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AUGUST 2003³

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Prueitt fluffs the meringue on Tartine's lemon cream-filled cakes.

[best pastry chef]

ELISABETH PRUEITT
TARTINE BAKERY

When **Elisabeth Prueitt** talks about baking, she taps her fingertips together, the skin drawing tight around her eyes. "I tend to be a bit obsessive," she says. Signs of Prueitt's fondness for detail are everywhere at Tartine, the Mission District bakery she and her husband, bread baker Chad Robertson, opened last summer. There's the roster of producers who provide the fruit and the lush cottage roses that garnish the tarts next to the cash register. And the brief but exacting wine list she assembled to pair with the bakery's sandwich menu. But the best evidence of Prueitt's nature is found in the lemon cream-filled cakes swirled with browned meringue, the Mexican wedding cookies (Prueitt's personal favorite), and the butter-laden croissants that fill the display case. The aesthetic is simple, almost rustic, but the flavor attests to a perfectionist's attention to detail.

Prueitt spent part of her childhood in rural New York State, where her parents raised ducks and goats and grew much of their own food. As she sees it, growing up in a family that valued art and craftsmanship and encouraged a do-it-yourself ethic paved a natural course to the kitchen. "It's no accident that I became a pastry chef. There's so much beauty in baking," says Prueitt, who graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. "I love the elegance and simplicity of it." But as it turns out, running a bakery requires a whole lot more than making cakes. "Tartine is an outlet for all the things I like to do. I get to have my hands in everything." • **JAN NEWBERRY** TARTINE BAKERY,

600 GUERRERO ST., S.F., (415) 487-2600.