

# my table

HOUSTON'S DINING MAGAZINE

## Flour Power

Explaining the packaging process of cookies for the Gingersnap Project, founder Alicia Lee bristles at the mention of the nutrition label — printing them siphons thousands of dollars away from her cause. She also flares up about tardy volunteers and tins without enough snaps inside.

Lee and her sister began the Houston-based Gingersnap Project in 1998, selling cookies with the proceeds benefiting the Center Serving Persons with Mental Retardation, a private non-profit United Way Agency. Her late sister's portrait now overlooks the packaging room, where Lee continues to oversee packing of the gingersnaps, cheesesnaps and chocolate nuggets for sale. Volunteers clad in hairnets and rubber gloves chat happily while filling golden tins to the brim and every so often scooping a malformed cookie to the side for themselves. One volunteer, Ebbie Smith jokes, "We're always working, but sometimes just our mouths."

After the cookies are placed in the tins with that pesky nutrition label and sealed shut, gilded paper decorations are glued on top. These beautiful, collectible ornaments are created by residents of Willow River Farms, a branch of the Center and an organic farm home to 60 adults.

Lee's day isn't always just about cookie nibbling though, because the Center has recently come up against some trying obstacles. Finally, in August, after much debate and the rousing support of the community, the City of Houston (which owned the land the Center sits on) agreed to sell the foundation their 6.7-acre property and leases for \$6 million. That's a lot of cookies!

The Gingersnap Project actually began by selling fruitcakes, but due to their time-honored bad reputation — and a little push from a cooking-loving Barbara Bush — gingersnaps became the new focus. Fruitcakes are still available, and Lee stands by them, but there were no visible signs of the cherry-laden desserts the day I visited.

The cookie recipes were invented by Lee herself, but she "never gives up" on tweaking them. They include only natural ingredients, most of which any home baker has in her kitchen. The first thing apparent about the gingersnaps is the delicious smell wafting up from an open tin, a distinct reminder of Christmas. They are very crunchy and leave a spicy aftertaste. As a savory offering for the project, the cheesesnaps were created. These also give off a rich fragrance, but of cheese and paprika. The bite-size morsels are cheesy, buttery and filled with bits of pecan. Finally, the most recent addition to the lineup is the crunchy chocolate nugget, loaded with Guittard chocolate chips and grated Swiss chocolate.

Although the cookies were once made around town in volunteers' kitchens, today they are baked by Peter Hobi, under Lee's tutelage, at the Alporn Bakery. The packing and decorating, however, are still done by volunteers at the Center.

Tins of cookies are available at several farmer's markets year round, at holiday and spring bazaars (such as the Nutcracker Market and Chapelwood's Spring Thing Market) and, during the holidays, at area Whole Foods. You can also visit the Center at 3550 West Dallas (call 713-525-8468 for directions) or order online at [www.gingersnapsetc.org](http://www.gingersnapsetc.org). — *Nikki Metzgar*

### DETAILS

- 16 oz. Gingersnaps (48 small cookies, \$15)
- 23 oz. Gingersnaps (69 large cookies, \$25)
- 8 oz. Cheesnaps (128, \$15)
- 16 oz. Cheesnaps (256, \$30)
- 16 oz. Crunchy Chocolate Nuggets (32 to 35, \$20)
- 2 lbs. Fruitcake (\$20)

*To date, the Gingersnap Project has sold more than \$1 million of their products and contributed more than \$950,000 to the Center Serving Persons with Mental Retardation.*