

LITTLE CZECH BAKERY:

DELICIOUS IS THEIR BUSINESS



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According to Merriam-Webster, a kolache is “a bun made of rich, sweet yeast-leavened dough filled with jam or fruit pulp.” But for those that have experienced the Czech Stop in West, it is so much more. A kolache is not just a pastry, but a pillowy pocket of perfection filled with prime ingredients, and attention to the smallest detail is evident in every bite. Kolaches at the Czech Stop tell a story of a vibrant, passionate people who adapted to change and created a product that their customers cannot get enough of. They represent growth, fellowship, and a story of true passion. For those that flock from across the country, a kolache is so much more than a simple pastry.

In 1983 a small building sat off Interstate 35 in West, Texas. At exit 335, nestled along the frontage road, was Bear Kats Liquor. Among only a handful of ladies was Barbara Schissler, the store’s very first employee.

“The owner had the intentions of making a convenience store,” said Schissler.

But, as one can imagine, liquor did not sell well off a major freeway, so they had to rethink things. The employees were ordering their bakery products from a local West bakery called Kolache Kitchen. In true entrepreneurial spirit, the employees decided to try making their own and hoped for the best. Evelyn Cepak, a co-worker of Schissler’s, had a few recipes, so they decided to give it a go.

“She was our original girl. It was her dough recipe and her fruit recipes,” said Schissler. “She has been very instrumental in the success of this business.”

The Uptmore boys, who ran a business around the corner from the bakery, would come in every morning for coffee. One day Schissler asked Cepak if she could make a cream cheese kolache. She let the boys try it, and they loved it.

“The next week they asked if they could have more,” she said. “We thought if they like it so much maybe everyone will like them.” And they did.

With only two tables and an oven that held just four pans, the Little Czech Bakery began its journey.

The cream cheese kolaches lead to fruit kolaches. Then there were sausage and cheese kolaches, which are still a huge hit today. All of a sudden there were pies and cakes and candies too. The experimenting continued and soon the menu boasted creative flavors like “Hot Chubbie,” “Pepperoni Puff,” and “Czech Reuben.” Customers often overlook the cottage cheese kolaches, but Schissler says that is a mistake. It is one of her favorites.

They offer pecan rolls, cinnamon rolls, and maple twists too. Various pies and cobblers, still made with Cepak’s original dough recipe, are available also, along with cookies, muffins, brownies, and glass cases filled with enough sweets to satisfy even the finickiest of eaters.

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“As time progressed we had to expand and expand some more and expand some more until we’ve gotten to where we are today,” said Schissler.

Celebrities visit on a regular basis, and this once little store has even been mentioned in a famous Texas country song by Josh Abbott. The bakery is now such a hit they take orders ahead of time and even deliver. That is right, they ship, providing the temperature is under 50 degrees since everything is made fresh, and nothing is frozen, of course.

Ensuring the quality and consistency of their recipes is of utmost importance to the Czech Stop. All the products, from cakes, cookies, and pies to kolaches, sandwiches, and jellies, are checked for perfection. And it is checked the old-fashioned way, taste testing. Every Wednesday a management meeting is held, and seven ladies sit around a table and randomly select a few items to spot check.

“We just go around the table. Say we’re trying a sausage and cheese today. Everybody takes a bite of their sausage and cheese. We chew it up, we swallow it, we taste it, and we say, ‘what do ya think?’” said Schissler. “Just to make sure the quality is what it should be. Because, you know, if you don’t keep an eye on these things people tend to slack off. Maybe they change the recipe a bit here, a bit there, and pretty soon you’re not even selling your original product.”

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Majority rules in the management meetings. If five out of the seven women like it, then it passes. Quality control is not the only thing that goes on behind the scenes, recipe improvement and new creations are always cooking. According to Schissler, just because something tastes great and sells well does not mean it cannot be better. Stepping out and taking risks is what brought the bakery to where they are today. Trying new things is in their history, and creating new flavors has yet to disappoint.

Their newest kolache is the Jalapeño Popper, a jalapeño with bacon and cream cheese wrapped in Cepak’s famous dough. The management team comes up with ideas and then asks the production crew if they can make it. And they deliver. The creative process goes back and forth between these two teams until they come up with something that meets the high standards of a Czech Stop treat.

The employees are a tight-knit group, with some having worked together for over 30 years. “There’s not too many of the old Czechs left. The language isn’t spoken like it used to be 30 years ago. That kinda gets lost along the way,” said Schissler. “Most of the ladies, the ones that started out with us, along the way have passed away or retired. So as far as Czech heritage, we try to keep their recipes alive. And that’s the best we can do.”

And this is where the magic of the Czech Stop began. It is a true tale of time growing from a small convenience store to a flourishing bakery. Schissler is now CEO, and Cepak still works the front counter a few days a week, watching as her recipes delight literally thousands of people. While the ingredients in other’s pies and kolaches may be similar, the Czech Stop uses two important ingredients as old as time: true passion and best of all, love.

