

AU: It means that there is someone measuring the sugar, the flour; actually ladling and scooping the ingredients out and into the mixer. For some bigger customers, like grocery chains, the dough is hand made but the actual scooping is done by machine, because you're talking about thousands and thousands of cookies and you'd get carpal tunnel if you tried to scoop them by hand.

CWM: Let's talk about how you develop a product. How long does it take to come up with a recipe?

AU: As I told you, the caramel brownie took four years – it would end up sticking to the bottom, I wasn't getting it – and engineering has helped me a lot because of the science. I have developed all of our products myself – and you're looking at a hundred now, because over the years we've had some and then dropped the ones that didn't sell. We used to have a ginger and wasabi brownie...

CWM: Eww...sorry, it sounds disgusting.

AU: Well, [laughing] we don't have it anymore!

CWM: Must have been a phase, right?

AU: It was a 'phase'. A few years ago, ginger, wasabi and all those kinds of little snacks were big, so we thought, 'hey, why not?' It didn't sell. We used to have a peanut butter and jelly bar too.

CWM: That sounds good.

AU: People loved the idea, but actually getting it out of here and into the store didn't go. Getting back to how long it takes...it is taking a shorter and shorter amount of time to develop new recipes because of experience. Companies come to us daily to develop new products for them. That's how we came out with our own health bars. We were making eight different nutritional bars for one of our customers and decided to do it ourselves. Ours is a raw bar – it's made with dates, good for vegans, and it doesn't have any additives.

CWM: How long did it take you to develop your new sugar free lemon bar?

AU: The lemon bar took me one try – two hours.

CWM: That's amazing!

AU: It is amazing, that's why I was so excited about them. Some things will still take a lot longer than that, especially if it's a brand new product, something I've never done before, but it's never going to take me four years again. Not even a month again. That's why now, I actually charge for my time, if someone comes to me to develop something new.

CWM: Will you be adding other new lines like cakes or pies?

AU: No. It will never be cheesecake, or pies or wedding cakes or anything like that, but it will be new products. Things I believe in, that I am passionate about, that won't harm the environment or the person.

CWM: How long do you see yourself doing this business?

AU: Through the years we've had a lot of potential buyers, but I can't sell out my employees. My biggest claim in my life is the fact that I have given livelihood to a bunch of people, that's very important. They have been able to start a family, buy homes, have a good life etc., and I want to make sure that continues. We don't want to become a little dot in someone else's company. Because what happens, like with Rachel's brownies...this big company in New Jersey bought them out and then 3 years later decided it wasn't a good acquisition and sold them off.

CWM: If you did decide to sell your business, how would you go about it?

AU: What I would do is that if someone would take the company over, I would make sure that my employees would receive their retirement that it would remain in tact for them and their families. That's very important to me.

CWM: What about your own children? Do they have any interest in the business?

AU: No, none at all. My oldest works for Macy's, she's a buyer. But maybe there will be a time when they'd be interested, but I'm not someone who would hand this over. I worked really hard to build this business and I'm not going to just hand it over to someone, even if it is my own kid. I think they have to earn it. They have to show they can do well by the people who work here, that they're qualified to run the business. When they were little, they use to love to come with me to work. They'd say, "Mommy, you smell like chocolate" – that was when I was making, baking and selling everyday.

CWM: You are a very slim lady, and that's interesting being in the kind of business you're in.

AU: That is the question I get asked most often

– if I collected a dime for every time I am asked that question... Honestly, I eat more than anyone, but I work out a LOT. I work out an average of four hours a day. Like yesterday, I worked out for an hour and a half in the morning and I played tennis for three hours at night. I lift weights every other day. I'm a chocoholic and an exerholic. I am also a great cook, and if I ever went into competition, I'd be a better cook than a baker. I love cooking, I love food – big foodie. I'm the one that tastes everything. If you ask my employees, they wouldn't think twice about who eats the most around here. I am eating constantly. Before you came [this morning] I had three sandwiches.

CWM: What kind of sandwiches were they?

AU: I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, feta cheese with herbs and tomatoes – I grew up eating that for breakfast in Iran, and another sandwich.

CWM: Do you eat a lot of healthy foods?

