



Michael Manni '74: The Art of the Bakery Business

BY RAY RAGOSTA



LaSalle Bakery



By 9:30 a.m. the backrooms of LaSalle Bakery's Admiral Street store were surprisingly quiet. The dough mixers were silent; the ovens cooled. Several workers were ferrying large trays of pastries through, some of which would be sold here but others shipped to the Smith Street location. A few others were "finishing" cakes and pastries, a process that could mean decorating them, adding fruits and glazes, or dusting them with sugar.

The production area of one of Providence's most notable bakeries was subdued at this hour because bakers and their helpers begin work here at midnight and end their day around 8 in the morning.

Smith Street starts a little later – around 2:30 a.m.

Owner Michael Manni admits that these hours are a good reason why the bakery business was not his first love.

Manni, a 1974 graduate of Rhode Island College, began working at LaSalle Bakery in 1965 when a friend's father offered him a job as a pan boy, doing such tasks as scraping pans and sweeping floors. He then was a 15-year-old high school student. His boss was Jake DeMaria, who later passed the business on to him.

But Manni's memories of the bakery go back further. As a boy he lived just two houses behind the Smith Street store. He recalled, "My mother used to send me to get dough at six o'clock in the morning, and she would make doughboys. The guy I bought the bakery from used to come out from the back, wipe the flour off his hands, and put the dough in the bag. . . . Little did I know how it was going to work out."

DeMaria taught his young employee progressively more, and eventually Manni became a baker's helper. While Manni did enjoy working with his hands and learning about baking, his vocation was art. At first he set his sights on becoming a commercial artist but later switched to art education.

He said, "I thought teaching would provide the best option to make a living and still be able to pursue my painting and drawing. I graduated from RIC in 1974 with a Bachelor of Science in art education. There were no teaching jobs."

His background in education has been an asset in his business ventures. He said, "I became an educator at Rhode Island College. I learned how to teach and that has a definite reflection on my business."

"I applied to like 30 systems in Rhode Island and got a couple of interviews. I subbed for a year and a half but never got a job."

All the while, between the ages of 15 and 25, Manni continued to work part-time at LaSalle Bakery.

In 1975 DeMaria was in the hospital, and Manni went to visit him. To his surprise, his employer asked him if he wanted to buy the business.

"I literally almost fell off my chair," Manni said.

Although he knew the production end of the bakery, he knew little about business, so it was a tough decision. After discussing it with his wife Cheryl and mulling it over for a few months, he decided to become the new owner of LaSalle Bakery.

More than buying a business, however, Manni was inheriting a neighborhood tradition as the bakery had been in existence since the early 30s, with DeMaria taking it over around that time as well.

Manni always seems to think with two sides of his brain – the analytical and the creative. That is why LaSalle Bakery has become so successful, along with some guidance from DeMaria who stayed on to help the Mannis.

Manni observed of his association with his mentor, "I worked for him for 10 years; then he worked for me for 10 years."

With Michael and Cheryl Manni as owners, LaSalle Bakery grew extensively. They expanded the operation from two retail spaces to five, purchased the building and added to it. They also bought two adjacent houses and a parking lot. When a bakery on Admiral Street went up for sale, they acquired it, remodeled it, and moved half the production there. To both stores, they added cafés offering menu items not found in traditional bakeries, such as coffee, soups, salads and sandwiches.

Not only were the physical presence and product line of LaSalle updated, but the business was modernized in other



ways. For instance, all inquiries and orders are directed to a call center in the Admiralty Street location in order to free up sales staff. In-store customers can preview examples of special order items with a touch screen computer display; and off-site they can explore LaSalle Bakery's menu, product line, history and more through a sophisticated website developed by Tribal Vision, the business's marketing firm.

In addition, Manni recently purchased a \$55,000 machine that cooks and cools pastry cream, cutting the time to produce the confection to about one-half hour. Also, combining the cooking and cooling processes reduces the risk of food contamination, which actually caused the death of a man last year as a result of his eating a contaminated zeppole (from another bakery).



Machine for cooking and cooling pastry cream

“That gave me the incentive to buy the machine,” Manni said.

Many of these innovations result from Manni's ability to “think globally and act locally.” He credits a good measure of his success to his participation in national associations, such as National Retail Baker's Association, of which he was president in 1999. He gets to meet and learn from the “cream of the crop” as Manni noted.

How do his peers feel about LaSalle Bakery? Just last year *Modern Baking* magazine named LaSalle Retail Bakery of the Year. Manni's shop was chosen from some 24,000 bakeries nationwide and was the first-ever Rhode Island bakery so honored.

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“It also gave me confidence in a lot of areas that I wouldn't have had if I didn't go to school. For instance, I have no trouble getting up in front of a room full of people and speaking.”

The artist in Michael Manni has not remained totally dormant either. There is a sensual element in his descriptions of the baking process.

“Bread has this real emotional aspect to it,” he noted. “You love the therapeutic thing of touching the dough. Kids love it when they can get their hands in dough. It just feels good.”

But there is more to it. At 62 Manni is spending less time at LaSalle and has begun to paint again after leaving art behind for several decades. Recently he took classes at RISD and in Newport and has joined the Providence Art Club.

With two sons involved in the business – Michael Jr. in administration and John in sales – more changes may be around the corner.

Oddly enough, that is where Manni grew up and was educated just around the corner, proving that you don't have to leave the neighborhood to make your mark on the world.

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