

Dayton City Paper[®]

Miami Valley's Arts, Culture & News Weekly

Doing The TWIST

110 YEARS THE OLD FASHIONED WAY: SMALES PRETZELS

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FAMILY TIES

5th generation of pretzel benders on Xenia Avenue

By Jennifer Hanauer Lumpkin

Smales Pretzel Bakery has been around as long as the airplane. Theoretically, the Wright Brothers could have had a Smales pretzel. In fact it's likely, considering that Smales (rhymes with "sails") were the Montgomery County Fair pretzel up until the latter part of the 20th century.

Smales Pretzel Bakery on Xenia Avenue has pretzels, hard or soft, to varying degrees of saltiness, and with maybe a packet of mustard should you like. "We've just done the same thing for so long, it's probably the reason we've lasted this long," says Emma Smales, fifth-generation owner. "We know what we're good at, and we do it really well."

If you've seen "Stranger Than Fiction" and are familiar with Maggie Gyllenhaal's baker character Ana, you know a bit about Emma. Warm, effortless, passion at the ready but very much in control. As we sit talking in the front of the bakery, a well-meaning yet frenetic local comes in for a soda. I have difficulty making out most of what he has to say, but Emma knows him well. After he leaves, Emma explains that when the man says "he," he means himself. This woman's kindness should be a part of every business plan.

Emma was born in California but spent several years in the Miami Valley as a child while her father worked at the bakery. When her parents separated, Emma returned to California with her mother and sisters but made trips back to Ohio for summers. Emma received dual bachelor degrees from Sonoma State University in Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies before going on to get her masters in Public Health. Some day she would like to work in health education. For now, the needs of the family business have called, bringing Emma and her fiancé Joe—a television writer setting into his new role as Oven Man—back to Ohio.

"Part of running your own business is everything is up to you," Emma says. "If you want to work more, you can. I could work forever. I could keep working all the time. But you have to really make the time for yourself and know when you need a break."

From her studies

in the social sciences, Emma learned about self-care and knowing when you're giving too much. "You have to know when [to stop]. It's okay to take a day. You can just keep going all the time. There's always stuff to do. I'm naturally a work-a-holic. I'm just naturally go go go."

What's new for Emma is running a business, as she's always worked in nonprofit. "That's always been my focus, so it's definitely a shift from providing services to providing goods. It's a little weird."

While Emma didn't attend business school, she is familiar with the basic tenants of running a successful enterprise.

"I know that if you're overhead is low, and you don't have a lot of ingredients so there's not a lot of price fluctuation that's going to affect you, then you're pretty much good to go," Emma explains. "And we have such a solid customer base. They don't want us to change anything." Requests for gluten-free varieties or a dipping sauce are rare, but they do occur. "It's really just new customers who will ask if we have cheese," Emma says.

"The reason places have cheese is because their pretzels don't taste like anything, and you need something with it. But I feel like our pretzels are so good on their own, they really don't need anything."

A recent excep-

tion was at AleFeast this past winter where Smales partnered with Lee Anne House of HouseMade. Lee Anne, who is also owner-operator of Bad Dog Nice Taco, created a beer cheese to complement the pretzels. Emma is considering incorporating a HouseMade product into their lineup. "It's local and fits with what we're trying to go for."

with his family from Germany. He opened Gem City Pretzels in 1906 on Warren Street before briefly relocating to Main Street. The most lasting changes to Rudolph's pretzel dynasty came when his daughter Emma took over. Having taken her husband Lawrence "Lolly" Smales last name, Emma changed the company name to Smales Pretzel Bakery and in 1926 moved the shop to Xenia Avenue where it is still located today. Bold moves, especially for a woman in that time period, especially for a person not yet 30.

"I definitely take inspiration from her," says Emma, who herself is 28. "If she could do it, when I'm sure everyone was like, 'A woman can't do that, can't run a business by herself.' Even now when people walk in, they assume Joe is the owner. Sherry, she's a people esty- young

"Baking, as much as it is a science, it's an art, too."
— Emma Smales

"Even now when people walk in, they assume Joe is the owner. Or even Sherry, because she's older. People underestimate young people."
— Emma Smales

Or even because older, under-mate people."

The owner was Smales. The World War II veteran still enjoys coming to the bakery. Of her grandfather's long life, and the longevity of Smales in general, Emma says her dad jokes that it's all the salt that they work with preserving them.

Fourth generation pretzel benders Charles "Chuck" Smales, Emma's uncle, and Lawrence "Larry" Smales, Emma's father, became the fourth and fifth owner respectively. Emma became the sixth owner this past summer, keeping the bakery in family hands for five generations now. Emma and the bakery will both retain the Smales name after Emma and Joe marry this summer.

BUILDING WITH A PAST

Something that Emma has had to deal with that none of the bakery's previous owners have—more than a century of history and decisions wrought by her family. The current building at 210 Xenia Ave. is itself more than 100-years old and is of course requiring updates, repairs and good old fashioned TLC. The addition on the south side of the building recently needed a wall rebuilt when it was discovered that it had originally been built next to the foundation as opposed to on it.

"Which of my family members do I have to blame for this?" Emma smiles, considering which of her predecessors had made the poor structural choice. "I think about that now, so I try and do everything the right way because I don't want in 30 or 60 years or 100 years for my descendants to be like, 'Why didn't they just build this wall on the foundation?' I really do think of it terms of it's going to be here for another 100 years. I have to make sure that I do the right thing so they're not rebuilding a wall in 100 years because I feel like I'm getting stuck with a lot of that stuff."

