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Training is bakery's recipe for continued success

Rita Cooney presides over a food lover's nirvana – a place where under one long roof you can get yam-carrot-poppy seed bread, caramel popcorn, tomato-feta soup, lemon coconut bars, buttermilk pancakes, bittersweet Belgian chocolates, Monte Cristo sandwiches, classic apple pie in a “baby” size, banana splits, slices of pizza and much, much more.

“Every morning is a race against the ovens,” Cooney says from Breadstuffs Bakery and Screaming Bird Café in Brentwood, just off the roundabout. “Each of our 15 or so bread types is created in small batches and each recipe has its own personality. We don't use chemicals, preservatives or dough enhancers. Everything here is from scratch.”

So it's no wonder that while Cooney places a high value on learning new things – both for herself and her staff – she struggles to fit in formal training. “We say we'll do it some time, but finding the time and money is another thing.” Plus, she notes, in the food services industry, there is always more to learn.

That challenge is why Cooney readily agreed to participate in SkillsPlus, a program offered by the READ Society, Bridges for Women and the Community Social Planning Council and funded by the Canada-British Columbia Labour Market Agreement.

The program offers free training in the nine Essential Skills including reading, writing, document use, computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others, and continuous learning, says Helen Thomas, a workplace educator at the READ Society.

“One thing that appeals to busy employers is that we offer the training on-site and create custom programs suited to their business's unique needs,” Thomas says.

Breadstuffs staff participated in FoodSafe training, which focuses on many Essential Skills including oral communication, working with others and thinking skills.

Employee Heather McPherson says taking the courses at the bakery helped her apply the new information to the work environment. “We could walk through what the instructor was telling us.”

Cooney has seen increased confidence in staff who participated in the SkillsPlus training. “I notice they are more conscious of sharing and relating information to each other. They feel empowered,” she says.

More ...



Breadstuffs owner Rita Cooney with a small collection of her baked treats and employees Logan Grant and Heather McPherson.

SkillsPlus stories/Breadstuffs Bakery

That empowerment includes an increased willingness to learn, Cooney says. “Some of our staff were nervous – for some it was like going back to school – but we encouraged them to embrace the learning.”

Cooney is a big believer in continuous learning: “We make a lot of things because they interest us and challenge us,” she says. She would like to offer more training opportunities to her staff, many of whom are high school students. “I see this place as providing a safe work environment for young people. They start in the back and earn their way through the stations.”

That formula has created a Grade 12 student who makes “beautiful cakes” and a young female cook’s apprentice.

Along the way, Cooney and husband Dale Carter impart the business smarts and values that have allowed them to stay in operation for 13 years. “We are conscious of everything – gas, hydro, composting – and we teach our staff that just because we are in Canada we do not get to waste. We can’t bear waste.”

Breadstuffs regularly donates food to the Sidney Food Bank, the Saanich Tribal School breakfast/lunch program and Woodwynn Farm.

On this Friday afternoon, dozens of customers are loading up for the weekend, some enjoying a made-to-order sandwich in the café, others struggling to choose between pastry and chocolate.

Outside, a black-and-tan dog is tied up. He raises his snout, inhaling the yeasty air that escapes as the door opens and his owner returns. She sneaks a bite out of a treat hidden in a brown paper bag, but the pooch goes without. Some things are just too good to share.



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