Chef-philosopher Georges August Escoffier (1846-1935) instituted a rigid hierarchy that has helped define and organize the sometimes unruly and wild ranks of kitchen armies into a disciplined, orderly team of collaborators, each of whom knew what their task for the moment was—and if they played along—even their probable future trajectory. The chef de cuisine (kitchen chief) is the de facto general and runs down through about 27 positions, with the garçon de cuisine (kitchen boy) being the most junior (though no less important) member of the culinary fighting forces.

Plus, you’re either a baker or a chef. There’s no hop-scotching from proofing croissant dough over to the station searing lardons for boeuf de bourguignon. Furthermore, you either have A BIG PERSONALITY, or you’re someone who prefers to fade into the background. Think Guy Fieri versus Tamar Adler.

There’s little room for deviation. Unless, of course, you’re a gangster. Then the rules don’t apply. There’s one such whisk-and-knife-toting rebel right here in the Capital District: Michele Hunter. She is currently the executive chef at Saratoga Spring’s Hamlet & Ghost, but she has jumped from savory to sweet, and back again, from haute cuisine to big batch baking. Edible sat down with the 29-year-old—despite her young age, she has almost two decades of experience—over coffers of nitro coffee to discuss the merits and drawbacks of walking the line behind the line.

“I started out as a kid filling ketchup bottles for my dad and uncle, who owned fast-casual American Italian restaurants,” Hunter recalls. “By the time I was 14, I was usually scheduled as the cashier or dishwasher, but I always ended up in the kitchen during my shift. It quickly turned into a sink-or-swim situation with me getting put on the hardest station on a busy night just to see if I could handle it. I haven’t left the kitchen since.”

Still, she caught a glimpse of the kitchen’s darker side. “I saw what it did to my dad,” she says. “It’s a really tough business, very stressful, no time off, tiny profit margins. I grew up in Scotia, but my dad sold the business and we moved to Hawaii where my grandparents lived, and he never opened a restaurant.”

She and her family lived in Maui from 2000 to 2004, then she returned to Scotia to attend high school.

But by high school, Hunter knew—despite the downside—she was all in. “I enrolled in vocational classes in high school,” she recalls. “My mother tried to talk me out of it because she knew the impact the career choice would have on my personal life, and she was afraid I’d regret it.”

Hunter, and other fellow students who signed up for culinary, cosmetology or mechanical vocational programs, would get bussed from the Scotia-Glenville High School to Albany, where they’d get hands-
on training in the field of their choice.

“I really excelled at pastry in high school,” she says. “I couldn’t get enough of it. I’d come home from cooking and baking for hours in school, and then experiment more.”

But when she attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, she enrolled in the culinary program, deciding that a degree in the culinary arts would provide her with more flexibility down the line.

After graduating from the CIA in 2009, Hunter landed a gig at the renowned Chez Nous in Lee, Massachusetts. The beloved French staple was founded by renowned French chef Franck Tessier (he previously worked at the two-Michelin-starred Le Gavroche in London) and his wife, Rachel Portnoy (who abandoned academia for pastry, and met Tessier at Saranac Lake’s the Point).

“That job really got the wheels turning in my head,” Hunter remembers. “He was a classic French chef, and I learned so much from him. And she was extremely intelligent and talented and was willing to let me come in early and pick her brain.”

She says that, as in high school, she brought her work home with her, and was soon as confident and adept with pastry as she was with savory cooking.

Are they really that different?

“There is more chemistry involved in baking actually,” Hunter notes. “There’s a lot less flexibility.”

But what the rigid rules of baking can’t deliver to chefs in terms of creativity, it more than compensates for in terms of the pure pleasure reflected back on them from the people they feed.

“Sugar makes everyone feel good,” Hunter says.

For better or for worse, Hunter’s all-consuming passion for all forms of cookery, morning, noon and night has defined her professional life and made her one of the most successful young toques in New York. (And for the record: Even her parents have come around, acknowledging that, for Hunter, life behind the burners hasn’t singed her. Hunter’s husband Collin, whom she married in 2015, has only known her with a whisk in one hand and a knife in the other, and is, Hunter says, “100% supportive” of her culinaholic endeavors).

After three years at Chez Nous, she was recruited to the pastry kitchen of the regional restaurant lodestar Yono’s and dp, An American Brasserie, run by the Purnomo family. In addition to making every dessert, bread and legendarily delectable butter-tinged pretzel roll at each restaurant by hand, Hunter was responsible for all of the cookies, platters and breads at the Hampton Inn & Suites, which is connected to the restaurant.

She worked there for about a year, until the opportunity to spearhead the new Honest Weight Co-op prep kitchen came around.

“It was a huge project, because they had just moved into their new, much bigger space,” Hunter says. “They wanted to really offer a new level of prepared dishes, both sweet and savory. I knew I’d have to wrap my mind around vegan and gluten-free baking, which can be extremely challenging, and I’d have a big team of 60 or so people to manage.”

Add to that the rigorously limited purchasing rules (all of their purveyors must meet or exceed Honest Weight’s strict environmental, ethical and production standards) for base product, the unpredictable nature of her daily staff (in addition to trained, hourly workers, members of the co-op “pay” for membership by volunteering in various departments) and the cognitive dissonance required to crank out diet-conscious desserts and meals that taste anything but, and you have a standard person’s shrieking-into-a-pillow nightmare, and Hunter’s dream job.

