

This Phoenix baker's recipes made her Insta-famous. But the pandemic gave her new purpose

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Have you scrolled past more pictures of homecooked meals and desserts than usual on social media lately?

Tessa Arias, a published cookbook author whose full-time job is sharing baking recipes and tips on her blog and Instagram, might have influenced some of those creations.

Arias has shared her baking expertise online for more than 10 years and garnered hundreds of thousands of followers in the process. But since the world has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic she has noticed more people than ever are coming to her for advice and inspiration.

"People may be falling back in love with a hobby or looking at (baking) as a new skill or a source of comfort and relief," she told The Arizona Republic.

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The 29-year-old posts as [@handletheheat](https://www.instagram.com/handletheheat) (<https://www.instagram.com/handletheheat>), where she has more than 314,000 followers. Since many Americans began staying at home to slow the spread of the coronavirus, her account has gained followers more rapidly than usual; 27,000 users have followed her since March 7, according to CrowdTangle data.

Teaching others "the simple science of sweets (<https://www.handletheheat.com/science-of-baking/>)" on her blog and Instagram while sheltering at home in Phoenix has helped Arias find purpose these days. Baking is "precise and scientific," she said, and it offers a sense of "control, stability and normalcy."

"My intention is always to give value and help people in this time," she said. "I personally feel that what I do is a little superficial, and this underscored the meaning that (posting about baking) can have."



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Phoenix, Arizona

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Why her job can take 'an emotional toll'

Arias' inbox has been filled with followers' questions and requests these past several weeks.

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which can be difficult to find on grocery store shelves as people buy in bulk to stock

The scarcity of common ingredients has also impacted the workflow of Arias' team, which operated remotely and virtually prior to the health crisis. While she handles the editorial and social media work, [food photographer Ashley McLaughlin](https://www.instagram.com/edible_perspective/?hl=en) (https://www.instagram.com/edible_perspective/?hl=en) recreates the recipes to take photos for the Handle the Heat blog.

Arias has been more careful about the recipes she recommends as a result of the pandemic.

"If I can't even get an ingredient, there's no way my photographer in Colorado or my followers can buy it," Arias said.

Her blog posts are typically planned four weeks in advance. But with the uncertainty of what her followers can and can't get their hands on, she has had to be flexible.

That means planning less, pivoting to in-demand recipes such as sourdough and sharing baking techniques, which don't depend on what's in stock.

Traffic to her blog has increased, and more people than ever are viewing her Instagram posts.

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"Looking back at the last two years, this past week was her most-viewed to-date on both Instagram and YouTube," a spokesman for Tubular Labs, a video measurement and analytics platform, wrote in an email on April 7.

Despite the increased visibility, Arias has experienced some negative impacts on her income.

Fewer companies are advertising, and as a result her ad revenue has suffered. Some of her income depends on brand partnerships, through which she is paid to promote a product or service on her platform. Those have, for the most part, remained stable.

"I'm lucky to have brand sponsors that are adapting and fluid and want to continue to work together," she said. "I still have an income, but there's still an emotional toll."

These companies, which include Tillamook, are "seeing higher than normal sales" due to more people cooking at home, she said.



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How she became a professional baker

In 2009, Arias was a freshman in college who was "obsessed" with the Food Network and looking for a creative outlet. Handle the Heat was eventually born after she turned to the internet and found a community of foodies like herself.

"This was pre-food selfies," she said. "No one my age was interested in food, recipes and taking photos."

When some of her posts on now-defunct social networking site and Instagram predecessor StumbleUpon started getting tens of thousands of hits per month, she realized there was a niche for her interests.

"It was like a weird little secret hobby that I had, and it continued to build," Arias said.

Finding popularity among the online food community gave Arias the confidence to pursue formal culinary education while still working on obtaining her bachelor's degree. In 2013, she obtained her culinary degree from Mesa Community College and realized that rather than becoming a chef, she wanted to share her knowledge and teach people how to make food.

"That solidified that this could be a viable career and it wasn't just a hobby," Arias said.

After finishing school, she gave herself the summer after graduation to find out whether she could make enough money from working on the blog full-time to cover her living expenses.

"I haven't looked back since," Arias said. "It has really turned from a hobby mindset to business mindset."

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