

Four generations of Trefzgers made bakery into a Peoria landmark

When you bite into a frosted thumbprint cookie from Trefzger's Bakery in Peoria, you're eating a dessert, yes. But you're also enjoying a little piece of a business that has, over the last 152 years, become one of the area's most well-known names.

The bakery, founded by Simon Trefzger in downtown Peoria in 1861, was run by four generations of Trefzgers. Brothers Joe and Thomas Trefzger sold the bakery in 1993 to Jeff Huebner.

"We introduced a few new things but tried to keep everything the way it was," said Huebner, formerly the pastry chef at the Pere Marquette. "It had been working so well already, why mess with a good thing?"

The bakery's staples include the thumbprints, white cake, orange chiffon cake and Danish coffee cakes. And creating these delicate treats is hard work.

"Back (when it opened), bakers were a dime a dozen, they were all over the place. Now, that knowledge isn't around anymore. It's hard work, physical labor with long hours, very hot during the summertime. You have to have really good work ethics and stamina," said bakery manager Donna Draher, who has been with Trefzger's for 24 years.

COMPANY FOUNDER

Simon Trefzger, who had come to America from Germany, was awarded a contract to make loaves of bread for the Union troops stationed near Glen Oak Park during the Civil War. He baked six days a week and would also make noodles and roast turkeys and hams for customers.

Eventually, cakes and other sweets showed up on the menu.

"Necessity forced him to go into a complete line of baked goods. If he wasn't baking them, his competition would be," said Joe Trefzger, a fourth generation baker who joined the family business in 1947, after getting out of the service.

Simon Trefzger's son, Charles Trefzger, started a wholesale bread business and shipped loaves by train to small communities throughout central Illinois.

CRITICAL TIME

Making it through the lean times of the Depression era.

"People didn't have the money to buy the baked goods," Donna Draher said. "Bread was always a staple, although bread doesn't make your bakery any money - it's too time-consuming. You still have to have it, it's a necessity."

KEY TO SURVIVAL

Draher says the bakery has had to adapt to trends. A few years ago it embraced the cupcake craze, making about 40 dozen each week. It also expanded the cake offerings, with new flavors and fillings. It has also become active on social media sites. Making a quality product has always been part of the bakery's recipe for success, the staff says. Joe and Gladys Trefzger, who have been retired from the business for 20 years, says they still get compliments on the thumbprint cookies when they are out in the community.

THE FUTURE

Owner Jeff Huebner would like to eventually move to a larger spot with more parking once his lease is up in two years, and he'd prefer to say in Peoria.

"We've gotten to the point now that we're finding it hard to have enough

space to put everything before the customers come and pick it up," said Huebner, who says he quadrupled the number of birthday cakes the store produces. "We have a limited amount of space in the store, and around graduation season there isn't enough space for everything. We want to be able to have a big enough store and production area to accommodate all the business."

TIMELINE:

1861 - Trefzger's Bakery is founded by Simon Trefzger at 54 Fulton St.

1870 - The bakery moved to 537 Main St. in Downtown Peoria and remained there for 83 years. It turned out to be an excellent location as a post office was built across the street, and customers would pick up a loaf of bread after picking up their mail.

1890 - A draw plate oven was installed, replacing the brick ovens. Bakers rolled out the shelf, filled it with doughs and cakes, then pushed it back into the oven to cook.

1923 - The draw plate oven was replaced with two brick ovens, one for breads and the other for cakes.

1937 - The first gas-fired oven was installed, a revolving oven made by the Allen Co.

1953 - Trefzger's moved to its current location of 3504 N. Prospect Road.

1993 - The Trefzger family sells the bakery to Jeff and Martha Huebner take over baking operations of the business. The Trefzger family had debated closing the bakery until a buyer was found.

2002 - The kitchen was remodeled to add a state-of-the-art oven with manufactured proof box and 40-pan rack oven, all computerized.