

# Meet the Delectable Diva, Athena Uslander

Athena Uslander, owner of Silverland Desserts in Forest Park, started building a chocolate dynasty in the early 80's on a shoestring. Since then her delectable desserts have become a staple in the wholesale and mail order markets. The business she began on a single brownie recipe now boasts numerous varieties and flavors of gourmet brownies, cookies and dessert bars, further complimented by low fat, fat free and sugar free versions.

Having won numerous industry awards throughout her career, Uslander says the day her low fat brownies were named "best brownies" by Weight Watchers Magazine in 2002, the phone lines, "Lit up. We'd been written up before," she remembers, "but the following of Weight Watchers was amazing!" Last year, Silverland was also acclaimed as "one of the top 10 mail order desserts" by the Fine Living Channel and the Food Network.

We first met Athena at the Food Marketing Institute Show last May. What initially peaked our interest in Silverland was their preservative free health bar line, but what ultimately hooked us was Uslander's genuine charm and passion for her craft. She is a petite pistol in the giant world of food manufacturing who started out as an engineer designing bridges but ended up creating "a serious chocolate sensation" as a single mother of three against all odds.

**CWM:** When did you come to the United States?

**AU:** I came over at 17, almost 18. At that time, Tehran was the Paris of the Middle East, very metropolitan.

**CWM:** What made your family come over?

**AU:** They didn't, I was the only one.

**CWM:** At such a young age, by yourself? What made you do that?

**AU:** I watched Armstrong walk on the moon. I remember watching our English television station and I didn't understand a word, but was listening to the television announcer speaking and I thought to myself, 'God, if I could one day speak like that, one day understand that.' At the time I didn't think I'd be able to. But little by little I put it in my mom's ear. She tried her best to keep me there, but I told her, 'All I want to do is go to the United States'. And so she helped me get here on the promise that I would support myself once I was settled.

I didn't know anybody when I got here except for one person who lived in Chicago. I barely spoke any English, it was hard at first. I

remember going to Marshall Field's the first day I was here and asking a lady where the 'toilet' was. At first she couldn't understand me and then after repeating it about six times she said, "The Powder Room is...".

My friend got me an application for SIU. So that's where I started out. I was in Chicago for two days and then I went to Carbondale.

**CWM:** What year was that?

**AU:** 1973.

**CWM:** And then you ended up at Southern, of all places.

**AU:** I thought it was the best place in the world. I wasn't looking at Carbondale like a party school, with all the stigmas you have. My roommate was from Boston and I was just eating it up. I remember going to McDonalds one time...some-one bet me that I couldn't go in and order a Big Mac and fries with them understanding me on the first try. I practiced and I practiced to do it right, the bet was for \$10, and I did it - I was so proud of myself.

**CWM:** How difficult was it to come over to a foreign country and immediately go to school there?

**AU:** I was ESL, English as a Second Language, and I did that for one semester. But the thing about engineering is, it's a scientific language, so you don't have to read a lot of philosophy. We had to deal with formulas and I was way over qualified for like the first three semesters, because I had so much calculus, chemistry and math already. So I tested out of a lot of it. I got my undergrad and master's from SIU. Then I returned to Chicago and married a guy who went to Penn that I had met while he was visiting friends at Southern. He was an architect.

My first job was with a company who did consulting with the State of Illinois for bridge construction and that's what I did, designed bridges. It was 1979 and the company was all men, except for the receptionist. And I was who I am now, so I walked in and said [sprightly], "Hi---iiiiii!" They all looked at me like I was crazy, like I was from Venus or something. People wouldn't talk, they had breaks, and that's when they would talk. You had to be there and be real quiet at your drafting boards. So I was this little person sitting at this big drafting board and if I'd turn around and say something they'd roll their eyes. Little by little, I knew this was not where I wanted to be. And with respect to the creative side, it only goes for so long; I mean how many state bridges do you see that are much different than the rest? How many bridges are there that are



Cover story photos by Lee Balgemann

Athena at her desk - she drinks tea all day long from her mega coffee mug. (Behind her on the shelf, a small pillow embroidered with the familiar saying: Stressed Spelled Backwards is Desserts!)

actually unique and very beautiful design wise?

**CWM:** How then did you make the leap then from bridges to baking?

**AU:** One of the things that happened during this time was that my company sent me to Springfield on a project with this other woman they had just hired so we could room together. She was Indian and I realized she came from the same philosophy - that you're born with engineer's genes that you must be very steadfast etc. I wasn't like that. I just didn't think it would be for me more than a few years, because once you got it, it's the same thing all over again. I would come home on the weekends and cry. I wanted to be free, not because I was lazy or that I didn't want to work - it was never that. I also had to take my PE license, (Professional Engineer), because without that you are like a CPA without a certificate. So I took that exam and passed it. Once I did that I felt I could always go back to it if I wanted to. That's when I started looking...

There was this woman who would come to our parties and always bring these brownies and people would just them - they'd go nuts over them. And I was always a chocoholic. She had asked me several times if I'd ever be interested in going into business with her, her name is Lisa Silverman.

One day when I was desperate, (I had quit engineering and was pregnant with my first child), I called her and asked if she was still interested in going into business together. And

she said she was.

At that time Lisa had just gotten busted for baking at home. She was making her brownies in her apartment in the DePaul area and one of the jealous neighbors who had seen her walking up the stairs with bags and bags of chocolate, sugar and flour, called the health department.

**CWM:** The timing was perfect!

**AU:** Yes! So I looked around for a place and found a very small space near Harlem and Grand. And we started there with a convection oven, a cutting table, a home freezer, a cash register and \$7,500. I remember these little old Italian ladies would walk by and come in and say, "What are you girls doing?" We'd tell them, 'We make brownies, would you like some brownies?' They'd say, "WHAT!?" At the time it was 1983; there really weren't any brownies around, except for Rachel's Brownies. It was the only brownie around that was sold commercially and even cookies, weren't a trend then. They weren't something you bought in a store; you made those things at home, especially in Elmwood Park, Illinois.

Later that same year, I gave birth to my first child in August and then Lisa's husband got transferred to San Francisco. I ended up buying her out.

**CWM:** And she just let go of her recipe?

**AU:** Yes, but you have to realize that it was just one brownie at that time. It was our basic double chocolate brownie.

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