

Carlie Statky

A Piece of Cake

As Gayle's Bakery & Rosticceria turns 30, the woman behind it all speaks up BY CHRISTINA WATERS



Bus 6

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Threaded the serpentine corridors lined with display cases, each filled with sweet and savory temptation, Gayle Ortiz and I tour the production centers of the bakery and rosticceria imprinted with her name. We move from room to room among the white tile floors, refrigerated counters and mile-high racks of trays, each loaded with cupcakes, croissants, muffins and rolls.

"This was the old Village Pantry," Ortiz says. "Remember when it became the restaurant, Primizia? Well, it's now our cake room."

From an original 800 square feet, Gayle's has sprawled into 13,000 square feet encompassing multiple domains. And from where we stand,

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success definitely smells sweet. Looks good, too. Inside the cake room, where each cake, pie and tart has a different station, pastry workers clothed in classic white aprons deftly frost cakes on revolving stands.

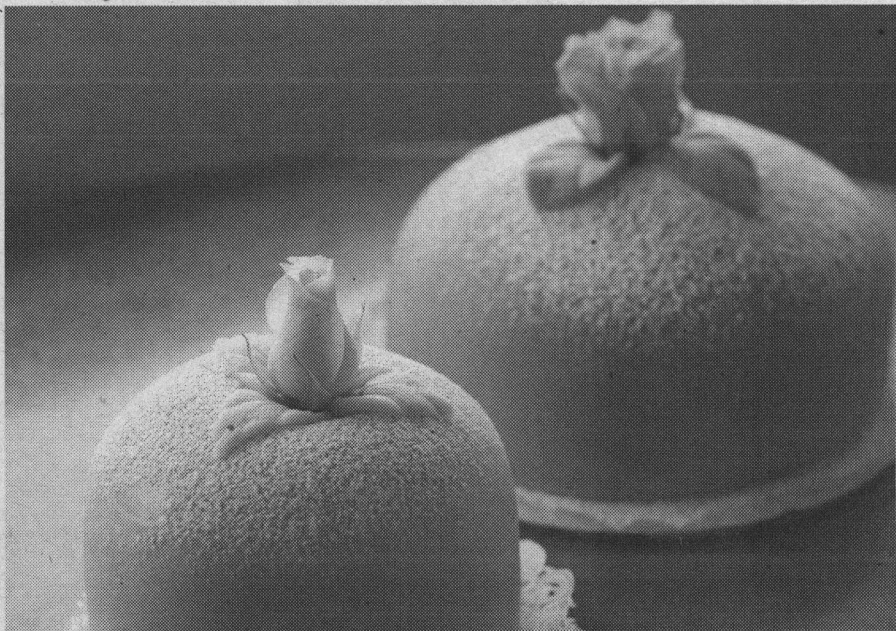
"What is the secret to the flawless finish?" I ask, admiring the marble sheen on a trio of layer cakes.

"A skim coat," Ortiz says, eyes twinkling. The color of black olives, Ortiz's eyes actually do twinkle. "The skim coat is a thin layer of frosting," she explains. "It holds all the crumbs in and smoothes out any irregularities. We refrigerate the cake at that point, and then bring it out again and finish it."

SECRET TO HER SUCCESS Gayle Ortiz, center, has had ample help from business partner Louisa Beers and husband Joe Ortiz.

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Carlie Stasky



I CONFESS Gayle's incomparable Princess cake has made midnight refrigerator raiders of the best of us.

I'm treated to an eye-popping demo involving a key lime pie and a mountain of whipped cream. "Cakes and croissants—that's what I started this business on," she says.

We continue through the former pastry area, now the deli kitchen. I am temporarily transfixed by a vat of coleslaw the size of a bathtub. Three 40-quart stock pots are simmering nearby. Corridors of raw goods line the back, while racks of trays stretch toward the ceiling. A tiny "nerve center" holds a bank of phones and fax machines.

Across the parking lot and into another building, filled with ovens, counters and a bunker of flour in 100-pound sacks, I watch 55-pound blocks of butter being cut with a machete-size knife. The bakery will use 2.5 tons of butter each month. *Every month.*

At the center of the bread building is an apartment-size triple decker oven. "Bread is very space-intensive," Ortiz reveals. "Regardless of the weather, the bread has to go through various stages, and each stage must be at a consistent temperature." She chuckles over the transformation of scale the business has undergone. "We started out with Hobart ovens—two for pastry, two for bread. Joe and I were always fighting over them. Actually, this business has kept us together."

Insisting that she's "really retired," Ortiz admits she works on long-range planning, production and salaries.

