

## Susi McConnell

Baking is the constant in Susi's story, from baking in her home kitchen as a teenager to becoming a pastry chef for the Leland Lodge, Hattie's, Carol Worsley's Thyme Out, and Martha Ryan's restaurant in Suttons Bay. In Europe she worked in restaurants as diverse as one in a Swiss ski lodge and one on a navy base, but pastry is the thread throughout until she developed celiac disease. A time working at Angela Macke's Light of Day Organics introduced her to biodynamic gardening, her passion today as she grows her own fruits and vegetables.

Susi McConnell, b. September 18, 1949

Interview: July 18, 2016

South Highland Drive, Lake Leelanau

*When you grow the seed that's planted in your greenhouse and then plant it in your garden, the cycle is a really spiritual thing.*

I was born in the United States. My father was Lithuanian and he came over during the Bolshevik revolution, so I have all that background, and my mother was German. I'm from a family of nine children so we've always had gardens, lots of vegetable gardens and food, and my dad also owned a bar in Saginaw, Michigan, which was in the Lithuanian part of town. There was a little enclave of Lithuanians: a grocery store, my dad's bar, and a couple of plants, like Lufkin Rule and Baker Perkins. It was kind of like a Cheers bar. People would come after work, and they served food.

So when I think about food, it was always around. My mother made a lot of food. Maybe she wasn't really happy with that, but when you

have that many kids . . . and we always had plenty of food because we had a huge garden. She canned everything. We had a cellar that was filled with canned food. My father always made sauerkraut. She made pickled pigs feet. So we had a lot of ethnic foods, too.

My parents' garden wasn't organic. I'm sure my father used chemicals. When I was a kid I had to work in the garden, which I wasn't happy about. When I graduated from high school in 1967 there was the '60s movement to get more natural. That's when I began becoming aware of organic stuff. When I went away to college I was very into making my own bread when I went home and bringing it back and eating it. I became really aware of food, and the health benefits. I started yoga at eighteen, not very well, but I did, and was very aware of the body/mind thing. But that was that whole era, too, the late '60s. There was an awareness there. And I hung around with people who had that awareness. That's pretty much where it all started.

And I always loved plants. I went to a high school that was not very good. They never asked you what you were interested in. They just sent you off to college. I probably should have gone into botany or some form of agriculture, because when I was a teenager I had a room full of plants. I always had plants around me. I wish I had done that. Instead, I became a master gardener. Right now I have plants that are forty-two years old. I have a cactus that is even older than forty-two. I have plants that are as old as my children. Many generations, and they have babies, and I give their babies away. They are family to me. I have a long lineage with plants.

As a teenager I was a little bit interested in cooking, but more in baking. I would bake and do things at home, but it wasn't until I left college and went to Europe that the food bug really hit me. I had worked in restaurants since I was fourteen, as bus girl, and again in college I had worked in restaurants. I majored in theater and English, nothing to do with food. But when I was in college I became a vegetarian and got into health food. Adelle Davis was my idol. So I really got into health food. And then I went off to Europe for just a couple of months. I thought I would take a break from Western Michigan University between my sophomore and junior year. I was entering my junior year. I went to Europe with two girlfriends who were sisters. We sailed to Europe on an Italian liner, the smallest on the ocean. The

food was wonderful, and it was everybody going to kibbutzes, like a student ship.

I ended up in Leysin, Switzerland, where I got a job as a cook in a ski lodge that was owned by Australians and Americans, up in the Alps. That was my first experience with commercial cooking. We had to make three meals a day for the staff and the guests. It was like a young person's place. People would use it as a stopover from India. Everybody was in transit. We were all travelers. I worked under an English chef there. She was traveling. She worked for a noble family, and she was taking a break. I learned a lot from her. Her name was Penny. She was exquisite. She had classical training. So that was fun, working under her.

