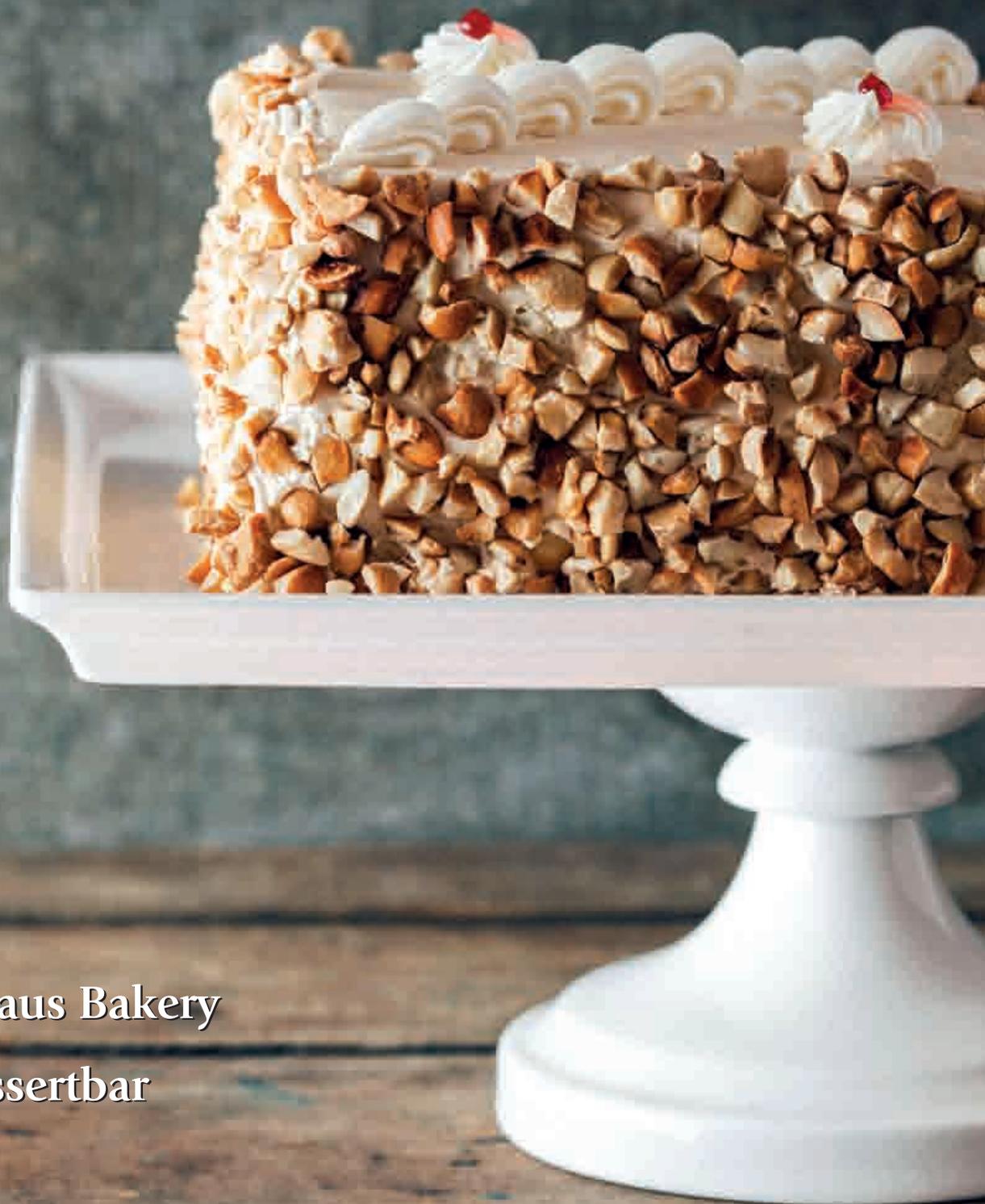


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Swiss Haus Bakery

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Bakery In Focus

“We focus on quality and traditional recipes. Everything is handmade, from scratch, with quality ingredients just the way it was when the bakery first opened its doors almost 90 years ago.”

Josh White – Owner of Swiss Haus Bakery





Swiss
Custom Cakery
Cookie Bakery

COOL
OFF
La Colombe
Iced Coffee
amh!

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secret
and
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Josh White and Donna Feldman



Philly Fresh Swiss Haus Bakery

By Campbell Ross Walker
Photos by Kelli Wilke

When I think of Philly, not much comes to mind. Sure, if pressed, I can come up with mental images of greasy cheese steak sandwiches and of course there's the Rocky statue. "Yo Adrienne!"

But, I'm the first to admit that I've not spent a heck of a lot of time in the City of Brotherly Love. Having traversed the 95 corridor between Washington, D.C. and New York more times than I can to remember, never once have I decided to stay on 95 North and visit the home of water ice, The Fresh Prince, Wawa and Tastykakes. And I'm here to confess that lack of adventure was a mistake.

Not only is Philadelphia a cool little city with a rich history, fantastic architectural highlights, and wild amphibious tours, Philly boasts an ever growing array of diverse delis, specialty shops and bakeries. And let's not forget the Liberty Bell – crack and all.

