts, she didn't burn the apple jelly she was boiling when we visited her, nor the peach-raspberry combination she calls "Grandma's Favorite" (after the peaches, which come from her grandmother in Georgia), nor the blueberry-mint jam for that matter.

It's a good thing, too, because she needed the jelly the following Saturday, when, just like every other week, she set up her jams-and-sweets enterprise The Bee's Knees at the 61st Street Farmers' Market. Bleach squeezes in time when she's not working as a pastry chef at Sikia, the African restaurant operated mainly by students from Washburne Culinary Institute, to go through her three-day jam-making process. She first macerates the fruit overnight, then boils the juices together the next day, saving the final steps—boiling everything together and canning it—until Saturday mornings, right before she heads to the market.

Everything else on the Bee's Knees table Bleach makes by hand, as well: from painting her own business card design to sewing the light-green patchwork quilt that she stacks her jams on top of at the market. In addition to a few flavors of jams, Bleach usually bakes brownies, cookies or cupcakes to give shoppers something they can eat on the spot. Unlike most of the vendors at the 61st Street Market (or any Chicago farmers' market, for that matter), Bleach lives in the community she sells to, and she spends her time at the market trying to meet people and make connections in hopes that, come fall, she'll find a way to introduce her line of jams into local specialty-food stores. As for the military, Bleach is currently on inactive reserve duty, so it's pretty far from her mind. "Finally," the 24-year-old says, "I'm doing what I want to be doing. Besides, I was too princessy for the military." The only reminder of her time in the service is a giant, heavy, rotating platter that she sometimes uses to frost cakes: "I stole this from the kitchen at the base," she says: "Nobody else was using it."

The Bee's Knees jams are available Saturdays 9am–2pm until October 25 at the 61st Street Farmers' Market (61st St at Dorchester Ave) and online at beeskneesco.com.
