

GlencoeNews

Glencoe couple makes serious (banana) bread

May 8, 2008

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Sitting in the Unicorn Café coffee shop in downtown Evanston while customers happily sample slices of her company's banana bread nearby, Glencoe resident Lisa Spinner is like a whirling top.

She is fresh back from giving a prestigious entrepreneurship lecture at Wilmington College in Wilmington, OH. She and her business partner/husband, Peter, are preparing for two major food trade shows in the coming week. And later in the day, she plans to drive out to the western suburbs to visit one of the company's two co-packer bakery sites.



(Joel Wintermantle for Pioneer Press)

Glencoe resident Lisa Spinner, founder of Hannah Banana Bread Co., sits at the Unicorn Cafe in Evanston, where customers can buy the company's line of sweetbreads. Hannah Banana Bread, founded in 2000, now supplies its gourmet sweetbreads nationwide to coffee shops, restaurants, and grocery stores.

In between the nonstop commentary on the history of Hannah Banana Bread's dizzying ascent in the last eight years, she casually mentions that, by the way, she was training for the Chicago Marathon when medical issues related to the pregnancy of her fourth child was born landed her in a recovery mode for 16 months.

Then the whirling top appears to be a mere mortal, albeit a grateful mortal.

"Glencoe neighbors and friends brought us meals for seven weeks straight. The heart in that town was amazing. I cried every time I opened the door," recalls Lisa of the period she was recuperating from the surgery. "I had to focus on the kids and the marriage and take all the help I could from my mother-in-law and sister-in-law," she said.

While recovering, Lisa's husband Peter, who had been working for a public relations company, stepped in to help keep the company afloat. "Things like that can cause a business to close. But when you get slapped in the face, you have to see what wasn't on the right track. I saw my husband had to be with the business. He knew me and my work ethic," she said.

As a student at the Lake Forest Graduate School of Management, Peter, a former journalist, had written a business plan for a class project modeled after what Lisa was using in running Hannah Banana Bread, so he knew the company. Peter now specializes in the public relations for the company, Lisa is the front man and handles much of the sales, her strong point, but both are flexible. "We are both jack of all trades," she said.

While the original banana bread recipe is her grandmother's, she no longer bakes in her kitchen, instead contracting to the two local bakeries to churn out the preservative-free loaves.

She likes it that way.

"I wouldn't try to re-finish my own floors. Stick with what you are good at," said Lisa, who grew up in Skokie and graduated from Niles West High School.

Lisa is good at well, talking, as she holds a listener spellbound. It runs in the family: Her father made his living giving oral business presentations, she said.

She also excels at sales.



(Joel Wintermantle for Pioneer Press)

Lisa Spinner and her business partner/husband, Peter, have baked up a winning venture with Hannah Banana Bread.

Lisa's sales experience goes back to selling copiers and, in high school, clothes. Her college major, though, was in political justice with a criminal justice minor, and she spent several years working as an undercover cop for the Cook County State's Attorney's Office. It was only after she was on maternity leave after the birth of her second child, Hannah, that the idea for starting her own company almost landed on her lap.

It was a caterer's tardiness in delivering goodies for her daughter Hannah's christening that prompted Lisa to serve her own home-baked banana bread to friends. She developed a love of baking from her mother, the late ShirLee Krull, but said the recipe was that of her maternal grandmother, Eleanor Richier.

Friends at the christening raved about the bread, saying they could easily sell it to their clients at work. The idea of starting her own company -- named after Hannah whose name conveniently rhymed with the product -- was born. An attorney friend incorporated the company, and the next week Lisa was hitting the pavement looking for coffee shops willing to give it a try.

Mi Amici coffee shop in Barrington, where her in-laws lived, was the first to take orders. Then came two stores in Palatine, where she and Peter lived at the time. After that, Lisa said she saw sales opportunities everywhere she looked. She discovered Unicorn in Evanston after seeing the coffee shop in the background of a local news report.

"We are a unique gourmet product for people looking for special baked goods products," Lisa said of Hannah Banana Bread's line of products.

The major break came when they landed Sunset Foods, which has four grocery stores in the north suburbs, including in Highland Park, Libertyville and Northbrook. Business grew more after an agreement with Oberweis Home Delivery Service.

"I was baking 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I would sleep on the kitchen table. Peter would give me the baby to nurse. I had no help," recalls Lisa, saying the children came with her as she made her bread deliveries to shops in the north suburbs.

Eventually, Lisa contracted with Evanston baker Jean Kroll, owner of Sugar and Spice Extraordinary Sweet Treats. "We grew our businesses together. She would order the ingredients, but we were never partners. We had a very nice relationship. She's a great teacher. I could not be more grateful," Lisa said.

Now the company sells to 150 locations nationwide and will soon sell on their Web site (Hannahbananabread.com).

They even have a Glencoe resident doing sales for them, Gina Brogan, who had left her own business in California to be a stay-at-home mom when she and her husband moved to Glencoe. Lisa met her at the park when their kids were playing. "She's fantastic. She has brought in more sales than a nine-person firm," said Lisa.

The company's products now include breads named for her husband, Peter Pumpkin Bread, daughter, Hannah Banana Bread, and her two sons, JonApple Cinnamon Bread, and Declan's Irish Soda Bread. Her son, Joshua, still has no bread named after him yet. "He will. We're working on it," she said.

Looking back, Lisa said she is happy with the way she has melded her business and her family life. "It was quite an adjustment to work with your husband. Humor is a huge part of it. Once I told my husband he was fired. He said, 'Hey, you can't fire me!'" she said.