

## 'Iowa Pie Lady' Sells Pie From Her Food Truck

The Iowa Pie Lady has come a long way since she set up a card table and her two children to sell her baked goods at a farmers market about 10 years ago. These days, Laura Bru bakes pies in her licensed commercial kitchen on her family's Gladbrook, Iowa, farm. Pie lovers hunt for her food truck at events such as Farm Progress and Half Century of Progress shows.

When not making or selling pies, Bru and her husband, Ryan, are row crop farmers. Bru's original goal was to teach her two young children social and business skills, and she was proud when they quickly mastered the art of counting back change. In the process, Bru discovered that pies made her stand out among other baker vendors.

"It's kind of a lost art. There's a little more labor of love—you can taste it," Bru says about baking pies from scratch, making pie crusts with lard, and filling them with fruit, nut, and cream fillings. Her mother-in-law had made family celebrations special with her pies, and when she

died in 2007, Bru stepped in to continue the tradition.

"I didn't focus on pies until our first RAG-BRAI (Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa)," Bru says. The family set up their pies under canopies in field driveways and between town locations along the cyclists' route. Word spread, and riders asked where she would be the next day.

"We only ever made it to day three," Bru says with a laugh as they ran out of pies by then.

In 2018, the Brus invested in a licensed food truck that Bru designed as a space to prepare, bake and sell her pies. Later, another supply trailer, complete with a freezer and extra tables, was added to the fleet.

She buys local food and supplies as much as possible, including from a nearby dairy farm and apple orchard. During a full production day, Bru makes 100 pies in her shed, which has a commercial kitchen, that her kids call Bru's "Habitat."

Her strawberry/rhubarb and caramel

apple pies are very popular, with demand for French silk and peanut butter cream pies spiking around the holidays. She has 20 pies on her "menu" that sell for \$20-\$25. But she's always up for a challenge to try something new, such as a bacon pecan pie she made for a pork producers contest.

Pie slices sell for \$7 from the Iowa Pie Lady's food truck at area events. For \$10, they come with homemade ice cream freshly churned by her husband, Ryan.

"My business is very family and faith-based. I give my family all the credit they deserve," Bru says.

Bru currently takes orders for local pickup through her website and is researching ways to ship her pies safely. This summer, FARM SHOW readers can find her at the Cedar Falls farmers market, the National Balloon Clas-



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sic in Indianola, Iowa, the Farm Progress Show in Decatur, Ill., and other events.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Laura Bru, Iowa Pie Lady, 1397 Hwy. T55, Gladbrook, Iowa 50635 (ph 641-750-6606; iowapielady@gmail.com; www.iowapielady.com).

## They're Using Roots, Herbs And Fungi To Brew Beer

The partners have stayed true to their mission of celebrating the flavors and aromas of southern Illinois.



Scratch Brewing takes local brewing seriously. It uses roots dug locally, garden-grown herbs and vegetables, and mushrooms foraged on local acres. Recent winter brews included fennel, wild carrot and nettle, and single-tree hickory. At other times of the year, basil, elderberry, dandelions, burdock, and even chanterelle mushrooms flavor its beers.

The brewery and its flavors were natural for owners Marika Josephson and her partner Aaron Kleidon.

"Aaron and I were both home brewers when we met," recalls Josephson. "We were into using local ingredients, me from the garden, and he spent a lot of time in the woods foraging. There was a lot of synergy when we began brewing together."

In 2013, the pair opened Scratch Brewing on five of Kleidon's 80-acre home farm. If location is essential for business success, their choice didn't make sense. The brewery is on a dead-end township road in the middle of the woods, 2 1/2 miles from the nearest

blacktop. It's one of only a couple of wood-fired breweries in the country.

Not only has the location not been a problem for day-trippers from St. Louis (80 miles away), but it's also been a plus. One national brewing publication described Scratch Brewing as one of the world's most beautiful places to drink beer.

Building a customer base in the first place was the biggest challenge, especially given their location. "We got into a lot of beer festivals, so people could taste this beer they'd never heard of," says Josephson. "We never have done any other type of promotion."

"People were excited about craft brewing and open to new flavors. We were and continue to be fairly outside the box," says Josephson.