Thus, on my recent trip to Philadelphia, I had little trouble packing my day with historic tourist attractions, off the beaten path local haunts, riding The Duck and taking pictures with a Ben Franklin impersonator.

Toward the end of my day, exhaustion set in and I found myself jonesing for a caffeine and sugar rush. The birthplace of



America freedom takes a lot out of you. Luckily, I wasn't too far from another Philly landmark: Swiss Haus Bakery.

Swiss Haus Bakery bakes some of city's best cakes, pastries, and cookies using century old European recipes that have been a Philadelphia tradition for over 85 years. The kitchen is helmed by pastry chef Donna Feldman who has been with the bakery for 16 years and trained under the shop's original owners.

Recently acquired by Josh White, Swiss Haus Bakery delivered exactly what this intrepid explorer required and it is no fluke this Philly institution enjoys a loyal and ever growing, customer base who go nuts for their hazelnut cake and Swiss Cro-Crèmes.

I decided to have both while I sat down with Josh and Donna to learn more about Swiss Haus Bakery and what it takes to prosper in Philadelphia.

Pastry & Baking North America: With limited retail baking experience, you took over the Swiss Haus Bakery earlier this year. Did you at all fear not being able to control or contribute to the production of the business?

Josh White: It was never my plan to come into the bakery and run the kitchen. It was my goal to contribute on the operational and marketing side. Having lived within 3 blocks of the shop for years, I was very familiar with the quality of their products.

There were some obvious needs for improvement. Since the acquisition, we've added an espresso machine and launched a more user friendly and visual website with fabulous photography by Kelli Wilke.

I have a background in finance, so I view my job as the business side of the bakery. I try to drive people to the store for Donna to wow them with all of our cakes, pastries and cookies.

How did business school and your experience with online cookie company White & Wong prepare you for owning and operating a bakery?

I think it prepared me quite well, actually (especially since Donna and her team do all the heavy lifting). Wharton, along with my previous career in finance, gave me a business view of the company that many in the industry lack. I think that, combined with Donna's talent and experience in the kitchen, make us a great team. My experience with White + Wong gave me a year's look at what production challenges



a bakery has, what solutions can be applied, etc. It was basically a crash course in production and sales. I had some great help from the Dorrance Hamilton Culinary Center in West Philadelphia. The staff there was willing to help when we didn't know what we were doing and helped us promote our product to the point that we outgrew the kitchen we were operating in.

What is your greatest human resources challenge? What do you look for when you make a hire?

My greatest challenge is with the learning curve for new employees, both in the front and back of house. I have had some experiences where I've hired someone to work the counter after a promising interview and trial day, and then they just couldn't seem to grasp some of the job responsibilities. Letting those people go and starting a

search again can be disheartening, but necessary. Luckily, I haven't had to deal with any similar issues on the baking staff. Since taking over, I've added one baker to our staff, but it wasn't because we needed to replace anyone, it was because the business is growing and Donna just needs more hands in the kitchen.

How would you describe your management style?

Persuasive! At least in the front of house. I like to have control over the ultimate decisions as far as strategy for the bakery - what coffee drinks should we offer, is it pumpkin spice season yet, should we have some sort of breakfast special, etc. But, I also listen to ideas that our staff has. I've found that if you're willing to explain your decisions and show employees your reasoning, they will be much more willing to follow your direction. With regard to the back of house, I'm a bit more hands off. The kitchen is Donna's... she's the Head Chef. I would say my management style there is much more laissez-faire.

Have you seen a shift in your customer's expectations? More healthy? Less complex, back to basics?

We have added some vegan and gluten free offerings, but when you've been around as long as our store has, any change to existing products gets noticed. If we changed our buttercream recipe, we'd have people beating down our door asking why it's not the same as 50 years ago anymore. Donna is very aware of that fan base and she's made a conscious effort to leave recipes unchanged wherever possible. We've experimented with some sugar free offerings but as of yet haven't been able to get a result we're happy enough with.





What is the percentage breakdown in your business between retail and wholesale?

The majority of our business comes from our retail store. White + Wong does a good deal of business with local coffee shops and universities and I've started to make some headway in adding Swiss Haus' products to those contracts. That being said, over 90% of our business is retail.

Swiss Haus (Swiss Pastry Shop) has been a Center City staple for decades. What's the secret to its success?

Josh White: My explanation for the bakery's resurgence in the past decade is simply that Donna is awesome.

Donna Feldman: Our bakery has been a Philadelphia Institution since 1925 operating out of the same location. We have customers who have celebrated milestones in their life from birth to 50 year wedding anniversaries. I honor that tradition and respect the original family recipes to provide that "taste" that reminds people of family. I have added my own personal touch to the bakery keeping in mind that "baked from scratch" always makes a difference as well as choosing recipes that will represent what Swiss Haus Bakery is all about.

Where are we in the cycle of the cupcake craze? Is it nearing an end or does it have few more years left?

