

The Boston Globe - January 17, 2007

At A & J King, the business is a family affair

By Allison Arnett
Staff Writer

SALEM -- Jackie King checks the timer hanging on a lanyard around her neck. It's beeping, signaling that the young baker, the "J" of A & J King Artisan Bakers, must jump up to check apple tarts that "people are insane over." As she hurries from the retail space to the kitchen, her husband, Andy (the "A") comes through the door. His clogs, like hers, are white with flour, and as he sits down, he also keeps checking the time.

Baking can't be rushed, he explains. "If it's not ready, it's not ready." Andy's breads -- he makes about 14 -- mostly begin with a slow-rising starter. Jackie's croissants, sticky buns, and brioche take more than two days to prepare.

What hasn't taken any time at all is customers finding their way to this recently rehabbed spot. "We do have a loyal army of regulars," says Andy, exchanging greetings with several of them as they buy hefty triangles of bittersweet chocolate brioche pudding.

The bakery opened six months ago after the couple rebuilt the industrial-style space, adding wooden racks for breads, a little table where a photograph of their smiling 21-month-old daughter, Emaline, is placed over handmade animal crackers, and antique tables and chairs. Big storefront windows show off the rustic-looking retail area with its high ceilings, and the kitchen, where the couple works with another baker. Being on display, says Andy, motivates them to keep the room clean.

The Kings -- she's 27 and he's 29 -- met at New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier, Vt., and then worked for 3 1/2 years at Standard Baking Co. in Portland, Maine. After Emaline was born, they decided it was time to go out on their own. "Having a baby kind of changes your perspective on everything," Andy says. They sold their house in Maine and settled on this Salem location because there wasn't a bakery of this type there. Jackie grew up in Topsfield, where the couple lives now with her parents; her mother watches the baby. Andy is from Providence.

In the beginning, he worked 100 days straight. But because they want the bakery to be independent -- it's financed with a bank and family loans, and their own savings -- they're patient with split schedules. He works until midafternoon; she keeps more regular daytime hours. And though they're closed Mondays, one or the other is always there. "One of our goals is to get a day off together," he says.

They'd like to do more wholesale business and add sandwiches. "Our bread makes great sandwiches," Jackie says. What won't change, they say, is their dedication to good ingredients: fine quality Plugra butter, organic eggs, and New England cream from dairies such as Cabot in Vermont. They make their own brown sugar from raw sugar and molasses. "We're debating using only organic flour," says Andy, though Jackie adds, "Cost is a big factor."

Their instant success has been a pleasant surprise. A customer comes in and laments that the bakery was closed the first week of January so the Kings could take time off. "You can't do this to us," he says, then adds: "It's tough work. We thought we'd better start young."