The partners have stayed true to their mission of celebrating the flavors and aromas of southern Illinois. Their beers and bar have been nominated for James Beard Awards, and the New York Times has celebrated their pizza. Here, too, local cheeses and sausage

are used.

Josephson describes their brewing as a continual learning process. Basil is one of the herbs they use in summer brews.

"We learned over the years how important it was to be fresh," she says. "We harvest it the hour before it goes into the brewing process and as early in the season as possible."

They've shared what they've learned by writing the book "The Homebrewers Almanac," which discusses brewing with farmed and foraged ingredients.

They make less than 300 barrels a year. In addition to serving up their lagers, porters and stouts on-site, they're featured at select bars and restaurants in Illinois. Some goes out of state, mainly to Kentucky, and they've sent barrels as far as California, Washington and Florida. They often participate in special events.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Scratch Brewing, 264 Thompson Rd., Ava, Ill. 62907 (ph 618-426-1415; info@scratchbeer.com; www.scratchbeer.com).

Lee renovated an old storage shed into a modern retreat space near their main wedding and event venue.



## Top-Rate Hospitality In A Small Town

As new grandparents, Jacob and Leslie Lee are affectionately known as Lolli Pops. "The name was so clever and endearing that when we had the opportunity to purchase and remodel a bakery, we thought it was a great business name," says Leslie.

Lolli Pops Bakery, Café and Gift Shop is now a thriving small business in Elysian, Minn. The Lees and their business partners, Dylan and Hannah Sheehy (Leslie's brother and his wife), chose the name after acquiring Mama's Mercantile.

They're quick to point out that their fresh and homemade baked goods are just "like Mama used to make."

The menu includes a large selection of sweet treats, all-day breakfasts, freshly brewed coffee, espresso and Tillamook ice cream. The gift shop carries jewelry, gift cards and self-care items. Catering is available for graduations, special events and weddings.

"Elysian has just 600 residents, but it's in a great location, next to several lakes, on a busy

highway and a major bike trail," Leslie says. "The bakery has great local customers, and business really picks up during the tourist, fishing, biking and camping season."

The Lee's entrepreneurship began three years earlier. Leslie was a nurse practitioner while Jacob was in construction when they acquired a shuttered restaurant within walking distance of the bakery. "Jacob and I both grew up in the area and worked at cafes, restaurants and as bartenders. We'd dreamed of opening a wedding venue, so when the Bear's Den restaurant became available, we bought it. "The building was rustic inside and out, and it needed an entire facelift," Leslie says.

Jacob used 30 gal. of chinking caulk to repair cracks between the log siding, then redid the exterior with 100 gal. of white paint. Black asphalt shingles replaced the cedar shakes to give the building a bright, contemporary look. He also gave the inside a significant facelift, removing the booths, bar and fixtures and adding new flooring, light fixtures and furnishings. A commercial garage door opened the interior space to a patio that accommodates 100 or more people.

Leslie says, "The interior space is now large, open and inviting, where guests can socialize, have an elegant sit-down dinner, and enjoy the Minnesota outdoors." Wed-

dings can be held outside on the beautifully landscaped grounds or inside a 3,000-sq. ft. retreat space that Jacob repurposed from a storage building. He installed a chef's kitchen, a 12-ft. granite island and a private home theater.

He also renovated two nearby 2,400-sq. ft. storage buildings into the Black Steel Suites. They're now contemporary five-bedroom patio homes with hotel-style comfort. Wedding parties and guests use them to prepare, relax and party during their big event.

Located only about an hour from the Twin Cities metro area, the venue has hosted more than 50 weddings in each of the past two years. They're close to another 100,000 or more people in southern Minnesota. Leslie says, "The Ahavah and Lolli-Pops are ideally situated for people who want tip-top hospitality in a quiet and inviting location."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Lolli-Pops Bakery, 410 MN Hwy. 60, Elysian, Minn. 56028 (ph 507-267-4480; catering@lolli-pops.com; www.lolli-pops.com) or Ahavah Cottage, 510 MN Hwy. 60, Elysian, Minn. 56028 (ph 507-384-7581; ahavahcottage@gmail.com; www.ahavahcottage.com).