

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white chef's hat and a white long-sleeved chef's jacket, is smiling broadly. She is holding a white plate with a light blue napkin, which has several golden-brown muffins on it. The background shows an outdoor setting with a white lattice fence and a window with multiple panes.

# Catering to diabetes

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## Pat LeGrand puts a lot of love into her cooking—and her Cleveland business that caters to people with diabetes. Her family and their favorite dishes are the inspiration. “We can eat our traditional foods as long as they’re adjusted a little,” she says.

**W**hen her mother was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes five years ago, Pat LeGrand had no idea her life would take a dramatically different direction as a result. Pat was a high-power corporate auditor in Cleveland who just wanted to help her 80-year-old mother, Iris, eat better to control her diabetes. Now she owns the first restaurant in the United States that caters mainly to people with diabetes.

“When Mother was diagnosed, I didn’t know how much diabetes could be affected by diet and lifestyle,” says Pat, now 50. “Food is normal and natural. It’s a source of solace. If you’ve had a bad day, a hot bowl of chili and a corn muffin give you that little gratification. You feel good about it. But when you find out you have diabetes, you’re told all the things you’ve come to love and enjoy are not good for you. That makes people mad.”

Iris found it hard to cook differently and start exercising. She vacillated between not eating and having low blood glucose, then eating too much and going high. And it upset Pat to see her mother, a great cook, eating food she didn’t like.

Pat knew she had to help, but her work schedule limited her. “I was a hard-core corporate woman,” she says. “I was hoping Mom would figure it out, but she wasn’t getting the hang of it. Someone needed to jump in before she got really sick. She was suffering. I didn’t know what to do, but I was determined to figure it out.”

Pat tackled her mother’s diabetes just as she would solve a problem at work. She started by conducting research. She talked to people, attended meetings, and sought information from the American Diabetes Association (ADA) and the American Heart Association (AHA).

Her initial idea was to purchase mail-order diabetic foods for her mother. “I thought all I needed to do was order special food and add water,” she says. “Instead, when I looked for diabetic food, I saw recipes—the same food everyone else eats! Then I read that diabetic cooking is just food that’s prepared healthfully. It’s whole grain carbs, low fat, and low salt.”

Pat and her youngest daughter, Eden, who was diagnosed with pre-diabetes, made a beeline for the bookstore. “I looked for the recipes my mother was accustomed to eating—oven-fried chicken, mashed potatoes, apple crisp, and peach cobbler. The crisp topping was a way to replace the crust in apple pie,” Pat says. “Those recipes became my inner circle. As I prepared them, I’d change them for my mother, adding more flavors—the way she’d taught me to cook.”

Pat realized she was on the right track. “When I first started, I wasn’t going to eat anything,” she says. “But when I was cooking for Mom, I had no time to cook for myself. I discovered it tasted

Pat LeGrand (shown opposite and near right with her daughter Eden) created a restaurant that caters to people with diabetes.



“I want people to feel that they can make what we serve **at home**. They’re so grateful to get something that **looks like real food**.”

—Pat LeGrand, restaurateur



Oven-Fried Chicken Breasts  
and Macaroni and Cheese  
*recipes, page 98*

Vegetarian Chili and  
Buttermilk Corn Muffins  
*recipes, pages 98 and 101*



Pat with her parents and daughters outside A Touch of Sugar. Back row from left: Eden, Pat, and Rijalon. Front row from left: Bill and Iris.

OK—maybe missing a little salt, but still surprisingly good.”

Pat’s success led her to corn bread, meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and cheesecake. “My mother really looked forward to me bringing her meals,” she says. “I began to realize there was nothing I couldn’t cook for someone with diabetes. We can eat our traditional foods as long as they’re adjusted a little.”

### **A Touch of Sugar**

Pat had been cooking for her mother for about a year when opportunity knocked. “I got downsized from my job and didn’t want to worry about getting laid off again,” she says.

