

The Cargill Master Series

Who are the people behind Cargill's innovative ingredients, beverages and food? Here's an inside look at the experts who work every day researching ingredients and developing recipes, beverages and foods that feed the world.



Q&A with Tim Christensen, CMB

Senior Research Scientist, Applications Group at Cargill



Tim Christensen, one of only two Certified Master Bakers at Cargill grew up in a family of bakers. Christensen was one of seven kids working in the various bakeries his father opened and closed, moving between Minnesota and Oregon. Christensen eventually settled back in Minnesota to train at Dunwoody Industrial Institute, met his wife, and remained in the Minneapolis area. The couple now have two adult children. Christensen worked at Murray's Restaurant post-graduation, creating quality desserts, breads and rolls from scratch for nearly ten years. He then went on to grocery store baking and conference center baking, before landing at Cargill in 2002. We recently caught up with him to learn more.

How old were you when you first started baking?

I was 10 when I started working weekends in my dad's bakery. My dad learned baking from his dad, who went through an apprenticeship in Denmark. My dad would let me bring home pieces of the scrap dough to make into a dozen or two donuts. I'd go around the neighborhood and sell them.

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Do you have a favorite baked item?

Danish, fresh from the oven, is probably my favorite sweet. The one I like is what they call the Stoplight, with two different kinds of jam on each end. I usually eat it before it gets iced, right out of the oven, when it's soft, tender and moist.

What are some of the more adventurous experiences you've had as a baker?

When I was 19-years-old, I went up to Alaska to work as a baker on a docked cannery ship. I would make desserts for lunch, bread for dinner and snacks for their breaks. The first time I made bread for people, they tested the quality by whether it could be folded without breaking. My bread passed the test.

Was there a moment when you realized the extent of your baking skill, and how far you could take it?

When I was 24, I left my dad's bakery to work in another bakery, owned by a farmer who'd bought the bakery so his divorced daughter could have a job. Every once-in-a-while something they baked wouldn't turn out and they would look to me to find out why.

You trained at Dunwoody Industrial Institute. Can you tell us why that was especially meaningful?

Yes, my dad had tried to get into Dunwoody, but it was full, so he went through a baking program in Duluth, which wasn't as good. He was proud of me when I was accepted to Dunwoody.

Any funny stories from your training there?

Christmastime at Dunwoody, everybody had to make a batch of fruitcake — the heavy dense stuff most people use for a doorstep. The batches were huge. The bowls stood 3 feet high. The mixing bowl probably weighed 40 pounds, the paddle that mixed it a good 10 to 15 pounds. I was trying to get some stuff mixed before our morning class, and some guys came up and started talking to me as I was weighing out the pound cake. I got near the end and didn't have enough batter. I looked around and the flour for the pound cake was still sitting on the counter. The fruits and nuts were already in, so I had to take all the pound cake out of the pans, put it back in the bowl, and remix it with the flour by hand so it would turn out. It's funny now, but it wasn't funny then.



Tim with his team.

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You met your wife during this time. Were you able to woo her with baked goods?

She was also a baking student at Dunwoody, and was working as a cake decorator at the time. I did bake and decorate our wedding cake. It was an all-butter marble cake, and for the filling, you make up a custard, whip in butter, and put in a raspberry custard-based cream. My daughter who is 27 is getting married this summer, and I'll bake the same wedding cake for her.

What's one of the most challenging aspects of your job at Cargill?

Long-term projects can be tough because you do the same thing over and over. You go through a lot of trial and error to see small incremental changes. You find one functionality, then a little more, and a little more. Making the first 10 batches is kind of fun. Doing 300 batches over three months is not as fun at the 300th batch. The best day is when I have three of four projects that I'm working on and they are all different.

What's the most fulfilling aspect of your job?

I like helping someone figure out a solution for a recipe problem, or talking things through with the other people around me. We have weekly meetings where we talk about interesting things we've seen, the interesting ingredients. It's fun to collaborate with the team and solve problems using and building upon the innovative ideas others have come up with.

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