

Baker finds the silver screen's sweet tooth

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By **STEPHEN G. HENDERSON** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

On Oscar night, you'll probably feel a bit jealous of the svelte figures of Hollywood's first ladies — Cate Blanchett, Annette Bening, Hilary Swank — as they swan along on the Kodak Theatre's red carpet before the 77th Annual Academy Awards.

Admit it. Doesn't even the idea of a size 2 make you blue? If so, don't blame California dessert chef and plus-size model Whitney Dineen. She's doing her best to, well, even the scales.

"Americans are getting bigger and bigger, but actors are getting skinnier and skinnier. What's the reality here? I always say I'm trying to fatten up Hollywood one cookie at a time," she says.

Her secret weapons are freshly baked oatmeal raisin cookies, coconut macaroons, lemon squares, toffee bars and crème caramels. She's the first to admit that her recipes are far from exotic. But in Los Angeles, where the body beautiful is sometimes the body bulimic, her treats have developed a cult following.

Feeding the stars

Part of their allure, certainly, is that they are hard to get. Ms. Dineen has no business card or storefront. Instead, her customers — a who's-who of show business names that ranges from Kirstie Alley and Blythe Danner to Steven Spielberg, Ron Meyer (president of Universal Studios) and David Geffen (co-owner of DreamWorks) — come to her through personal referrals.

"It's fun to be able to turn someone else on to something fantastic," says loyal customer Phil Rosenthal, executive producer and creator of CBS' *Everybody Loves Raymond*.



Evans Caglione / DMN

Whitney Dineen had to make the cookie cutter for her full-figured cookies. The cookies will be passed out in a hospitality suite the night of the Academy Awards.

"There is a kind of boost to being able to say, 'I found these cookies. I know a secret. You can't get these everywhere.'"

This month, Ms. Dineen is cooking up dozens of baked goods that will be given away in a pre-Oscars hospitality suite hosted by plus-size clothier Lane Bryant at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Her sugar cookies for this occasion are shaped like a full-figured woman wearing an evening gown. She had to make the cookie cutter herself, because in Hollywood, obviously, no such mold exists.

"I guess you could say this is genetic for me," she said on a recent morning, as she stood in the kitchen of her Pasadena house mixing butter, heavy cream, sugar, Dutch-processed cocoa powder and vanilla extract.

"I come from a long line of cooks and grew up with a treasure trove of good, old-fashioned American recipes that I got from my mom and grandma," she said. "I strap this on for inspiration." She then pointed to her plain white apron. It was once her great-grandmother's, who owned a bar outside of Pittsburgh called Mother's.



Joe Hill

Besides being a baker, Whitney Dineen is a plus-size model.

Ms. Dineen was making a fudge sauce, and as she stirred up a dark, rich brew, her two cats, Snickers and Baby, scampered about at her feet. Ms. Dineen's actor-husband, Jimmy, was off making a delivery of cookies.

If her calories-be-damned style of cooking is somewhat nostalgic, so is Ms. Dineen's figure. A 6-foot-1-inch brunette who hovers between a size 14 and 16, she resembles a more wholesome Jane Russell.

Or, as her friend, public relations guru Howard Bragman puts it, "Whitney is voluptuous. Very beautiful, gorgeous complexion, dark hair and creamy skin — like she popped out of **Good Housekeeping**, circa 1956," he said.

"The reason Whitney's cookies have a cult following is that they are a religion without the proselytizing. The goods speak for themselves."

Ms. Dineen, 36, grew up in Illinois; first, on the south side of Chicago, and then in a farming community in the state's center called Gibson City. Her father was president of a chain of savings-and-loan banks, and her mother frequently entertained his clients at home. An early advocate of organic gardening, Libby Bohlen, Ms. Dineen's mother, was also a formidable canner and freezer. (The lemon bar recipe is from Ms. Bohlen.)