Pat turned to SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) in Cleveland, who told her if she wanted to start her own business, it had to be unique, fill a market niche, and offer something people needed. “My own criterion was that it had to be good for people,” Pat says. “But I still didn’t know what ‘it’ was.”

Pat’s epiphany came on a day she was cooking for her mother. The kitchen was a mess and Pat was angry and tired. “I wished someone would open a restaurant so I wouldn’t

have to keep cooking the way I was,” she says. “But there was no such place—nowhere Mom could go without worrying whether she’d find something on the menu she could eat.”

Pat realized her wish was the “it” idea she’d been looking for. “I transitioned from wanting somebody else to open a diabetic restaurant to saying I needed to do it,” she says. Her business proposition met SCORE’s criteria—it was unique, it had a defined market, and there was demand—plus, fulfilling Pat’s own desire—it would be good for people like her mother.

Her idea led to a business plan, more research, finding a location, choosing a name, and marketing the restaurant through word

**(visit A Touch of Sugar)**

Next time you’re in Cleveland, stop by A Touch of Sugar for deliciously healthful favorites. For more information about catering services, meal pickup, and classes, go to [atouchofsugar.com](http://atouchofsugar.com) or call 216/432-9198. Pat LeGrand’s *A Touch of Sugar Cookbook* is now available.

Pat uses low-fat dairy products, including cheese, to reduce the fat in many of her recipes.

of mouth and print. The whole process took about two years. When it came time to name the restaurant, she recalled the expression she'd always heard family members use. "They all called diabetes 'a touch of sugar,' a very Southern term. The Hispanic community even uses a similar phrase in Spanish," she says.

The ADA told Pat that A Touch of Sugar would be the first diabetic restaurant in the country and asked her how it felt to be making history. "Once I found out I was the first, I got scared," Pat says. "But the medical organizations kept telling me they would recommend it to other medical organizations and refer their patients."

### **Serving Many Needs**

Opening day was beyond Pat's wildest dreams. "We had standing room only—lines of people. We stayed that way for weeks," she says. "People were coming to eat and taking food out, but we're really designed for takeout."

Pat and her staff started taking orders and filling them. "Some people order seven meals at a time and may drive an hour to get it," she says. "They count on us for portion control. I'll freeze it ahead for them if they tell me which meals to freeze."



Cooking classes weren't in Pat's original plan but have become popular. "Hospitals send patients here to learn how to cook things like my macaroni and cheese," she says. She loves cooking classes that involve kids and their parents. "I teach the kids to make a pasta salad, and the parents make the dessert," Pat says. "The kids love it—making something healthy that they like." She has taught cooking classes to over 500 children through city programs and at a nearby diabetes camp.

One reason Pat loves to teach kids how to cook and eat healthfully is because of her

Vegetable Lasagna  
*recipe, page 100*



Stuffed Peppers  
*recipe, page 99*





Chicken, Brown Rice, and  
Vegetable Skillet  
*recipe, page 99*

own daughter's health. Eden was diagnosed with pre-diabetes but has brought her blood glucose levels into the normal range through eating her mom's cooking.

Eden, now 16, is one of her mom's hardest workers, as well as one of her biggest supporters. Pat's older daughter, Rijalon (Ree-JAH-lon), 32, is a computer professional at a law firm and pitches in when she can.


### **Positive Feedback**

Pat says one of the most rewarding parts of opening the restaurant has been the daily face-to-face contact with her customers. "I try not to pry, but people come in for a reason. The food is the prescription. If the prescription is

out of whack, diabetes is out of control. When they come here, they feel good. I wouldn't trade that for the world," she says.

"I try to simulate what they've given up. When we first opened, people would come in and say they hadn't had a piece of fried chicken in years. My Oven-Fried Chicken Breasts are like the real deal. I want people to feel they can take what we serve and make it at home. They're so grateful to get something that looks like real food. If it's exotic or hard to find, you won't find it at A Touch of Sugar."