AU: I do, but I also like a steak. I didn't grow up with bacon, but I love the smell of it. I went to a party where they served, bacon, chocolate and champagne and I loved it. I could never be anorexic or bulimic. And if I gave up exercise I'd have a huge problem.

CWM: Have you always been that way?

AU: No, not until recently. I use to not be very "gourmet".

bad things that I ate as a kid and I still love them, because those things stay with you the rest of your life. I'd like to be a part of training kids to exercise in life – not as something that you have to do, but something that is a part of life.

CWM: There are still a lot of kids who aren't growing up seeing their parents consistently make exercise a part of their lives. Was that different for you since your mom was a doctor?

AU: My mother NEVER worked out. I give her advice all the time now about it and ask her, 'Are you doing at least something...a couple of sit-ups?' I'm the one who encourages her to be active. Just being a doctor, doesn't mean you do squat about that. I always saw her made up, always going to get her hair done – never ever working out or even walking. She'd put her little white gloves on and drive. They didn't care about being in shape, working their muscles, etc. My mother still doesn't believe that you can correct things with exercise. She takes medicine because she's a doctor.

CWM: When you reflect upon your life, do you have any regrets on the choices you made?

AU: I think everybody can look back at the choices they made, but what good does that do?

CWM: What advice do you have for people who want to have their own businesses?

AU: I would tell them to do it the way they plan to do it, meaning they should start out with a



Sharing nutrition facts with CWM Publisher, JJ Rusch. Silverland's Double Chocolate Brownie has 190 calories per slice and 10 grams of fat. The Low Fat Caramel Brownies have only 1.5 grams of fat and are 130 calories each. Athena's new sugar free Lemon Bar is a 120 calorie slice of heaven!

CWM: Did you always work out?

AU: No. I didn't started running until I was 26 or so. Then I started slowly getting addicted to running.

CWM: Are you still running?

AU: Yes, I get the "runner's high". I love to familiarize myself with places I go to on vacation by running; you get to see so much more than just by driving through.

CWM: What do you think you'd like to do when you retire from baking?

AU: I would do a lot of volunteer work. I really want to give back. I feel like giving back with money is not enough – I think that is sort of like saying, 'okay, I've done that, let's move on'. I want to give back in time and energy working for someone who can use my services. I would also like to get involved in the area of health and nutrition for children, like changing the foods we have in schools. You may think it's ironic with me being in the kind of business I'm in, but I don't feel like this [desserts] is bad food. I think there is a place for everything – this is dessert – it has to have chocolate. I can't live without chocolate.

I just saw this woman who is over a hundred years old interviewed the other day, and they asked her, "What do you do?" She said, "There's two things I eat, chocolate and peanut butter everyday. Maybe that's not why I have lived as long as I do, but I like doing that." That to me is not bad nutrition. Bad nutrition to me is when you give kids potato chips and some kind of processed meat for lunch. That to me is a crime, because this kid is going to grow up loving this. You carry things from your childhood with you. I have some

business plan, which isn't the way I did it. Here's "x" amount of dollars, where do I want this business to be in one year? What are my goals? At what point am I going to say, 'no, the direction is wrong', in other words, when am I going to cut my losses? That's a better way to go about it. I just winged it – going about things as they came up. If you do it the right way, at least you have some benchmarks that you can look for. But really a business is more than that. I think you have to have passion when you start it; something that you have passion for. I could never sell liquor because I don't approve of it, but I love chocolate, so I can sell from my heart.

I have a lot of women who call me about going into business. When I can, I have lunch with them. There was one lady who wanted to make puppets, when I talked to her she was really passionate about how she wanted to do it. And as odd as that sounds, if you have passion it's going to work. If you don't have something backing it up [passion] you are going to fail. If you think you're going to just spend five hours in the office, it's not going to work. It takes a lot of heart and a lot of hard work. And that's something you have to be ready for at any time when you have your own business – a lot of hard work. I don't care how ready you are, or how lucky you are.

If you'd like to try some of Silverland's goodies, including their new sugar free lemon bar, stop by the CWM booth on Sunday, November 19th at the Chicago Women's Show at the Rosemont Convention Center. Athena will be on hand greeting visitors and passing out samples from 12-2.