"Mom fed people for any reason — happy, sad, didn't matter," Ms. Dineen recalls. "Heaven forbid if someone died, you would gain so much weight from her cooking!"

As a child, though, she wasn't much interested in learning recipes. "I told my Mom that when I grew up, I would be rich and have hired help."

After studying art history at the University of Illinois in Chicago for a few years, Ms. Dineen was approached by a casting agent about the possibility of being a model. At her first job, posing for circulars that went into Midwestern newspapers, she sometimes crossed paths with an aspiring actress named Halle Berry.

Rediscovering food

She relocated to New York in 1989 and continued modeling. A few years later, she and Jimmy moved to Los Angeles. It was in their small apartment with a patio that she first began to cook for friends and rediscovered some of what she'd forgotten from her youth.

"As much as my Mom always tried to make me part of her creative process, I didn't think I was paying attention," she said. "But, when I had my own parties, I began tapping her for recipes, and suddenly, I blossomed. Cooking fed my soul. It gave me what I needed to go on in other endeavors."

Her cooking was famous among her social set, but it wasn't until a friend, Constance M. Burge, executive producer of the WB-TV show *Charmed*, sent some baked goods to her agent, that Ms. Dineen's cookies began to reach a wider audience. Business gradually grew through word of mouth, until a basket found its way to the Spielbergs.

"The next day I got a call from DreamWorks. They said, 'Kate and Steven want to order some cookies,'" Ms. Dineen remembers. "At this moment, I thought, 'Well, I guess this is what I will do when I grow up.' "

Countless treats

This was about three years ago. Since, she's not only baked countless treats (which sell for \$75 for three dozen), but she's written a cookbook, *Sweet Things*, and a series of children's novels about two best friends, Wilhelmina and Tomasina, and their adventures in the fictional town of Watusi, Texas. She also continues to work as a Ford Model for clients such as Lane Bryant, Marshall Fields, Macy's and Liz Claiborne.

Her sweet success doesn't surprise Ms. Dineen's fans.

"You'd be shocked at how many really thin Hollywood types indulge in stuff they say they are not supposed to. They work it off at the gym, pay for it later, or don't eat dinner," said Mr. Rosenthal. "To me, dieting is about picking your spots to indulge. Whitney's cookies are definitely one of those spots."

Even so, Ms. Dineen, ever the cookie crusader, still thinks she has her work cut out for her.

"I was in Saks the other day, buying lipstick, and I saw an actress who was very famous in the 1980s. Back then, she was probably a size 8, but now it looked like someone had just dug her up," she said. "I couldn't believe how emaciated she was."

Ms. Dineen lets out a heavy sigh. "I wanted to kidnap her and force-feed her my cookies!"

Stephen G. Henderson is a New York freelance writer.

Libby's Luscious Lemon Bars

Ingredients:

2 cups flour (divided use)
½cup plus 2 tablespoons powdered sugar (divided use)
¾cup butter, slightly softened (1 ½ sticks)
6 eggs
3 cups sugar
1 cup plus 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest

Directions:

Preheat oven to 325 F. In a large bowl, combine 1 ½ cups of flour and ½ cup of powdered sugar. With an electric mixer, beat in butter and mix until the mixture looks like small peas. Press into the bottom of a lightly greased 13x9x2-inch pan. Bake 22 to 25 minutes until nicely golden in color. Reduce oven temperature to 300 F.

In a large bowl whisk together eggs, sugar, lemon juice, lemon zest and remaining ½ cup of flour, until smooth. Pour over hot crust and continue to bake for 35 to 40 minutes until set. Let cool and refrigerate. Dust remaining 2 tablespoons of powdered sugar over the top.

Garnish, if you like, with fresh raspberries and mint leaves. Makes 18 cookies.

PER SERVING: Cal 292 (29% fat) Fat 9 g (5 g sat) Trace fiber Chol 82 mg Sodium 81 mg Carb 50 g Calcium 12 mg