Then I got a Swiss boyfriend, and after realizing I wasn't going home, I wrote to the college and had to cancel my scholarships because I was not coming back. I don't know if that was a good move or not, but I didn't go back. I ended up staying a year and a half in Europe, and then I came home, and again I got restaurant jobs. I teamed up with my then husband. We had known each other, and we started dating, and in 1974 we moved to the Traverse City area. Again, I got a job in restaurant work.

We got married and started a family, and in the early '80s I got a job at Leland Lodge, for the first time as a pastry chef. I had met Martha [Ryan] and we started a business together, a very short business, we were going to bake for area restaurants—but it fell through. We were kindred spirits. We were a lot alike. We raised our kids together. When we were working at SugarLoaf it got really slim about March when SugarLoaf closed down. We were on unemployment. And Martha would call me and she'd say, "What kind of food have you got left?" and I'd say, "This is what I have." And she'd say, "This is what I have." And then we would have communal dinners. So that's how we made it through the winters. We both had young children, and we were collecting unemployment. Our husbands didn't have great jobs.

Time went on and I got this job at the Lodge. Back then they decided that they were going to go gourmet. So they hired a chef who had just graduated from La Varenne in Paris. Her name was Melissa Yard. And she hired me as a pastry chef. I learned a lot from Melissa. It was a great experience, and she really gave me full rein. That job lasted

five years. In the meantime they sent me away to Hyde Park, New York, to the Culinary Institute of America for an advanced pastry course for one week. And that really opened doors for me. I had been doing things the long way because I was self-taught. That brought it all together, and I learned a lot from the people I was with. To be in the course you had to have been in the business for five years, so it was everyone that had been in the business. And I was with a lot of country club chefs from very fancy Jewish clubs, and I learned so much from them. We swapped recipes. It was a great experience. Also I was with people who had their own bakeries.

That job lasted five years until they decided that gourmet wasn't their item. I left with another chef, and we went to Hattie's in Suttons Bay, where I was hired in as a pastry chef after Nancy Allen left. Nancy Allen was doing the line, and trying to do pastries. And she didn't like that, and so I took her place as a pastry chef, and the woman who left the lodge with me took on the line work. I ended up working for Jim Milliman for ten years. I loved it. That was a great job.

Then I was in a real bad car accident, and I had to retire from Jim's. I couldn't stand for long periods of time. So I left Jim's, retired for a while, and then I worked, actually, in a gift store in Leland for a bunch of years, five, six, seven years. And then Martha came back into my life. She had gotten a job out in Glen Arbor at a little place called Thyme Out. It was a little pastry shop, and Martha was going to run the kitchen and I would do the pastries. I was hired in to do that. So what I did was I worked in the wintertime at the gift store, and I would take the summers off and work in the pastry shop. It was the best job I ever had. It was for Carol Worsley. I worked in this beautiful country inn kitchen, and she gave me whatever I wanted. Any recipe I wanted to try—she was so supportive—she would buy whatever I wanted. My job was just to fill the pastry case. I could be as creative as I wanted. I had been collecting recipes since the early '70s, so I drew on all these old recipes and on new recipes.

Carol sent me to a French pastry school in Chicago. The chef was Sébastien Cannone. He came to the Detroit area for a class I took, and I also went to Chicago. Carol Worsley sent me to both of those. I didn't like some of the French customs. They used dye, red dye, and they used too much fondant on the cakes, rolled it on. Their pastries have

a lot of steps to them. They are usually a two-day process. A lot you don't want in a small place. The classes were very good, but I found that a lot of it was for big hotels, and especially the Culinary Institute. Massive recipes, for ten cakes; croissants for a billion people. A lot of recipes I could not even use. We could break down some of them. It was better having smaller quantities.

Thyme Out was a wonderful job. I loved it. And then after the fifth year Carol kept closing sooner and sooner, and pretty soon she was only open from July 4 to Labor Day. I couldn't survive on that.