"I go over the profit-and-loss statements," she says. "After all, this place is named after

me." She adds some free advice: "I don't recommend that you name a business after yourself—it has made me think twice about ever selling. We still freak out about every detail. After all, there aren't any other Gayle's. This is our only empire."

Everything Nice

So much has changed since Feb. 14, 1978, the day Gayle and Joe Ortiz opened the doors to their little Capitola bakery. That was 25 million cakes ago. And yet, in a way, nothing has changed.

"The issues aren't really different," Ortiz maintains. "You're just talking about more money. Now it's huge dollars and the livelihoods of 130 people. If the economy goes down, we just can't offer as many jobs."

There have been "economic burps," like when the freeway exit closed for a year, and then again when Costco, Trader Joe's and Starbucks came in. Now the big issue is food costs.

"It's as big as it ever has been. Food service people have to raise prices a lot—their food is high—and it's getting higher. We have to have a program," she points to a computer on the counter, "that keeps working the equation between costs and economic indicators. It has to be automatic, and regular—so that there isn't a sudden huge rise in prices."

Construction costs are also a big issue. "Incredible!" Her voice acquires a noticeable edge. "So many regulations," she complains, offering lurid details of a

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recent floor remodel. "All of a sudden it's \$300,000 more than we expected." Citing her five-year stint on the Capitola City Council, she continues. "I know that some ordinances are good for people, but some are . . .," she rolls her eyes.

In three decades, the Gayle's customer base has increased and demographics have changed. "We still have the after-workout women, and the guys club that meets regularly. A lot of Realtors. Many Santa Cruz customers have been replaced by out-of-town people from the Central Valley who come here for the summer, and from Monterey. I think our food, even though it's expensive, is still very much value-added." She tells me about a woman who comes from New York with a separate suitcase just to fill up with special bakery items.

Ortiz likes that particular image, possibly because she's a traveler too.

Gayle and her husband Joe—baker, playwright and amateur painter—maintain an aerobic schedule of foreign travel. Just back from two months in New Zealand, they spent time last year on a culinary exploration of Singapore. And they regularly visit Italy. Each trip is a voyage of discovery. "There's a notebook from every trip," she explains. "I make notes on the meals and try to take pictures. I bring back food ideas to translate into our deli and bakery. Japan was really great for that."

So much for retirement.

Business partner Louisa Beers is given lavish credit for the success of the business. Ortiz knew how, and when, to delegate. "I think I had to be in control in the beginning—I had to prove what I could do. But the early successes gave me all the fulfillment I needed for a lifetime. When I do something, I do it all the way. You can't do that for too long," she emphasizes.

Ortiz candidly acknowledges that not having children was the other big factor in her business success. Simone de Beauvoir, who famously told women they must choose between babies and books, would have understood this choice between babies and cakes.

"I don't think we would have done well as parents. We couldn't have done what we wanted to, or had this business if we had had children. And no—I don't feel selfish at all," she insists. "What religion taught that? I feel I'm modeling a path that allows for full enjoyment of life."

Regrets? "I might regret something I ate this morning," she laughs. "But not the big decisions." She's convincing. The woman I see is too engaged with life for regrets.

GAYLE'S BAKERY AND ROSTICCERIA, at 504 Bay Ave., Capitola, is open seven days a week, 6:30am–8:30pm. 831.462.1200.

Key Lime Pie Parfait

*From Gayle Ortiz
of Gayle's Bakery
& Rosticceria*

This recipe was created by our friend, Christie Carlson, one of the founders of Wisteria Antiques. It's the perfect quick and easy dessert for a dinner party. The pie is creamy and tart and the lemon bread is the perfect cake. If you feel really decadent, use two pieces of pie! This is a fruit shortbread of sorts. Make it either right before dinner or just before serving. You can tell everyone that you "made" dessert because, technically, you did!

Use any stem glass you have. If you don't have parfait glasses you can use wine or champagne glasses.

Key Lime Pie Parfait

(serves 6–8)

Fresh seasonal fruit, sliced
(berries work really well)

Grand Marnier, Framboise
or your favorite liqueur
(optional)

Sugar, if needed

1 whole loaf of Gayle's Lemon
Bread, cut into slices

1 slice Gayle's Key Lime Pie

Cut the fruit into bite-size pieces and place in a bowl. Taste and add sugar, if needed. Sprinkle a little liqueur on and toss. Let sit for 5 minutes.

Tear the Lemon Bread into bite-size pieces.

Spoon a little Key Lime Pie in the bottom of each glass, then add a few pieces of fruit, then Lemon Bread. Alternate in that order until you reach the top of each glass. End with a little dollop of pie.