Another bit of curio Emma has had to take on are the floor-to-wall-to-ceiling white tiles in the oven room, the result of a mid-century spat between Emma's grandpa and the then health inspector. A disagreement over grooves that Charles Smales had added to his handmade pretzel boards prompted the health inspector to require him to make all surfaces in the bakery cleanable, and so the distinctive top-to-bottom tiling. "After 60 years the tiles start to fall off," Emma says. "We're constantly putting tiles back up."

And for some parts of the bakery, well, it's just time for something new, though Emma is firm about prioritizing



Grandpa Charles, pictured here as a young boy, still enjoys coming to the bakery at age 96

SMALES FAMILY HISTORY

In 1895, Rudolph Schaaf came to Dayton as a child

craftsmanship and local sourcing to keep with the Smales directive. Floors were replaced in the addition with the help of her stepfather, and Jake Baker of Baker Salvage Company replaced the kiosk counter and added a unique light fixture and dining table with reclaimed wood.

GRAND OLD MACHINES

It's a powerful, mesmerizing presence, the stone oven taking up the entirety of the north wall of the building and has been since 1955. There's 60 years of flavor on that hot, rotating stone.

"No one knows how to work on it," Emma says regarding the 15-foot diameter behemoth that was brought in piece by piece and installed directly into the structure by the now closed New York Oven Company. "We've outlasted the people living who could work on it. It's a problem. When something breaks, we have multiple companies that will fix certain things, and we'll always ask them to send out the oldest guy because they're the only ones who have maybe seen something like this."



Larry Smales works next to the stone oven from 1955; photo: Bill Franz

With such a grand machine turning out the lifeblood of the business, relocating would be tricky at this point, if not impossible, but Smales isn't in talks for a move. "We've been part of this neighborhood [Twin Towers] for so long," Emma says. "We were part of it when it was really good, and we're still part of it now when it's not, so I think it's important that we still support the residents. And it keeps us kind of safe, too. We take care of them, they take care of us."

With all respect to tradition and the old ways, there are a few things that Emma wouldn't mind having new. Rolling machines, for instance, have come far in the last 50 years and are now smaller, easier to use and easier to clean. But such modernity comes at a price, so it's something Smales is working toward.

"We'd still twist them, but it would put out the noodles," Emma says. "Now we have to hand roll all the soft pretzels, which literally triples the amount of time it takes to make them." Getting pretzels out more quickly would benefit everyone, including getting fresher pretzels to Smales' patrons. "Part of it is keeping the artistry and keeping that tradition, but also, you're a business for all of these people."

SIMPLE, YET OH SO PARTICULAR

"Pretzel making is really easy, if you have the right stuff," Emma says. "If you have the right equipment and you have



Employees at Smales hand twist every pretzel; photo: Bill Franz

the right ingredients, it's not actually a hard process. We don't have a recipe. You just go by how the dough feels, which some people are better at than others."

The list of ingredients is simple: flour, salt and yeast, the most specific of these being flour. Smales used to use two different flours, one for the hard pretzels and one for the soft, but now they have a new flour that works for both. "It's technically a pie/cookie flour, instead of like a bread flour," Emma says. "For whatever reason, it works better for us."

Once you have the components, you have additional elements to contend with. "It's not ever going to be the exact same every time because that's not how dough is," Emma says. "Is it cold outside? There are all these variables that go into it. Baking, as much as it is a science, it's an art, too." Emma says she can't bake anything else or following recipes, so she's much more suited to this, where it just has to feel right.

While the ingredients for hard and soft pretzels are the same, albeit in varied measurements, hard pretzels are much more of a commitment. Both are rolled, twisted and sent into the oven, but the soft for only eight minutes while the hard go in for 30 and then spend 18 hours in a dry brick oven before they're ready. The hard are also smaller than the soft and sold in greater quantities, up to three times as many in a day. "It's a much bigger undertaking, hard pretzels," Emma says. "Much more time and a more labor-intensive process."

THE NEXT 100 YEARS

Emma has come along at a time when the bakery was in need of some love, some re-investment. "If it's going to be here another 100 years, we have to do these things," Emma says. "I'm not in it for the profit. I'm not in it to live off the money the bakery is making. It's not that kind of business. I came into it with that mindset. This isn't for me to be rich. It's just to keep it going. It's to keep it in the family."

And Emma has a great desire to play her part in the history of Smales Pretzel Bakery. "I think that there's not a lot of that anymore," Emma says. "I think that's why I felt like I had to keep it. People don't have family histories anymore, it feels like. It's really something special for this country to even have. It is partly me, but it's partly something that I couldn't imagine if it ended because I didn't take over."

It's hard to imagine a Dayton without family-owned businesses like Smales, and it's with deep gratitude



In a week, Smales Pretzel Bakery typically goes through:

1000 pounds of flour,
50 pounds of salt, and
150 tablespoons of yeast to make
5000 hard pretzels and
6000 soft pretzels.



that we stop in to see Emma and partake of her family's classic pretzels.

"We know what we're good at, and we do it really well."
- Emma Smales

Smales Pretzel Bakery is located at 210 Xenia Ave. in Dayton and is open 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Saturday. You can also now find Smales Pretzels at Mudlick Tap House in Germantown, Red Carpet Tavern in Linden Heights, Barrel House in Dayton and Dorothy Lane Market in Oakwood. For the latest on what's happening at Smales, visit facebook.com/SmalesPretzelBakery.



Emma's fiancé Joe, settling into his role as Oven Man; photo: Bill Franz



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