“I AM AN ARTIST. People find it difficult to understand how I could go from haute couture to food, but in everything I do, there is art.”

When Nicole Bergere selected the most recent location for her bakery in Chicago, she approached the decision with the same intuition she has relied on all her life. “I knew it had to be a place that says ‘hello,’” she explains. “I didn’t want to have a space just because it’s convenient. It has to have some romance. When I walked in I said, this is the place I want. It’s for people who create. It’s a very old building, with marvelous high ceilings and a lot of things wrong with it, but nobody bumps into one another!”

Nicole’s Bake Shop is marvelous, full of the heady scent of baking, as well as the vitality of muscular young bakers in constant motion. But it’s the presence of Nicole herself that gives the bakery its flair.

“Well, hello, you sweet little girl,” she greets me when I come to the bakery to meet her. “Your turquoise beads are beautiful; almost as beautiful as mine! Here, look at my clasp.” She pulls it around her neck so I can see. Indeed, her clasp is golden and lovely.

There is music playing. Several Latino men work in concert with the music and one another, moving from one gleaming stainless steel oven to the next, measuring flour and watching to see what Nicole might need. They are intensely involved in creating breads, cookies, and quite possibly the most aptly named crackers on the planet—Nicole’s Divine Crackers. These crackers defy all expectations for a food that is typically considered just a conduit for good cheese. Instead, Nicole’s crackers are crunchy little blasts of flavor with names as intriguing as their flavors. The Shanghai Jester, for example, is elevated by toasted black sesame, nori, wasabi, and ginger. “It’s one of those crackers you keep eating and saying, ‘What? What is it?’” Nicole says. “You’re not quite sure, but you want to keep eating it.

“My bakers have been with me for over ten years,” she continues. “I’ve got a family of four brothers over here. The man over there at the table, we call him ‘the stray.’ He was the last to come aboard, and the guys had to approve of him. They had to try him out and see if they liked him and if they could work with him. The older brother over there is the head baker of bread. This guy here does all of the sweet things—the wafers, the cookies. He does all of the cookies by hand, he cuts them all. And the sister of this one is married to that one,” she points at them and pats each one on the arm as she speaks.

A voluptuous tray of golden rolls dusted with flour is taken out of the oven by one of the boys. Nicole sees me look at them longingly. “That’s on its way to one of the restaurants,” she says. Some lucky soul will eat the rolls tonight at the Ritz-Carlton, the Peninsula, mk, or one of the many Chicago restaurants that serve Nicole’s breads.

It All Started at Home

Although Nicole has lived most of her life in the United States, she was born in France in 1925. Her life’s path was heavily influenced by the parents she worshipped. “My father was a very romantic person who loved dreaming about wonderful things,” she says, looking off into the distant, high ceiling of her bakery. “He was adorable, and he dressed beautifully and loved good food.”

That both of her parents dressed well during the Depression was not simply admirable; it was the basis for Nicole’s future as a clothing designer, a career she feels almost as strongly about as she does baking. “My mother was very creative. When I think back on the things that she could do with nothing!” she exclaims. “I had the most beautiful clothes as a child, because the neighbors would give her old clothes. She would take them apart, create a pattern, and make me the most wonderful clothes. And thank God my mother was a wonderful cook! I learned all of the basic things from her.”
Her mother’s tutelage was tough (“she was making a maid out of me!” Nicole winces), but she was gentle in her desire to help her daughter become the best. “She never said ‘you dummy.’ Never. Mother would say ‘No, honey, not quite right. You’ll have to take it out and do it over.’ That was the way I was brought up: You do it right or you don’t do it at all.” When Nicole later taught design and sewing at the Art Institute of Chicago, she employed her mother’s demanding technique. “Not everyone is going to be Yves Saint Laurent or Chanel, but you can at least aspire to be the best. You cannot aspire to mediocrity. Then you are wasting your time.”

A Divine Life

Nicole’s start in the fashion industry began much like everything she has done: she abandoned the linear, traditional path of a nine-to-five job and went off on her own to explore. In 1961 she left good jobs at a Chicago cosmetic company and ad agency to do what truly excited her: design clothes. “I lived in a little apartment. I was always poor, never had enough,” she says. “But I was always out there thinking it’s going to be great, and it’s going to be marvelous.” Throughout her life Nicole’s magnetism has brought people to her, not only in her work, but especially in love. Her romantic sensibility—and a failed love affair—sent her packing to Europe in 1963. “I chose Spain because it’s always been part of what I love: the history, the tragedy,” she explains. “I had a romantic notion of it. And the bullfights!” She bought a one-way ticket and took her sewing machine, but no frying pan. “I figured I could get one
there!” she says. “That’s the confidence I had in what I can do. And I had the most wonderful time of my life.”