About 60 percent of Pat's customers order dessert from her menu. Some of them say they've lived without desserts for years because they thought they couldn't have sugar

A chef in a white uniform is holding a white rectangular tray filled with several golden-brown oatmeal cookies. Each cookie is studded with dark chocolate chips and sliced almonds. The background is softly blurred, showing a restaurant setting with a glass of water and a vase of red flowers.

“One gentleman walked up to me  
after finishing his dessert  
to say **thank you.**  
He had tears in his eyes.”

—Pat LeGrand, restaurateur

Butter Rum  
Oatmeal Cookies  
*recipe, page 99*



Sweet Potato Pie  
recipe, page 100

and they didn't like artificial sweeteners. "We use real sugar in our recipes so there's no aftertaste, but we reduce the level of sugar to meet the American Diabetes Association nutrition guidelines," she says. "In the beginning, a few of our customers would pay for their dessert at the cash register, then stand right there and eat it without even going to a table. One gentleman walked up to me after finishing his dessert to say thank you. He had tears in his eyes."

### Dreaming On

Even though Pat's restaurant has only been open for three years, she's already looking ahead. While it sounds strange, she'd love some competition. "I want to see a whole lot of diabetic restaurants open up, in every major city in the country, whether they're mine or not. I need competition. I can't feed all of these people. They're writing to me from Alaska!" she says. "It shouldn't be this hard in America for people with diabetes to find healthful food. No one has a right to corner good health. If you can make people's lives better, it's your moral responsibility to pass it along."

Pat has set other goals for herself: learning to ship food nationally, teaching more catering and cooking classes, and delivering more meals locally. She's busy writing a cookbook so people can make her recipes at home.

## (top 10 menu picks)

Pat LeGrand is constantly trying new foods, but here are a few secrets to her top-selling items.

1. **Oven-Fried Chicken Breasts:** Pat dips the pieces into low-fat buttermilk, then bakes them instead of frying.
2. **Macaroni and Cheese:** Dreamfields pasta is Pat's secret—it has more fiber than regular pasta.
3. **Meat Loaf:** Pat chooses a lean ground meat for her meat loaf and uses whole wheat bread crumbs.
4. **Turkey Burgers:** Use lean ground turkey breast.
5. **Sweet Potato Fries:** Sweet potato has more vitamins than regular potatoes. They're baked rather than fried.
6. **Vegetable Lasagna:** No-salt-added tomato products, low-fat cheeses, and vegetables make this healthful.
7. **Stuffed Peppers:** Pat stuffs the peppers with lean ground turkey and high-fiber brown rice.
8. **Chicken, Brown Rice, and Vegetable Skillet:** This is a gluten-free item for people who have celiac disease.
9. **Turkey and Dressing:** Originally on the menu only for Thanksgiving and Christmas, roast turkey and the trimmings are popular with Pat's guests year-round.
10. **Sweet Potato Pie:** This is the number-one selling dessert. Low-fat dairy products keep it light.

Pat's dreams pull her along, but not too far from reality. She often finds herself standing in the restaurant kitchen, covered in gravy and flour. Those moments make her marvel at her new path in life. "No way I would have done this by choice," Pat says. "But in order to make something work, sometimes you have to look beyond your comfort zone. Cooking is one place where change is necessary. When we change that, we'll change the way people eat."

Pat's father, Bill, 85, was also diagnosed with diabetes three years ago, so now he benefits from her cooking, too. And how is Pat's mother these days? "She's as feisty as ever. She still wears her high-heel shoes and still drives. Her numbers are good, but when her sugar goes too high, she knows what to do. When she wants to splurge, she'll call and order different dishes from the menu," Pat says. "I'm still cooking for Mother. Every time I stir a pot, I wonder if she'd like what I'm creating. If the answer is yes, then I know I may have to add it to the menu. It's been an amazing journey!"

*Continued on page 98*