

Rolling in dough? I don't think so!

Andrea Rigie Kay

Can you believe it? Sugar Bun Bake shop is celebrating its 42nd year! I was asked, "How did you come to be here?" Well, to fully explain, I must take you back briefly to almost 100 years ago . . . because I am the third generation to own and operate our retail bake shop.

The 1st Generation:

My grandfather was a young lad when he was plucked out of hiding as a stowaway on a ship escaping from religious persecution in Europe. He was quickly put to work in the belly of the ship (the kitchen) where he began his "voluntary" apprenticeship in cooking and baking. Several years later he jumped ship when making port in New York City and began his long, arduous ascent as an immigrant striving to carve out a living in the land of opportunity.

(Oy Vay!)

After training in several bakeries, he made his first attempt in 1932 at owning a bakery on Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn. When that store didn't make it, in 1944 he purchased another on Kings Highway & Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn. He called it **Duvals** and it did very well. (That's when Charlotte Rousses were 1cent each!)

One day in 1954, while my grandfather was working his usual brief twelve-hour day, he literally dropped dead in the back of the store during production. (Did I neglect to mention that bakery work can sometimes be hazardous to your health?) With the bakery's founder gone, it was suddenly up to the next generation. My poor old Mom and Dad picked up the torch and carried on the family tradition. After all, there was a whole Brooklyn community depending on our family bakery to bring sweetness into their lives."

2nd Generation

Now let's move on to the 2nd generation (that is if you are you still awake?). My dad was a young, innocent and very handsome new accountant (I know he's going to read this) at the time my grandfather passed on. Deciding to try his luck at taking over the bakery was a big decision (Don't do it, Dad!)

In those days, around the early 1950's, bakery life was tough. Dad's training as an accountant hadn't exactly prepared him for what was in store for him. Now he had to trade calculating rows of numbers for calculating how many cheesecakes and pies to make each morning. And unions were very strong in those days – especially in Brooklyn. From time to time they felt it was necessary to communicate displeasure to the boss and show him who **really was** boss.

Hostility reared its ugly head one morning when unbeknownst to my Dad, while some workers were baking hundreds of rye breads, they dumped copious amounts of salt in the mix. As you can imagine, my father lost many customers that day. Another time, I remember as a wee child, the union pulled out all the bakers from our store for two weeks over some grievance that occurred at another shop. (Talk about an unplanned vacation!)

When both of your parents own and operate a food business chances are you do a lot of growing up there – that is, if you want to see your parents once in awhile. My earliest recollections take place at my parents' first store in Brooklyn around 1959. My brother and I were fascinated by a cat that had just given birth to kittens underneath a baker's work table. In those days cats were the "unofficial" eradicators of pesky and uninvited little guests within many old-time retail businesses. These cats were great workers for any boss. They never unionized, made few demands and enjoyed their work immensely. (Perfect employees!)

In 1964 my father located a store space on Cross Bay Boulevard, Howard Beach, Queens (our present location) and decided to give it a go. My mother had misgivings because she felt the area was too tranquil and unpopulated to provide enough business for the bakery to flourish. (Quiet?! Unpopulated?! Can you believe that?)

As my parents began building their business they had the good fortune to bring two wonderful partners on board: Herbie Dow and his beautiful wife, Helen (I know she's going to read this, too). Herbie was a talented baker. He had begun his career being tortured – oops, I mean apprenticed – by some old time European immigrant bakers. They would teach him to mix a batter and then, in the middle of the job, send him away to get something while they added a few "additional" (probably the most important) ingredients to the mix. (Meanies!) In those days, this was an effective and often utilized method of maintaining job security. Even without the extra trade secrets, Herbie came to us with a wealth of invaluable experience and delicious recipes. Most of all, he taught us a higher level of quality baking that would help launch Sugar Bun – to this day – as one of the finest bakeries in the New York/Queens area.

(Way to go, Herb!)

Over the next forty years my parents developed a fiercely loyal clientele. Sugar Bun reminded them of the old-world, European recipes that had been passed down from generation to generation in their own families.

3rd Generation

My permanent involvement in the family business began over fourteen years ago while my parents were entertaining the notion of retiring. They begged me to take over. Well actually, at the time I was unemployed, **again**, and struggling to find my niche in New York City (as well as a husband). Okay, so I was a little bit of a loser, and okay, so maybe I begged **them** to give me a try at taking over the bakery. I thought, "Hey, what the heck? All I have to do is work like a dog for probably every single day for the rest of my life, but at least I'll have a place to hang my apron and hopefully one day be rolling in 'dough!'"

The first five years after I took over were a whirlwind. Even with my heavy work schedule, I found that special somebody and managed, although late in life (I was approaching forty), to marry and conceive two amazing kids, one after the other. Hooray for me!

(A regular "Fertile Myrtle!").

I can't help but think of that silly joke: "**How do you get a Jewish girl to stop having sex with you. . . . marry them!**" As you can see, in my situation I had a double whammy. Here I was, a nice Jewish girl, running a seven-day-a-week business. Lack of sleep can really make you nutty. One sleepless night, being busy with two sick toddlers and the bakery, I inadvertently fed my birth control pill to my Springer Spaniel, Winston, while I swallowed his anti-biotic. Thank goodness things went more smoothly at the bakery!

As in every venture in life there are pluses and minuses. As far as my taking over the bakery, on the plus side I get to put out wonderful products I'm proud to sell. They give people great pleasure and earn me respect. On the minus side, most times I feel that I look like Phyllis Diller's daughter. It's not terribly bad as long as I don't walk by too many mirrors. Another minus is when I get home and my dogs follow me around in an attempt to lick my shoes of any sweet remnants from that days bakery production. The last thought I just recalled is that fairly often, when I'd venture to the bank to conduct transactions, the tellers would tease me about having the most delicious smelling money, then grouse about how hungry I was making them.

I have to admit that there have been some tough times, when I thought I would go insane with my balancing act – juggling the ups and downs of a business with keeping my husband and kids happy. But the rewards have been immeasurable and I feel incredibly fortunate. Many of our patrons are second-generation customers whose moms and dads brought them in on a Sunday morning after church for donuts, buns and rolls. Then of course, there are hundreds of girls from the Queens area whom I have watched growing up as employees of Sugar Bun. (I always said that working at Sugar Bun builds strong bones). To you ladies, I would like to extend a warm and special thank you for your hard work in helping me keep this place humming.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our customers for their loyalty and good wishes as we launch our website: www.sugarbunbakeshop.com. I look forward to continuing to see them every day and I am grateful for their friendship. Despite some of them experiencing difficult health issues, they always greet me with a wave and a warm smile. I always hope that my baked goods make them feel as good as their smiles make me. I also hope they will love the convenience of having Sugar Bun goodies shipped anywhere in the United States as gifts with just the click of their computer mouse. "Rolling in dough?" Maybe not absolutely. But will the dough continue to be rolled with tender loving care at Sugar Bun Bake Shop? You can count on it!