

# Pop-tarts and hand pies

**New Near & Dear bakery a hit with its creative vegan treats**



**Sydney Carroll's neighbors must love sharing a building with her.** The 22-year-old runs her Near & Dear bakery from an apartment on the first floor of a 146-year-old converted schoolhouse near downtown

Chico, and on the Tuesday morning this reporter arrived for an interview, the smell of something savory was wafting all the way to the sidewalk out front.

story and photo by  
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**Near & Dear**  
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Through the large kitchen window, Carroll could be seen smiling as she filled a jar with freshly toasted coconut shavings for the Pop-Tart-like pastries she'd later make. It was quite the scene, one that provided a vivid impression of the workings of a cottage business in Chico.

The young entrepreneur's greatest sales tool, however, might be her social media presence, specifically the photos she posts to Facebook and Instagram. In addition to the standard close-ups of the products of the day, she also regularly posts artfully staged scenes, such as heart-shaped hand pies stuffed with creamy potatoes and caramelized onions fanned out atop a copy of Neil Young's *Harvest* album; or a gold/orange/brown tableau with a woman in a vintage sweater, a fruit still life on the wall and her butternut-squash "pop-tarts" in what looks like a frame from a Wes Anderson film.

It's an effective approach in a smartphone world, and one that matches well with the hip local spots where Near & Dear products are sold—including downtown hangout the Naked Lounge; the Winchester Goose craft-beer bar; Tender Loving Coffee cafe; and Carroll's biggest account, Blackbird bookstore/coffee house/artist-and-activist hangout in south Chico.

Near & Dear has been in operation for nearly a year and a half, having debuted at the same time as Blackbird, whose owners she auditioned for as they were working on getting the space ready to open.

"She dropped off a picnic basket of treats with us one afternoon when we were still doing construction. This was before we had even talked about what kind of

pastries we were going to sell or even had an open date," said Blackbird co-founder Molly Roberts. "I feel like we've grown up with her. She is an integral part of Blackbird."

Sydney Carroll works in her home kitchen.

"They were my gateway," said Carroll, who moved to Chico from the Bay Area a few years ago, initially for college (she says she's taking a break from school for now). After getting a job on the GRUB farm, she started developing an outlook on food that would inform her business: "Eating [as] locally and naturally as possible." The name of her bakery is both a nod to the "near and dear" feelings she holds for her formative GRUB experience, as well as the commitment to sourcing as many near/local ingredients as she can.

The ethics behind her food definitely resonate with her customer base, but it's Carroll's creativity (trying inventive recipes—plum donuts, mini rose cake loafs, Meyer lemon cinnamon rolls) and her skills as a baker—which she picked up from the kitchens of her mother and grandmother—that make her products disappear from counters before she can replenish them.

Making baked goods vegan is pretty straightforward—take out the eggs and replace the butter with some other fat. But making them taste good requires finesse and not skimping on the good stuff. In the "pop-tarts" and hand pies, for example, Carroll's crusts are made with a generous amount of coconut oil, making for an arguably more luxurious crispiness—and decadent experience—than your average butter-made version.

Carroll recently greatly improved her efficiency by replacing her old malfunctioning home oven/stove with a second-hand commercial one, and she says things are going well enough that she's hoping to be able to hire an employee soon. Her ultimate goal is to one day turn Near & Dear into a brick-and-mortar.

"My dream goal is to have my own cafe that is open late-night style," she said, "hopefully something in a house that's cozy and sweet."

And with how enthusiastic local response has been, Carroll said she'd prefer to keep it in this area. "I know I wouldn't be where I am now if Chico wasn't so awesome."



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