With the help of many people, including sculptor Javier Corbero, she stayed for a time at a three-hundred-year-old inn that brought to life all of her idealized notions of Spain. “I remember the first breakfast that Javier fixed for me. They had help in the house, but he himself brought it to me on a tray, with a silver bud vase and a white rose, and beautiful bread that was rubbed with fresh garlic and tomato.” Nicole closes her eyes in reverie. “The coffee was pulverized Nescafé mixed with some leche azucarado, which is like sweetened condensed milk, and there were little pieces of jamón Serrano.”

The apartment she later took in Barcelona was near the markets. She quickly learned Spanish. “I integrated immediately, just so I could shop! There was a giant vat of olive oil, and you’d take your own bottle and fill it up,” she recalls. “And they would wrap the eggs in paper with a little twine on it. I adored cooking there, and I could have stayed. Javier’s wife would have put me in business making clothes. But I felt as though I should not be clutched by the throat. If I got involved too quickly I’d have my life taken away.”

So she went down the coast to Costa del Sol where it was warmer, cheaper, and easier to make money. She sunned on the beach daily with throngs of young people from all over the world. “I found Chris, a young English gay boy, and he was into money,” she says. “He wanted to open a restaurant. At this point I was thirty-seven. It’s a perfect age, absolutely perfect! The young boys want you, the older guys want you. Of course I went for the younger ones. Always did and still do.”

With the English boy Nicole opened her first restaurant, Louis Quatorze, in Costa del Sol, in a little U-shaped mall that had rosemary bushes around it and roses in the center. The restaurant had no stove and no oven, so she cooked with plates on gas. “If I wanted to make a pie I took the handles off a paella dish. They had no idea what a pie was! I cooked in my long gowns; it was so much fun!”

Nicole’s years in Spain were wild and enchanting. While she experienced the rigors of running her own restaurant, she met a cast of characters who still waltz through
her mind many years later. During this period Nicole had many boyfriends who would come to the restaurant to help her in the kitchen. One was a soccer player from Morocco. “He was adorable, and I didn’t find out until much later that he had a wife in Morocco!” she says. “She came over and tried to kill my Spanish doggie with poison bones, and almost succeeded.”

“It was an adventurous time for me and my friends. They were writers, they were sculptors. I guess I was notorious because I cooked in my long, homemade Pucci-print dresses. Gorgeous little things. Wore no bra. People wondered, ‘Who is that?’ Mothers would cover the eyes of young children when I walked by! I had one marvelous friend, Harry Hubert, nicknamed ‘Harry Armpits,’ who was written up by James Michener in some of his books because he was such a human. Such a person. Such a man! He was fabulous. People adored him. He’d say ‘Heeeeyyyy Nikki!’ He was an ex-marine who went to Spain to recover, and never came back. He’d bring boys from the base over to the restaurant and say ‘Nikki, give it to ’em, baby.’”

Unfortunately, Chris embezzled all of the restaurant’s money. He was ultimately deported. So Nicole left to become chef at another place, bringing all of Louis Quatorze’s patrons with her. After that she followed her latest boyfriend to Casablanca, where she hit rock bottom, with no money and no means of support. Some of the most influential men in Tangier were after Nicole, and wanted to “put her up.” They wondered, ‘Who is that?’ Mothers would cover the eyes of young children when I walked by! I had one marvelous friend, Harry Hubert, nicknamed ‘Harry Armpits,’ who was written up by James Michener in some of his books because he was such a human. Such a person. Such a man! He was fabulous. People adored him. He’d say ‘Heeeeyyyy Nikki!’ He was an ex-marine who went to Spain to recover, and never came back. He’d bring boys from the base over to the restaurant and say ‘Nikki, give it to ’em, baby.’”

With only twenty dollars in her pocket, Nicole returned to Chicago. There she reconnected with her artistic friends and designed haute couture out of a salon on Webster Avenue in Lincoln Park. Her designs were luxurious, and soon they became a hot commodity. She began designing haute couture for upscale Chicago shops, and her designs soon appeared in stores throughout the country. Then she moved into costume design for trade shows, working for such clients as McDonald’s, 7UP, International Harvester, and Jovan Perfume.

