

BREAD WINNER

Danko's Choc O Pain brings taste of Paris, and lots of baguettes, to Hoboken, Jersey City

BY MEG FRY

Clemence Danko said she cannot go a single day without bread. But she won't eat just any carbs: Bread must be healthy, it must be fresh and it must be French.

Born and raised in Paris, Danko, founder and owner of **Choc O Pain**, uses only high-quality, local ingredients whenever possible to bake traditional French bread and pastries in Hoboken and Jersey City.

The products range in price from \$1.50 for a mini croissant and \$10 for a chocolate and pecan babka ring, but Danko said her customers are willing to spend the money.

"Some of our French customers have told me our products are even better than what they are used to having in France," Danko said. "That is a huge compliment."

Choc O Pain, the first French bakery and café in Hoboken since 2012, has since expanded into two additional locations in Jersey City. Danko will open its third location in the area this fall.

"It will accommodate more growth going forward," she said.

The company does over \$1 million in revenue annually. An amazing figure, considering Danko never thought of getting into the business until just a few years ago.

Danko's husband, Laszlo Danko,



Clemence Danko, founder and owner, Choc O Pain in Hoboken. —AARON HOUSTON

moved from Paris to Hoboken in 2009.

Clemence Danko stayed behind for six months to finish her work in the pharmaceutical industry. The separation sparked the business.

After having spent her college career studying and seven years working in pharmaceutical logistics and finance, Danko realized she wanted a change.

"I wanted to explore other ventures," she said. "I always knew I would be an en-

trepreneur at some point in my life, but I did not think it would be so early."

At the same time, Laszlo Danko discovered he could not find a proper croissant or a fresh baguette to eat in Hoboken, so he strongly encouraged Clemence Danko to open such a business in the area when she arrived.

"I grew accustomed to this idea and so I tried to figure out how to do it," she said. "Hoboken had great potential; there was nothing there like what I wanted to do."

Danko was hooked. She obtained a degree in culinary management from the Institute of Culinary Education and took courses in bread baking at the International Culinary Center in New York City while working at **Le Pain Quotidien**.

"I was working on my business plan while gaining hands-on experience," she said.

Danko opened Choc O Pain in 2012 and expanded the brand into Jersey City in 2013. She opened a third location in Jersey City Heights in March of this year.

"We do well with what we know how to do," Danko said. "We are focused on authenticity and simplicity."

Choc O Pain bakes fresh all of its bread in the traditional European way, using only four basic ingredients: water,

Biz in brief

COMPANY: Choc O Pain

HEADQUARTERS: Hoboken

FOUNDED: 2012

REVENUE: Between \$1 and \$2 million

EMPLOYEES: More than 40

ONE MORE THING: "It would help if New Jersey would require manufacturers and distributors to label GMO ingredients," Founder and Owner **Clemence Danko** said. "That would help people realize the quality of our ingredients."

flour, leaven and salt.

It then takes about 12 to 24 hours for the unique textures and flavors to develop.

"We do not cut corners — we use the best ingredients possible and allow for a long fermentation process," Danko said. "That makes all the difference in the quality of our product."

Choc O Pain also only uses suppliers on the East Coast to reduce its carbon footprint and environmental impact.

"A lot of French people are surprised when they learn that we do not import flour," Danko said. "We can achieve the same results as the bread in France just by knowing which suppliers to work with."

While 95 percent of the wheat and

Working mom

Clemence Danko, the founder and owner of **Choc O Pain**, found out she was expecting her first child on the day she took her last exam at culinary school.

"I am happy I did not discover it before, because it may have mentally prevented me from carrying trays and such," Danko said. "The timing was also a little scary because I was not sure how I was going to manage creating Choc O Pain while having a child."

"But things come and you deal with them and everything falls into place."

So much so that Danko would again open her second location in downtown Jersey City in 2013 while expecting her second child.

"I have since made decisions to dedicate and hire people to be on the floor," she said. "It has a financial impact, but it balances my family life."

Danko works between the various Choc O Pain locations from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"I am able to prepare my kids for school in the morning and can pick them up to go to the park afterwards, make dinner and spend time with my husband," she said. "I just work a lot from my phone, and at night, I continue answering emails."

"Successful women have a vision and project it, plan and organize what needs to be done, delegate, find and hire the right people who are better at doing a job than they are and are humble and accept feedback. If you need to adjust — you will."

SPOTLIGHT TOP ENTREPRENEURS

flour production in the United States is generally reserved for the "Wonderbread" industry, Danko said, 5 percent of flour exists for use by the likes of Choc O Pain.

"We are lucky that people in Hoboken and Jersey City have tried our product and have realized the quality is on par with the price we propose, so they continue buying it," she said.

Choc O Pain offers more than just bread and pastries. From soups, salads and sandwiches to homemade lemonade and house-brewed iced teas — as well as an assortment of French specialty items, such as candies, spices, honey and jams — the boulangerie competes in several markets.

"Cost-wise, there is, of course, no comparison," Danko said. "Some people cannot afford more than the \$5 they spend at a chain, which sells awful ingredients for their health."

That has not stopped consumers from making better choices.

Choc O Pain's sales have increased 10 percent each year.

Danko will continue expanding the brand this fall by building a new production facility, offices and café in Jersey City Heights.

She hopes this will, first and foremost, help her more than 40 employees.

"Being French and not being able to offer my employees some health benefits



Pastries at Choc O Pain in Hoboken. —AARON HOUSTON

is a huge struggle for me," Danko said. "It is really frustrating because things like that are taken care of by my country. The cost of it here is just prohibitive — I simply cannot afford it at the moment."

"When we move to the production facility, I hope it will allow us more efficiency in the way we work so that we can reduce labor costs and be able to offer more benefits. That is one thing I wish I could do better for my employees."

The right size oven will also increase production and open up new markets for Choc O Pain.

"At the moment, we need a full eight-

hour overnight shift to bake all of our next-day sales," Danko said. "With the right size oven, everything should be baked within three hours. We will continue doing things by hand but we will be better organized."

More efficiency will allow Choc O Pain to expand into an additional two or three cafés, as well as focus on wholesale activities and catering services.

"We will then be able to knock on the doors of the larger businesses down on the waterfront to make sure they know we are here," Danko said.

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Trending

Clemence Danko is cautious when it comes to following food trends.

"The French have been baking bread for hundreds of years," she said. "It is a simple, basic food."

However, in the wake of **Panera Bread** and **Subway** recently launching national media campaigns regarding the removal of preservatives from their menus, Danko believes she may need to speak up.

"Come on, guys, you cannot try to take advantage of this — we have always been doing this," she said. "I am ahead of a lot of people in the industry because we do not use preservatives, coloring agents or flavoring. We keep it simple. It is the essence of what we do."

"I should communicate more about it, but I focus more on our products than our communications."

While Danko stops short of converting **Choc O Pain** into gluten-free, vegan bakeries, she does make an effort to offer menu items for everyone regardless of their dietary restrictions, such as gluten-free macaroons, flourless chocolate heaven cake, quiches, soups and salads.

"I am, however, very interested in scientific developments that are developing gluten-free bread with the same rising properties," Danko said. "If the taste and texture is there, I would be the first one to try it."