

Pie business shoots for the sky

By Nancy Isles Nation

Independent Journal reporter

When Christine Milne began baking pies three years ago, she used wild blackberries that she picked along a jogging trail and sold them at the ferry terminal in Point Richmond.

Today Milne is the owner of Upper Crust, a San Anselmo wholesale bakery that produces about 350 pies a week.

And while she plans to go big with her pie business — Milne hopes to be the “Mrs. Fields” of pies — she is going one step at a time, reinvesting profits as she grows rather than incurring debt.

By renting baking space at the Royal Sweet Bakery, for instance, Milne saved the expense of leasing and equipping a professional kitchen.

When the recently divorced Milne started baking pies in the oven of her houseboat home in 1987, she didn't intend to start a small business. Her first customers were guests returning from the East Brother Island Light Station bed and breakfast inn. Then her friends took an interest in the venture and bought pies to bring to their offices.

After a taste of success, Milne branched out from free blackberries to use other traditional pie fillings. As her costs went up, her prices went up, and she chose affluent Mill Valley to set up a pie stand. For several months she sold pies next to the Mill Valley Market.

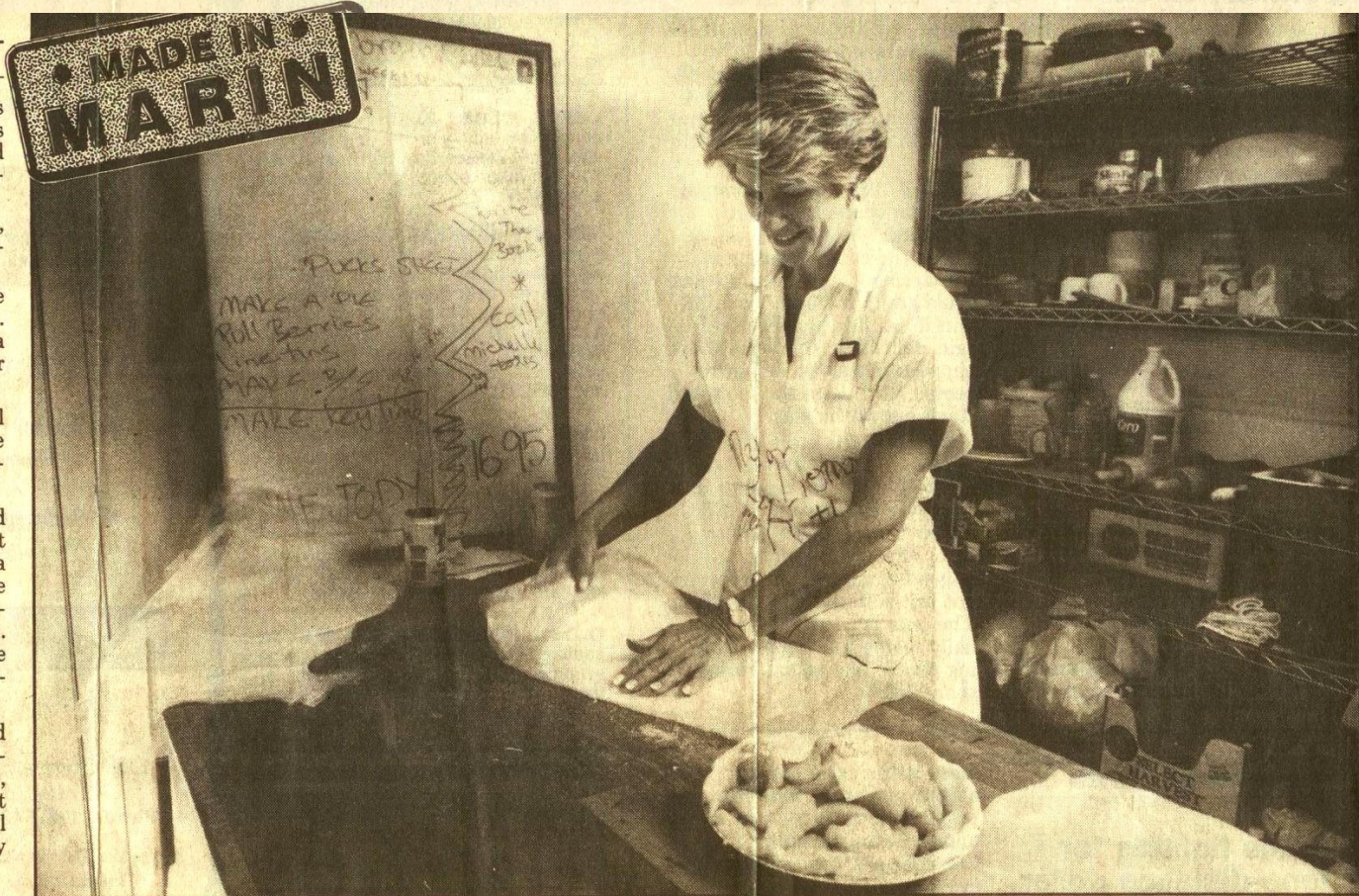
It wasn't until she was told by the police that it was illegal to sell on the street that she began to call on restaurants to sell the fruits of her labor. One of her first customers was the Depot Cafe & Bookstore on Throckmorton Avenue in Mill Valley.