Donna: I believe the cupcake craze has ended. We used to have requests for wedding cupcakes, but I think that was more a sign of the times when we were going through a bit of a recession. People always enjoy a little cupcake. That will never change!

What is your best selling item? How do new products make it into the line-up?

Josh: In terms of dollars, it's without a doubt our hazelnut cake. We sell out of them routinely and make them to order daily. We also make wedding cakes with it and have it by the slice. It's the cake that people come from Maryland and Atlantic City (and beyond) to get. It's the cake that we get calls about asking if we can ship to Florida.

Donna: Without a doubt. It's our hazelnut sponge cake with our Swiss vanilla buttercream. It is the cake that put our bakery on the map. When we introduce new products it is usually due to season changes, latest trends in the business or recipes that any one of our bakers wants to try.

So Donna, when did you start working at Swiss Haus (Swiss Pastry Shop)? What were your first duties and what was your progression?

Donna: The family who started the bakery in 1925 sold it in 1998 and that was when I came aboard. I was entrusted with the job of learning their original recipes so I could keep the "Swisshaus" tradition alive. As I focused on these traditional recipes and became more familiar with them I started introducing products that reflected my personal tastes and interests gathered from my previous employment and mentors.

What's the most important thing you learned from the original owners?

Jim Hausman taught me that if you treat people with genuine respect and care they will honor your business as if it were their own.

Describe the working atmosphere at Swiss Haus?

I like my staff to be able to multi task and not be pigeon holed into one process. Everyone is expected to decorate cakes, mix batters, do benchwork and even answer the phone!



This creates a mutual atmosphere with no hierarchy. We all work together to get the days production done and share the satisfaction of reaching our goals.

How does the creative process generally work for you?

My pursuit of perfection drives my creativity. I get excited about working on the same technique over and over again until it is perfect. I never get bored through that process. My inspiration comes from hearing customer's stories, my personal experiences, getting ready for holidays and the changing seasons here in Philadelphia. My motto is "too many pastries and only one lifetime"!

What is your most popular cookie?

Our most popular cookie would be our hand piped butter cookies filled or dipped with white and dark chocolate, jimmies or nonpareils.

Are the Swiss Cro-crèmes still selling out? What do you think of about the trademark granted to Cronuts?

Yes, our Swiss Cro-Cremes are still selling out and the demand for them seems to be rising. I think the Ansel Bakery deserves to trademark the "Cronut". It is a unique and delicious pastry they introduced to the baking world.

With commodity prices going through the roof, what has been the affect on your business?

Josh White: There are certain items where we definitely have been noticing huge price hikes. The increase of butter prices in the past month has been the biggest impact. We're a pretty traditional bakery and buttercream and butter cookies are two of our biggest products.

Today, baked goods are everywhere; local super markets, convenient stores and coffee shops. How does Swiss Haus approach customer satisfaction and retention?

Josh White: We focus on quality and traditional recipes. If you want to spend \$10 on a birthday cake or get a huge muffin for a buck, you're going to get what you pay for – a poorly made product with lots of preservatives. Our approach is that everything is made by hand from natural ingredients and our customers have been satisfied with that for years. Coffee shops generally offer good coffee with mediocre pastries bought from mass producers. We offer La Columbe coffee and make everything from scratch. I think there's been a trend of local food and businesses and going to small bakeries over super markets for baked goods is part of that.

Are you incorporating any social media into your marketing efforts or does reputation and word of mouth suffice?

Josh White: Our customers are great and we enjoy a fantastic reputation and word of mouth. But, I wouldn't be able to talk to my marketing professors back at Wharton if I ignored social media completely. Part of my focus since taking over the business has been to grow our Facebook audience and build an Instagram audience. I've also started to market on Yelp and Foursquare to drive people into the store. It's an important aspect of the business to acquire customers.

I'd just mention here that I've had some help building our Facebook audience and increasing engagement from Likable Local, a New York based start up that focuses on social media marketing for small businesses. They've been pretty great at helping me get content up on Facebook and Twitter more regularly.



With an online business, what are the challenges in shipping perishable food?

Any order we get is baked fresh. That means we constantly have to be ready for online orders and execute on baking everything fresh the day after it's ordered. Also, packaging is a great concern especially with Swiss Haus' butter cookies. If someone orders food online, it needs to get to them intact. No one wants to open a box and see a bunch of broken cookies and crumbs. That means we've had to test and try out different ways of packing cookies in order to protect them from the bounces and impacts they're bound to get in shipping. Additionally, people are often paying to send someone a gift, and it has to look nice when it gets there...that's why we showcase our gift wrapping on www.whiteandwongbakery.com.

What advice can you give our readers who are thinking about opening/buying a bakery?

If you're opening or starting a retail shop, location is of primary importance. You need foot traffic to drive people to your store. Also, don't do it on your own. I know some people who come out of culinary school and try to open their own store and then are shocked by all of the business aspects. Or those with plenty of business experience who know nothing about small batch or commercial production.

What makes us a great team is specialization: Donna has no interest in negotiating a new lease or finding suppliers or keeping our Instagram up to date and I don't want to get in the kitchen and start running daily production. We each have our focus and they complement each other well.