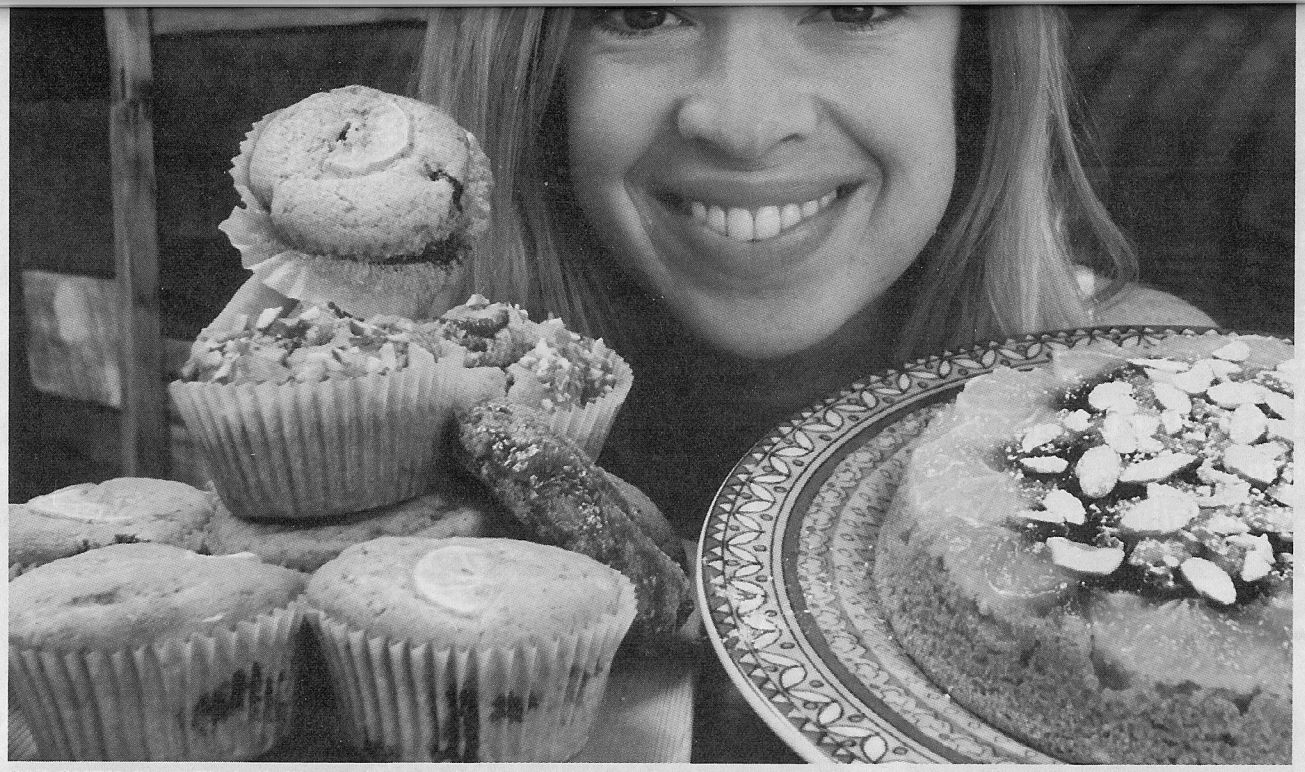

ALT OVEN *Baker Michelle Minor of Squash & Blossom creates gluten-free treats loaded with texture and flavor yet low in sugar.* PHOTO: CHIP SCHEUER

Enlightened Flavors

Squash & Blossom's alternative-flour delights, beet kvass from Cafe Ivéta, and the Santa Cruz Baroque Festival BY CHRISTINA WATERS

Adding spice to **Mutari**'s already piquant chocolate and pastries menu is **Squash & Blossom**. I spied some of these unusual "alternative-flour" pastries made by **Michelle Minor**—former artisanal baker and head cook for River Cafe—on my maiden voyage to Mutari Chocolate House and Factory. Then I went back just to try a trio of Squash & Blossom pastries. I took them home and began an in-house tasting. Oh my God, to put it mildly. Here—finally!—were muffins and cookies and cakes made without gluten, and yet filled with robust texture and almost poetic nuances of fruit and spice flavors.

"Not only are my pastries gluten-free, they are also sweetened with alternative sugars—agave, honey, maple syrup and coconut sugar," Minor says. "And not only do I use these alternative, less-processed sweeteners, but I use about half as much sweetening as most recipes call for." Minor says her focus and mission is "to produce delicious, satisfying treats with flavors that are not overwhelmed by sugar and butter. I want people to be able to taste in each bite the flavors of the local fruits, nuts, seeds, sweeteners and even the different flavors of flours I use."

First off, we sampled the hazelnut cacao nib cookie ($2.50) and realized that we were tasting the finest new cookie on the planet. The earthy, faintly woodsy flavor of hazelnut—which also forms the underlying crunchy texture—perfumed each bite. So did the top notes of cacao. A slice of hazelnut pins down the cookie center. Taken together, it it addictive after a few bites. Dry, but good! Our final Squash & Blossom discovery were the delicate orange muffins studded with plump, fresh blueberries ($3.50). This one offered a fabulous, light cake texture with a fresh moist crumb and the perfume of orange in every bite. Minor reveals that she uses her own blends of flours, "including millet, amaranth, rice, tapioca, buckwheat and almond flour." She also notes that at least three different flours create the best texture. Let's just say that I'm blown away by how distinctive, i.e. different, these pastries are from the Disney-fied sugar and white flour-driven fluff of one's Twinkied youth. Minor tells me that her pastries will be available soon in Midtown Cafe, and with some luck and persistence, hopefully our local farmers markets will be showcasing her delightful pastries in the very near future!

IVÉTA TONIC

Beet kvass is our new favorite designer drink. House-made and on tap at the chic and welcoming **Cafe Ivéta**, the drink is a traditional fermented Russian tonic inflected with probiotics and enzymes. Indeed. It tastes like a strangely powerful, salty, and ancient brew that I now require on a weekly basis. Sample the 4-ounce shot for $1.50 and see if you don't agree.

GOING FOR BAROQUE!

Join music lovers as the **Santa Cruz Baroque Festival** presents *Music in the Garden* from 2-5 p.m. on Sunday, May 24. Celtic musicians Shelley Phillips and Jesse Autumn join the Great Morgani in the private garden of a Bonny Doon estate. Killer views of the Monterey Bay set the backdrop, and the $40 ticket includes lively musical offerings, local and organic appetizers, **Hallcrest** wines, and beer from **Santa Cruz Mountain Brewing**. Purchase tickets online at scbaroque.org. Think of it as a sensuous way to spend Memorial Day Weekend.