By the end of 1987, Milne's fledgling business earned \$50,000. Almost abruptly she became the owner of a small business.

“It's been just over a year since I started running this like a business, with employees and payroll deductions,” Milne said. “I have had no business plan. It's totally intuition.”

But as the demand has grown — Upper Crust pies are sold in more than 60 markets and restaurants in Marin, San Francisco and the East Bay — Milne has adjusted.

The operation of the business is still entirely in her hands. “I don't have any partners. I do the whole thing,” said Milne. “I do the bookkeeping, sales, develop recipes. I'm learning as I go along.”



IJ photo/Scott Henry

SHAPING DOUGH: Christine Milne makes pie dough for an upper crust on her fruit pie in San Anselmo bakery

She has been a good student. By the end of 1989, sales more than doubled to \$107,000. She's shooting for \$300,000 for 1990.

“It's not a number picked out of the air,” Milne said. “I would like to increase production considerably.”

To do so, she plans to invest in some equipment and to hire a distributor to sell Upper Crust pies in San Mateo County.

Beyond 1990, Milne hopes that, with the help of a friend, she will complete a manual for establishing Upper Crust franchises.

“We're planning to cookie cut what I've done up and down the coast,” Milne said.

Milne believes Upper Crust pies, which are sold by retailers for \$12.95 to \$14.95 — are set apart from other commercial prod-

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| <p>Upper Crust</p> <p>Address: 625 San Anselmo Ave., San Anselmo. 485-5658.</p> <p>Employees: Four.</p> <p>Products: Pies. Flavors include apple, blackberry, berry supreme, strawberry rhubarb, blueberry/peach and key lime.</p> <p>Sales: \$107,000 in 1989.</p> <p>Owner: Christine Milne.</p> | <p>Outlets: Restaurants include the Panama Hotel & Restaurant in San Rafael, Pacific Cafe in Kentfield, Vanessi's and Mulhern's in San Francisco. Markets that sell Upper Crust pies include Magnolia Food Co. in Larkspur, Mollie Stone's in Sausalito, Boardwalk Market in Tiburon, Living Foods in San Anselmo, Le Cremerie at United Market in San Anselmo, Food Villa in Fairfax and Pardini's in San Rafael.</p> |
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ucts because they are handmade.

“We start with a big bowl of fruit, add a little tapioca and sugar,” Milne said. “The dough is made from scratch with flour and shortening. I make them just like I did when I was a housewife.”

Made in Marin spotlights local manufacturers. If you have a Marin-based company that makes a product we would like to hear from you. Write Nancy Isles Nation, Assistant Business Editor, P.O. Box 330, San Rafael 94915, or call 382-7312.