

The Community Page

Carstens' BAKERY



Willi Carstens displays a yet-to-be baked pan of beehive cakes.

Eastern Idaho's Best-Kept Secret

It was almost 60 years ago when Willi Carstens took his first foray into baking. A young apprentice in a world of hot ovens and master bakers, 16-year-old Willi would spend three years learning his trade from the best in Germany before immigrating to the United States at age 20. Eventually, Willi found his way to Idaho Falls and bought Halkar's Danish Bakery at 243 Cliff Street.

That was nearly 43 years ago. And while the baking industry has changed dramatically—most bakeries merely cook premixed ingredients loaded with preservatives—Willi, his bakery, and his recipes haven't changed a bit.

The result of that constancy is a bakery—now called Carstens' Bakery—that is unlike almost any other in North America. When you walk in the door, the delicious smells emanate from foods baked that morning—from recipe cards that look as though they belong under glass at a museum. Crumbly cookies, soft bread loaves, dripping hot-cross buns all come out of the oven steaming and quickly find their way into the hands of wise connoisseurs who know Carstens' Bakery is the best-kept secret in Idaho Falls.

"Where else can you find homemade stuff made from eggs, potato flour, wheat flour and butter with 40-year-old recipes?" Willi's granddaughter and business manager Crista asks rhetorically. "Maybe in your own kitchen if your mother bakes. But you won't find it anywhere else in the bakery industry."

What makes Carstens' Bakery phenomenal is the phenomenon behind the scenes in the kitchen—Grandpa Willi. At age 74 and with a work ethic crafted six decades ago, Willi is still working at a pace that would put two present-day bakers to shame.

"I don't see anybody who has the work ethic that my grandpa has anymore," Crista says. "Nobody is willing to do what he does—I can't. It's amazing."

While Crista is hesitant to take over the baking duties, she didn't think twice about taking over the administrative work at the bakery. Little more than a half-decade ago, Crista was away at college when she learned that her grandmother's health was failing and the bakery was falling into dire circumstances. Crista left her studies and came home to Idaho Falls to fill in, and she hasn't left town since.



Willi's granddaughter Crista (left) manages the day-to-day operations of the bakery.

"If the bakery would've been gone when I came back, it would've killed me," she says. "My mom, myself, my brother, my son—we all learned to walk in this bakery."

Crista's mother, Melanie, even remembers sleeping in a breadbasket on the floor of the bakery while the dough mixers hummed around her.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of Carstens' Bakery, however, is the fact that so few Idaho Falls residents know it exists. While the chain stores and restaurants draw large crowds with persistent advertising, Carstens' Bakery relies on only one kind of publicity: word of mouth.

"We don't blow too much hot air," Willi says. "A lot of people in town don't even know we're here. We had a much bigger operation years ago, but that's not the answer either. We know we need to stay within our means."

Opportunities for home-baked goodness are rare in this new millennium, yet residents of Idaho Falls have a from-scratch bakery right here at their fingertips. Perhaps it's time for you and your family to sink your teeth into a soft Carstens' pastry. Maybe, just maybe, it's time this best-kept secret got out.