

Pastry chef-turned-sculptor feeds miniature appetite with Mouse Market

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Mo Tipton, 32, works from her apartment on merchandise for The Mouse Market. Tipton started the business in 2007. The Mouse Market sells miniature dollhouse food and jewelry. † [Lauren Gatcombe](#)
BY [Jennifer Liu](#)

COLUMBIA — A few weeks ago, Mo Tipton had a full table ready for a Thanksgiving feast — roast turkey with fresh sage and apples, sweet potato casserole with marshmallows and a tropical fruit salad.

But instead of friends and family at her feast, Tipton set the table for guests on a much smaller scale.

Her tiny Thanksgiving dishes were made in 1/12 scale out of polymer clay, just the right size for a dollhouse.

Tipton, 32, is a miniature foods artist. She works in her home studio and runs the [Mouse Market, an online store](#) that specializes in miniature food.

The holiday season means she will be busy filling similar orders for Christmas cookies, cakes and family dining room tables.

Making a name in the miniature market

When Tipton began her business four years ago, she didn't know she would eventually be catering tiny food to dollhouses around the country.

She made her first creations in elementary school. They were handmade animal figurines made of modeling clay and zippers down the middle. She would sell them to her fellow classmates and called them "Zippirs."

The Mouse Market began as a hobby she discovered after moving to Columbia.

"If it was anything about tiny worlds, I was just so into it," she said. "I don't know what it is about it, but I was always just fascinated."

She started with food jewelry, or clay food pieces made to wear as accessories, and showed her work at artisan shows such as the Beaux Arts Bizarre in Columbia.

After a fellow vendor suggested she expand into dollhouse food, Tipton jumped into a research project to

learn the techniques.

She first [relied on Etsy, an online site for artists and craftspeople to sell their works](#), to market her pieces. The demand for her products was enough to launch a full-time business in 2008.

"I started making fairly good sales. ... It sparked the idea that I could make this a living if I really tried," she said.

Four years later, Tipton is still expanding and reaching out to other miniatures enthusiasts with her ideas.

"When I see my dollhouse start to fill up or filling a custom order of an entire table of food, there's something satisfying about that at the end of the day," she said.

Starting from scratch

Her interest in the miniature world was sparked during childhood with a Christmas gift from her parents.

When she was in grade school, her father built her a dollhouse based on her [favorite storybook squirrel, Miss Suzy](#). Her mother also contributed by supplying the house with tiny furniture.

"It was the coolest thing that I had ever gotten, so that started my miniatures obsession," she said.

Later, Tipton picked up on her passion for food. She attended the [Cooking and Hospitality Institute in Chicago](#) in her early 20s and received her pastry chef certificate in 2001. She also worked at [foodlife, a restaurant in downtown Chicago](#).

When she relocated to Columbia to marry, she left the culinary arts in the kitchen behind and moved her love of food into the studio.

Becky Best is one of her customers and has been since the beginning of Mouse Market.

"I was working on a dollhouse and looking online for miniature things and found her," Best said. "I loved that the food looked real. You look at it and think, 'well, that could be a real piece of cake.'"

While Tipton had the artistry and passion to create her products, she was still new to the logistics of running a business.

"I was learning everything from scratch," she said. "I had no idea how to attract customers and build a customer base, so that was probably the hardest thing."

She turned to books and advice from other online business owners to get the Mouse Market off the ground. She combined what she learned about maintaining an online presence through customer mailing lists and social media outlets with her experience in customer service.

Shortly after launching her business, Tipton met Lisa Hsia, another artist who used Etsy.

"We shared a lot of conversations about growing a small online business, the peculiarities of working from home and being our own boss and the difficulty of running a one-woman show," Hsia said.

Along with support from Hsia and Tipton's family, the Mouse Market has gone from Etsy to a business of its own.

"I don't think any of them, myself included, thought that this would turn into something that would be a real job," Tipton said.

"I know that they're all just really happy that this has worked out and that something that started as a hobby is actually paying the bills now, and not just something that I spend way too much money on."

Miniature inspirations

Tipton credits online sites such as Pinterest and Martha Stewart Living as inspirations for her clay dishes.

She also hopes to start her own online magazine for her customers. At the moment, she offers tutorial e-books and blogs to allow others to get a behind-the-scenes look at her creative process.

"It's just such a fun hobby that I want to put it out for other people to learn about, too," she said.

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