

Psychologist-baker-entrepreneur celebrated with *I Am Huron* award

For anyone who has attempted to make pie, it's easy to imagine pinching dough and putting savoury or sweet filling inside the pie shells.

For perogies, Nataliia says, the process is pretty much the same, except everything is miniature, bite-sized pieces handcrafted as time disappears in a cloud of flour, sugar and salt.

"In Ukraine, I had a small business and I made desserts for people, like cookies, cakes, marshmallows," says the mother of two, who now calls Goderich home.

In truth, baking was Nataliia's side hustle, a hobby that turned into profit. Baking was Nataliia's way of decompressing after her demanding job as a psychologist in Ukraine.

"I love how people enjoy my food. It's really one of my favourite things in life," Nataliia remarks.

Nataliia, in her 40-something years on earth, has accomplished an incredible amount. After growing up on a small family farm in Ukraine, she completed three university degrees and had careers in each respective field: as a railway engineer; an economist; and a psychologist.

When the war interrupted life in Ukraine in 2022, Nataliia and her family knew they needed to leave. She had a friend in Goderich, someone who had married a local man and moved to the community in 2017, so Nataliia reached out.

"I knew nothing about Canada, about real life here. I just watched some videos and movies, but I didn't know anything from a real person. And [my friend] said, 'if you come to Goderich, I would help you'. And she helped. She helped a lot."

Nataliia's friend helped her family find funds to pay for plane tickets, and a billeting host who offered rooms in her home while the family got settled.

Nataliia remembers arriving in Toronto after travelling for 37 hours.

"My cat was in the carry-on bag, and she really wanted to kill us, she was angry. My one-year-old baby was crying, tired, hungry, all that stuff. She cried all the way from Toronto to Goderich," Nataliia recalls.

Far from being an omen of things to come, Nataliia says she was overwhelmed by the support from local residents from the moment her family arrived.

"The community is, was just amazing to us. It was so kind, so friendly," she says. "I still cannot believe these people even exist, these kinds of people," Nataliia says.

Nataliia says the generosity has even extended to a local woman donating her family a car, a vehicle she calls "my lovely Buick."

"I always think people are the most important resource for a country, for jobs, people are the heart of everything," says Nataliia. "When I came, it just surprised me how much all the people here did such an amazing job for Ukrainian people. They were so welcoming."

Nataliia says she loves Lake Huron, a place she visited the first day she arrived in Goderich. She says she feels confident she's in the right spot for herself and her daughters. She's developed a great network of friends and helped other newcomers settle in the area, by offering support and time to practice driving in her car..

And just like in Ukraine, Nataliia's diverse career has continued in Huron County. She's worked as a pharmacist's assistant, a cleaner at an events' venue, a bank teller, and, now, as a counsellor for youth with a local organization.

"I really love my job, I'm so happy. I always wanted to work in my field. I want to help people and be useful to them. I want to share my experience, share my personality, and help. It's an amazing position," Nataliia says.

While adjusting to life in Canada, baking has continued to be a constant. Nataliia remembers unveiling her culinary skills as a vendor at the Huron Multicultural Festival in 2023.

"It was the first place where I presented my products, my pierogies. And within 30 minutes, they were just gone. I wasn't prepared properly. But it was a great lesson for me," she says.

Since then, she's launched a pierogi business that's sold direct-to-customers at local farmers' markets and through custom online orders. It's a local business that's created a loyal following of customers and sparked cultural conversations and joy among many residents.

"I have thought about opening a place in Goderich to present Ukrainian food, maybe a cafe or a bistro," Nataliia says. "I love feeding people."

Before that, there remain hurdles to overcome. Canada's promise to Ukraine was to provide safe harbour for the country's residents while the war was ongoing. While the Canadian government offered a temporary open work permit for Ukrainians, Nataliia hopes she and her daughters can remain in Canada in the future.

"I feel safe here and I know my kids are safe. I think it's one of the most crucial things. I advertise to everyone to move here. Goderich is beautiful, it's safe, the lake is so wonderful. For people who value peace and calm and a great community, this is a really good spot," Nataliia says.

Nataliia's contributions to the community have not gone unnoticed. Earlier this year, she was nominated for an *I Am Huron* award, an award that recognizes newcomers to Canada who are creating a positive impact in their new community.

"As a single mother raising two children on her own, she demonstrated resilience, determination, and an inspiring work ethic while building a new future for her family," wrote her friend Iuliia Dovzhenko who nominated Nataliia for an *I Am Huron* award.

"Nataliia is known as a hardworking, compassionate, and community-oriented person who continuously strives to help others while creating a stable and positive life for her children. Her dedication, courage, and willingness to contribute have made a lasting impact on the community around her."

The I Am Huron awards celebrate the contributions immigrants and newcomers to Canada make in Huron County's communities. Nominations are received from the community, reviewed by a committee with lived experience of immigration, and awarded at a ceremony.

The project is funded with support from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

For more about this campaign, visit: <https://www.huroncounty.ca/i-am-huron/>