It was such a challenge, it held her rapt for three years. While she was there, instead of taking her work home with her, Hunter actually opened up a side gig, called Sifted Bakeshop. She created baked goods and sold them wholesale to Tierra, Stacks, Cider Belly and other locals.
"I was ready to really go all-in on Sifted," Hunter says. "But then I was approached by Gray Kunz."

Though she would never say so, word of Hunter’s culinary and pastry prowess has evidently spread through the Capital District’s culinary ranks. Kunz heard about her from Steve Kernzer, the chef de cuisine at Yono’s (Now he’s the chef over at the Cuckoo’s Nest in Albany). The Singapore-born, Swiss-raised celebrity chef who rose to fame at the helm of Lespinasse at Manhattan’s St. Regis Hotel, then went on to erect a culinary empire in New York and Hong Kong, was coming to Saratoga Springs to open Salt & Char at the Adelphi Hotel.

Kunz needed someone he could trust to run pastry for Salt & Char, and eventually, Blue Hen, Morrisey’s and the Adelphi hotel’s guest mini bars with minimal oversight. It was… an undertaking.

Kunz himself didn’t stick around for long after the initial opening (the equally famous David Burke is now helming the kitchen), but Hunter did.

“The production schedule was intense at first,” she says, noting that even the specialty items for the hotel’s individual rooms were time-consuming. Think handmade pastries in the mini bar, smoked and candied nuts, maple caramel popcorn, truffles. “For the first year, I worked 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. six days a week, but before too long I was able to leave by 8 p.m.”

Bliss, only a 72-hour workweek! The job pushed her, made her stretch herself. Rewarding stress.

But, once she got it down and had the pastry departments up and running as smoothly as a Rolls-Royce Merlin, she realized she needed a new challenge. (Sitting idly back is not one of Hunter’s life goals.)

“I wanted to find a place that I could grow into and then continue to grow in, if that makes sense,” Hunter says. She also wanted to apply the rigorous, precise zeal for organization and systems a brain trained by pastry adopts to the culinary world. You knew this analogy was inevitable, right? Hunter wanted to make a savory cake, and eat it, too. (Bah, doom, boom, ching, we’re here all week, folks.)

Hamlet & Ghost’s chef Bryan Redmond was departing, and unsurprisingly, Hunter’s name was floated as a replacement.

“I went in to meet with the team, and I knew it would be a great fit,” she says. Hunter officially took over in April. “It’s open concept, there are three chefs plus me, we do everything right there in front of the guests. The menu is seasonally inspired and constantly changing.”

The team at Hamlet & Ghost seems to have been forged in the same fire Hunter was. After flames ripped through the restaurant and surrounding businesses on Thanksgiving of 2016, many would have thrown up their hands and shut down. (Many did.) But co-owner Brendan Dillon set up a series of fundraisers, including a GoFundMe page that raised $20,000 and enabled them to reopen with an expanded kitchen just a few months later.

We spoke just as autumn was nipping into town, and Hunter said that she and her team were busily preserving the last of summer’s bounty for the winter ahead.

“I know the summer is an exciting time because of track and all of the foot traffic, but I love cooking for locals in the winter,” she says. “I can’t wait to introduce new menus with local produce, both fresh and preserved, plus new homemade pastas.”

When Hunter isn’t busily tweaking and playing with the savory selections, she’s editing the short pastry list, which what it lacks in length more than makes up for in terms of creativity. (Think blondie sundaes with vanilla bean ice cream, salted caramel and rum-smoked golden raisins, campfire s’mores with dark chocolate pot de crème, smoked marshmallows and housemade graham crackers, hand-assembled and filled with smoke before being presented at the table.)

Throughout Hamlet & Ghost’s menu, Hunter’s legacy as a sweet and savory chef is in evidence with dishes that evoke pure pleasure and utter indulgence, yet are all executed with scientific precision and plated with artistry. (While the menu rotates seasonally, a few recent favorites were grassfed lamb and beef tartare with fingerling chips and a quail egg; wild sockeye salmon with coconut cream, red lentils and purple potatoes; La Belle Farm duck breast with foraged mushrooms.)

In Hunter’s hands, the war between the whisk and the knife has come to a delicious draw. Now dig in.
MICHELE HUNTER’S HAZELNUT ESPRESSO OATMEAL COOKIES

Makes 12–18 cookies, depending on size

14 tablespoons of unsalted butter
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons light brown sugar
⅓ cup granulated sugar
1¼ teaspoons baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 tablespoon vanilla extract
1 egg (free-range organic, if possible)
1 cup plus 10 tablespoons all-purpose flour
(at Edible, we use King Arthur)
7 tablespoons rolled oats (again, we use King Arthur)
1 tablespoon espresso powder
3 ounces or 6 tablespoons hazelnuts, toasted and chopped
Sea salt for sprinkling, to taste

Melt the butter, pour over the sugars in a mixing bowl. Whisk well to combine. Add baking soda, salt, baking powder, vanilla and egg. Whisk well to emulsify together.

Add all the dry ingredients and mix until homogeneous.

Scoop out into desired size and allow the dough to chill before baking. Before popping them in the oven, sprinkle on sea salt to taste. Bake at 350° until very light-golden brown (check after 15 minutes).

Enjoy!

Pairing recommendation by EmpireWine.com
Brotherhood Winery Holiday Spiced Wine