



The ownership team at Kitchen Kuttings: Elmeda Weber, Nancy Shantz, Lydia Weber and Shirley Martin. Kitchen Kuttings began in 1988 when the group took over the Elmira Cheesehouse. *Photos by LEAH GERBER*

# THE GOODNESS IS BAKED RIGHT IN

Early mornings and long days have a sweet payoff for the owners of Woolwich bakeries

by LEAH GERBER

From Floradale to Heidelberg, Conestogo to Maryhill, over to Breslau and anywhere in between, a traveller with a sweet tooth can stop at any general store, restaurant or café to find trays filled with iconic, freshly-baked long johns, cakes, cookies, breads, pastries, fritters, muffins, cinnamon buns, tarts or pies that make up such a large part of the Woolwich Township culture.

Here, the trays of baking reliably appear each morning plump and steaming, but the ambitious bakers who spend hours working alone in florescent-lit, stainless steel kitchens rarely get the spotlight.

People here aren't alone in their love for tasty baking. Across Canada, sales for baked goods totalled US\$6.6 billion in 2021, making Canada the 12th largest retail market in the world at the time. Canada was also the world's second largest exporter of baked goods behind Germany, with a total of \$3.8 billion.

The world of the professional baker goes mainly unseen, often beginning in the dark mornings before anyone else is awake, and continuing long into the day. In this article we meet three professional bakers working in the township who give us a peak behind-the-scenes into their lives.

Lenore Johnson, owner of The Shed, a café in St. Jacobs, knows well the power of baking. "Baking is something that we've been doing since forever, since we've had the ability to make fire," she said. "[Baking] calls back to moms and grandmas and aunts and cousins, and remembering the first time you ate a cookie."

Johnson learned to bake as a child, and continued into adulthood before deciding to do it professionally.

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"It's something that I used to do with my mom, because she was a stay-at-home mom until I went to kindergarten. And it was what we did to pass the time. It's how I learned math and how to count." She studied math and business at the University of Waterloo, then realized she didn't want the corporate life. "Somebody asked me what I was passionate about, and [I asked myself], 'What do I do when I'm happy?' and I'm like, 'Well, I guess I bake.' And what do you do when you're sad? I guess I bake." "What do you do when you have time on your hands? I guess I bake."



(Right) Lenore Johnson, owner of The Shed café in St. Jacobs prepares lemon madeleines and homemade pop tarts before the café opens. (Above) Laurene Martin with her two daughters Shirley and Julianne Martin. Laurene and Julianne bake at Kitchen Kuttings, while Shirley is part owner after working in the business for seven years.



Once she set her sights on baking, she completed an internship at a bakery before completing her degree. Then, she attended culinary college, studied and worked in France and New Zealand, and made her way back to Waterloo Region to set up shop.

Baking is a fun, comforting hobby for many, but for professionals it's work, science and math. Johnson reflects on the difference in approaches between her professional baking and how she learned to bake from relatives.

"My grandmother and my mother and these folks, who are just like, 'Oh just add a little bit of that,' and I'm like, 'How much is a little?'... I hated the fact that one time it tasted a little bit more like this, and another time it tasted a little bit different. So, my approach is very systematic, and it's incredibly mathematical," she said. Now she works by weight and percentages instead of cups and teaspoons so that recipes can be scaled up quickly and precisely.

Johnson's Instagram account is full of the creations she and her staff put together daily. They range all over the map, including brekkie pies (all-butter flaky pie dough, filled with egg and cheese and other breakfasty things), lemon meringue doughnuts, millionaire shortbread or newly invented kinds of pop tarts.

The business of running a bakery is ingrained in Elmeda Weber, one of the owners of Kitchen Kuttings in Elmira along with Nancy Shantz and Lydia Weber. Shirley Martin also joined as an owner after seven years as a staff member.

Weber and her partners started the company in 1988 when they bought the Elmira Cheesehouse. They started out with basic summer sausage and honey, and then opened their retail space at Church and Arthur Street. They outgrew the space and by 2019 moved to the current location where they added their café.

