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Creativity is the icing on the cake of new career

By WILL ASTOR - 10/22/2010

If you need a cake in the shape of whatever your heart desires, Tina Bennett is your woman.

"I will try anything," says Bennett, owner of the Vanilla Swirl Cakery in Fairport.

A specialist in cake carving and decorating, Bennett makes one-of-a-kind, custom creations-like a seven-foot-high rendering in cake of the number 175; a detailed re-creation of the Irondequoit Country Club's sixth hole and a scale model of Rochester's Button Factory building, as well as virtually innumerable whimsically decorated multilayer confections in various shapes.

"My favorite thing is to have someone bring in a picture for me to duplicate or ask me to create something on my own," says Bennett, who several weeks ago was one of 12 finalists in the Pillsbury Bakers' Plus Creative Decorating Competition in Las Vegas, placing fourth in the national contest.

The 175 cake was for a University of Rochester event marking the school's 175th anniversary. The Button Factory cake was for a ceremony presided over by Mayor Robert Duffy to celebrate a business moving from the suburbs to the former factory building on State Street.

The golf green, which Bennett carved for the surprise 80th-birthday party of a man who had twice managed a hole-in-one at the club's sixth hole, was especially dear to her.

"It actually brought tears to his eyes," Bennett recalls. "It meant so much to him. That made me very happy."

Bennett, 44, started baking at the age of 3 as an assistant to her grandmother. Later, she studied at a culinary school in San Francisco, where she and her husband lived for many years and where Bennett worked-not very happily-as a marketing manager for a newspaper. She started the Vanilla Swirl Cakery seven years ago when their family decided to relocate to her native Fairport.

At first, Bennett says, she worked out of her house, testing recipes on neighbors while trolling for orders. Demand for her creations picked up quickly. Within months Bennett had moved into her first location and started hiring a staff. She moved the bakery into its present location on Turk Hill Road-the venture's fourth-a year and a half ago. In addition to Bennett herself, the bakery currently employs a dozen part-time workers.

Bennett claims to have little idea of the venture's revenues. The books are handled by an accountant who keeps track of such things, she says. In addition to special-order cakes, the bakery sells cookies, cupcakes and other items to walk-in customers. It also regularly supplies three UR dining halls, and the university is a regular customer for special-occasion items such as the gargantuan 175th-anniversary cake.

Most of the Vanilla Swirl Cakery's business comes from special orders for weddings, birthdays, baby showers, bar and bat mitzvahs, wedding anniversaries and the like. Prices vary according to size and the amount of work involved, running from less than \$10 to as much as \$270 a cake. Bennett estimates the bakery's special-order output at a steady 50 to 60 a week.

As much an artist as an entrepreneur, Bennett's goals for the business tend to be more along the lines of cake-decorating challenges she would like to undertake than ways in which she would like to see the business expand.

Two cherished but as yet unrealized ambitions are to do cakes in the shape of an airplane and a camera. If anybody at, say, USA Airports or Eastman Kodak Co. would be interested in such creations, Bennett says, she is ready to supply them.

Small Business is a weekly feature focusing on entrepreneurs. Send suggestions for future Small Business stories to Associate Editor Smriti Jacob at sjacob@rbj.net (<mailto:sjacob@rbj.net>).

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