But as soon as she had a chance to sell her studio, Nicole decided to start over again with something entirely new. With her friend and business partner, Gracie Colucci, she moved to Wisconsin, where they leased the Plymouth Inn in Plymouth. “We went up and looked at it and said, ‘Of course. Of course we’re going to have this! Why not?’” she reminisces. “There were twenty rooms in this hotel. We had to hire staff, and I was the chef. I loved it.” Although Nicole struggled with the patrons’ lack of sophistication, she took it as another opportunity to be creative. “You have to give people something that they understand, something that they are familiar with; otherwise you lose them altogether,” she says. “So if I gave them spaghetti and meat balls, it was going to be a step up from that. Because there they only knew bologna hanging off of a plate and fish fry—all you can eat! I gave them a step up with desserts, and gorgeous things, and salads. They weren’t vegetable people, but I still would give them beautiful things like a stuffed zucchini or an eggplant dip for munching on.”

It was there, at the Plymouth Inn, that Nicole began her love affair with bread. Because there was no bakery in the vicinity, her passion was born of necessity. She had a little mill in which to grind grains, just as she does now with a much bigger mill. In nearby Fond Du Lac she studied with Madame Lianne Kuony, whom Nicole considers one of the greatest women chefs of all time. Nevertheless, the inn’s location proved too isolated to make a go of it, and Nicole returned to Chicago in 1984, “with empty pockets again.”

There, she and Gracie found a Russian bakery for sale in Rogers Park. They bought it, along with its recipes, and began to bake whole grain breads. “From there we had one little store, with one little oven that held only seven pans. It’s called an old-fashioned cookie oven. The wheel went around and you put the trays in,” she recalls. During this period Nicole began reaching out to the best local purveyors to try to sell her products. The first one to bite was Neiman Marcus, which had recently opened in Chicago. “Grace went with an old antique basket. They said they weren’t interested in anything like what we were doing. But once they caught the aroma of the gorgeous breads, they asked if they could come for a tasting. They brought the manager of the store and all the department heads. Neiman Marcus was our first main client,” she says. “That opened the doors.”

**Her Divine Bread**

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Divine Crackers

“Baking is very hard to get away from,” Nicole sighs. “Grace asks me, ‘Would you stop already with the bread?’ But there’s just something that gets you. Just like Spain got me.”

When Nicole began selling bread in Chicago, she was already sixty years old. The crackers were a request from the Ritz-Carlton, which had been serving her bread. Gradually she built up her cracker business from there. She created the lemon and lavender wafers for the Ritz, as well as
biscotti. The names of her crackers are just what one might expect from her: delightful. “I came up with the names just for fun,” she laughs. “I enjoy playing with people! It has taken the public so long to get that I’m playing. They want to know what these names mean. I say: read around the little edge there and you’ll see what’s in it. I have to have a touch of humor somewhere; it can’t all be that heavy.

“We have one cracker that’s not on the market yet that Grace named ‘Love in the afternoon.’ It has Italian raisins and fennel. Fabulous!” Nicole whispers, as though the word is too decadent to say out loud. “I like all of my flavors a lot,” she adds matter-of-factly. “There isn’t another cracker on the market as good as ours, with the flavor and the personality. The finish of my cracker is there; it’s multilayered. You say ‘Ooh. OOOH!’ when you taste them. The cracker doesn’t turn into water or dry paper on your tongue. It remains food with flavor.”

The chocolate crackers are called “Without your kisses it’s a chili chocolate day.” That lets you know they’re chocolate, but there’s a pop at the end with chili. “My lavender cracker is unbelievable,” Nicole says. Though she claims not to know what prompted her to add lavender, perhaps subconsciously it evokes a deep connection to her father. “I turned these flavors around in my mouth to see how they would go, how they would blend, what would they be good with, who would use them. There are so many things to think about when you’re creating food for the public. You can’t reach everybody, so you focus. You say, Okay, what is my niche, who am I appealing to? I am not competing with Ritz or Carr’s crackers. I am special and want you to know it.”

Others have recognized how special Nicole is, and how special her crackers are. Between 2005 and 2006 she received three gold medals in London at the Great Taste Awards, the Oscars of the food business. She believes her crackers taste so good because they are developed from the heart, not just through science. “I just rely on my instincts and sensuality,” Nicole shrugs. “All of the big flavor companies are trying to figure out what the newest thing out there will be. I have yet to condescend to that. Let’s face it, most people are doing it with food scientists. Excuse me, but how about people who know something on their palate? Food scientist? No way. My flavors capture my whole life.”