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sandwiches, and we wanted homemade muffins and of course homemade tarts and long johns, so that kind of brought us into baking," Weber said.

One of Weber's employees, and Shirley Martin's mother, Laurene Martin, comes in to do the baking. She shares the task of baking with other employees including her other daughter, Julianne Martin.

On the days she's baking, Martin will be the first one to arrive in the dark parking lot. The bakers at Kitchen Kuttings start at 5 a.m. and bake until 4 p.m. Monday to Friday. On Saturdays they'll go until 2 p.m.

"In the wintertime, it's a drag sometimes to get going

in the mornings, but once I'm up and at it, I really enjoy it," said Laurene Martin. She starts every day at Kitchen Kuttings with the yeast baking and muffins. Others will do the cookies and tarts. Pies get made a couple of days each week, she says. Martin ran her own successful baking business for at least 17 years, so she is familiar with the work and the hustle it takes to run a successful bakery.

"I was getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and I was getting really busy, and I was burnt out," she said. "And that was around the time Shirley was starting here, and she goes, 'Mom, why don't you come help me?' and I didn't have the heavy work anymore. You're lugging all the groceries in, and lugging everything to market, and it was a lot of heavy work. So, then I decided, 'You know, I can come here, and still do the same thing, do the buns and all that, and leave the care and the worries to her, go home at the end of the day.'"

Martin learned to bake from her mother. "I loved the kitchen already from young," she said. But what has kept her baking all these years?

"People keep eating," she answers with a laugh. But she also spoke about the gratification that comes from baking. "[It's] the satisfaction of making something from start to finish and enjoying eating it."

She also reflected that people might underestimate the amount of work that goes into the baked goods they enjoy. "I don't think that too many people that eat cinnamon buns realize it takes hours with the whole process to [make them]," she said.

Weber says she believes homemade baking is a timeless activity. "I think it's just amazing that this has been passed on through the generations and to this day, it's something that didn't fall by the wayside. People are still enjoying it."



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Fran Adsett, owner of Frannie's Restaurant and Bakery prepares pies and tarts at 4:00 a.m. before her restaurant opens. She does all the baking for the restaurant, and this takes hard work and preparation.



Fran Adsett of Frannie's Restaurant and Bakery arrives at her kitchen to start baking as early as 3 a.m. on her busy days. She does all her business's baking on her own.

"You just do the work until it's done," she said. "I'm constantly thinking ahead and prepping ahead and there are no days off because if you take a day off, I'm pretty much screwed the rest of the week because we can never catch up."

Adsett learned to bake from her mother. "Growing up there were eight kids in my family and before we got to go grocery shopping or do the fun things, we had to have so much stuff baked, and the house had to be clean and the floors had to be scrubbed by hand," she said.

Even though she learned to bake as a child, she didn't do much of it until she opened her restaurant.

"I hired three bakers and they all had their education, and all knew what I wanted, but none of them could produce what I wanted. They were all that 'new school,' and I wasn't after that. I wanted the authentic, old-fashioned baking, where you're still peeling your apples and you're cutting your fresh fruit and you're putting it in the freezer and you're pulling your preserves out of the freezer and that's kind of what I do," she said.

"So, I started baking and then [the baked goods were] just flying off the shelves and then I started getting asked to do events, and butter tart festivals. It fell into my lap, and I'm very grateful that it did because it's a huge part of my business – a very huge part. A lot of restaurants are suffering right now and my baking pulls me through."

She says something people may not understand about running a bakery is the costs. "Unless you're a baker you have no idea what the cost is to produce anything. By the time you buy your flour, your sugar, your butter – and a lot of people, I don't know if they think because you are a business and you do wholesale that you end up getting product cheaper than what they do in the store, well, we don't. We can actually pay more money because we have that middleman that has to deliver it to us," she said.

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But Adsett says the work is worth it, saying her customers have become like her family. "It's the overwhelming feeling that people want your pies for Christmas and they want them for Thanksgiving and they want them for Easter. To put 2,000 pies out on one weekend for Christmas and to know that you're part of their Christmas meal, [it] hits my heart," she said.

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