By then Martha had decided that she was going to open a restaurant. She got backers, and she said, "Will you come with me and be my pastry chef?" So that's why I left Carol Worsley, and that summer, after I was off all winter, my job also ended at the gift store. They wanted a full-time manager. I took that winter off, and all that winter I worked with Martha on the menu, what we were going to have. I worked for Martha for five years until I developed celiac, which meant I could not work with flour anymore. I was getting too sick. It was the worst thing that ever happened to me. That ended my pastry career.

For five or six years I had also done wedding cakes on the side in the summer. But that was it for pastry. Then I went to work for Angela Macke at Light of Day for three years after I retired from Martha's. I learned a lot from Angela. I got into biodynamic gardening. I don't do it as fully as Angela does, but I follow the calendar, and I harvest and plant according to the calendar. I've always been an avid gardener, and I'm always inspired to make whatever is in my garden into something. So when we built our house I planted massive fruit trees. I planted currant bushes, strawberries, black and red raspberries, apricot trees, apple trees, pear trees, plum trees. So what I had done to myself was to become a slave to my garden and my orchards. I had to process everything because I couldn't stand anything to go to waste. So I repeated what my mother did. I canned everything.

But I got even more creative. I used this in all my jobs as a pastry chef. All my jellies and jams, I used them in all my preparations. I made liqueurs out of them. It's very satisfying to use all your products in another way. I candied all my flowers so when I did desserts I'd have candied violets, or whatever flowers I had. I did candied leaves with mint. I grew roses so I could do roses on wedding cakes. I candied

those or used them fresh. That's always been a passion and that hasn't left me. So if one year I don't have apricots, I make nothing apricot. I don't go buy anything. It's only what I have in my garden. That's been really fun and challenging. If I have too many tomatillos I'll make a tomatillo chutney. If I have too many tomatoes and I'm tired of canning I will dry them, I will freeze them. I will make condiments. I will make ketchup. Whatever you can do, I will do it. I'll make syrups, lavender syrup, pancake syrups out of fruit.

So then I had all these gardenings, and I had to get animals so I would have my own manure to make compost. That's not really the main reason I have horses. I have always loved horses. But that's what I do. I compost everything. We have a great compost area.

Now I'm into saving my seeds. I have my own organic seeds, because I do everything organically, so I save my seeds and replant. We're on seven years of our own garlic. Every year you save your biggest and your best garlic and you plant it in the fall. My garlic now is so big that I only have four cloves to a head. They are like elephant garlic. We use all our own potatoes, our own seed potatoes. And this year I started saving onion seeds. I grew my own onions from seeds. So that's my latest thing.

I am a Virgo, and I was very into astrology years ago. Virgo is an earth sign. I feel very close to the earth and so this is so important to me, to grow all my plants in my greenhouse from seeds, and then to take the plants, put them in my garden, and then harvest them. It's the whole cycle. And then when you grow the seed that's planted in your greenhouse and then plant it in your garden, the cycle is a really spiritual thing. Food has become more that way for me. It becomes more nourishing because it's something that I have grown. And it's especially wonderful with the garlic because it's now our own garlic. It knows my soil. This is our climate, our microclimate here. This is our environment. This is home. That's how I feel. It's all inner-connected.

When we first moved here in 1974 we immediately became members of the co-op, Oryana, that was in its beginning stages. We became members because I ran a co-op down in Saginaw, Michigan, before I moved up here. So we joined Oryana and have been with them ever since. And so we've known that group of people ever since that time. A lot of people moved up here in the early '70s, all of the same mind-set.

People bought farms. Some people did farming. Many foodie people and back to the land. Healthy eating. For a while there was a co-op in Suttons Bay that was started by Kathy Powell. It was called Sweet Water. For some reason, that didn't last very long, only a couple of years. It was in the Bailey building downtown. But there was that whole awareness at that time of people wanting to get back to the land and away from the craziness of the cities.

I'm happy that I have led the life I have, with a total awareness of my environment. We are all inner-connected, and I wish everyone could feel that way, about taking care of their property, their land, their bodies. I try not to preach to people. Either you are into it or you are not. You have that realization or you don't. A lot of people don't.