

The Baker's Basket: Baked Creations For Your Good Taste

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HAMLIN (Lebanon Co.) —

Lucky is the person who answers the doorbell that Cheryl Maulfair rings. The Lebanon County woman delivers "the baker's basket," a basketful of scrumptious baked creations that she has made.

The Lebanon County entrepreneur, who operates The Baker's Basket from her home, sold her first wedding cake when she was only 13 years old.

"When I was in seventh grade, a woman demonstrated cake decorating at my school. I was fascinated, and I begged my mother to buy me a book on cake decorating," she said. "The books are self-explanatory. Everything I know, I learned from a book."

After studying the book from cover to cover, Cheryl began turning out dainty-decorated sweets. During high school, she developed a substantial business by filling orders for classmates who wanted to present a decorated goodie to their sweethearts with the message, "Love is...."

Although busy with baking throughout high school, Cheryl got a license for cosmetology and worked full-time in a nursing home. She and her husband, Bruce, also had six children who now range in ages from 5 to 15.

Because she enjoys baking, she got the idea one year ago to start The Baker's Basket. She fills a basket with a variety of items such as pumpkin roll, whoopie pies, homemade pies, cupcakes, cheesecake with pineapple topping, and cookies wrapped in cellophane and tied with a bow and an attached card.

"Instead of flowers, send a gift basket," Cheryl encourages.

She takes orders as a flower shop does and delivers within a 20-mile radius. She prefers orders one week in advance but is known to fill orders given the same day if she isn't too busy. The variety of items included in each basket are freshly baked the same day as delivered.

The business has flourished. Many days, Cheryl works from six a.m. to 10 p.m. filling orders.

"I need help desperately," she said, "but I can't seem to find anyone who provides a consistent product that meets my standards."

"I'm fussy," Cheryl said. "I'm particular about the product that goes out of my house. Whatever is baked under my name is my reputation."

Cheryl keeps her recipes in her head — recipes that she has perfected over the years. Special favorites are pumpkin roll with a cream cheese filling and a rich cheese cake with pineapple filling.

Everything is made from scratch — never from packaged mixes. In fact, she insists on fresh fruit for her pie fillings.

"I don't use canned fillings — anyone can do that. I want my stuff to be top quality. It tastes so much better fresh."

When fruit is in season, she cleans the fruit herself. Her children grow strawberries and pumpkins that Cheryl uses for fillings.

"I believe in keeping children busy so they don't have time to fight," Cheryl said. The Maulfairs have 25 acres and raise steers and rabbits.

To watch Cheryl decorate cakes, the process looks easy. She forms wax paper in a funnel shape



Baked, decorated, and delivered to your door—Cheryl Maulfair does it all.

and inserts a Wilton metal tip in it. With deft, quick movements, she turns out spectacular creations within minutes. All of it is done free-hand.

When she first began cake decorating, she used patterns and marked cakes but now her experienced eye automatically enables her to draw designs proportionally spaced.

"I can't understand why people pay me to do this," Cheryl said. "It's so easy. I just marvel that more people don't do it themselves."

When reminded that many people do not find cake decorating easy, she said, "This is my gift. Some people are just cut out to do this like others are to draw or sing."

As she talks, she is a whirlwind of motion. Washing dishes, measuring flour, stirring pumpkin, wiping off countertops, providing lunch for her 5-year-old son, covering cardboard with aluminum foil, checking the oven — she never stops to rest.

"If people would not overbake, they would have a lot more success in baking," Cheryl said. "I always switch my items from the top to the bottom oven rack while baking."

With such a busy baking business, there is always dishes to wash, crumbs to sweep up, and countertops to wash off. "I use my kitchen, basement, and dining room," she said.

"I don't get the same satisfaction out of cleaning a closet than I do baking. I guess the kid in me likes to make a mess," Cheryl said as she surveyed her spacious kitchen that was built with her business in mind. In addition to using two standard ovens, she uses a convection oven and has a 20 quart mixer, but uses a standard Kitchen Aid mixer for much of her work. "It isn't built to take this abuse and I've had to replace it," she said.

A large island provides work space that holds several cakes, pies, pumpkin roll, cheesecake, and "duds."

Duds are the pieces cut off the top of the cake to provide a flat surface for decorating or a less than perfect pie or cupcake. "My family is not big on eating duds," Cheryl said. "They prefer to eat first-class stuff, but sometimes they must settle for the duds."

Cheryl delivers basket orders, not individual pie or cake orders, within a 20-mile radius. She offers three different size baskets, with 14, 20, and 25 items included. Delivered, these baskets cost \$16, \$21, and \$26.

Orders vary, reaching a high of 65 baskets delivered within two weeks before Christmas. Reactions of those who receive a basket are sometimes surprising and provide Cheryl with what she calls, "instant gratification."

Those who receive a basket as a sympathy gift seem especially pleased. One said, "I'm so glad it's not flowers, but something we can eat and serve guests."

Her baker's baskets are delivered as doorprizes, birthday and anniversary gifts, as thank-you gifts, and for other reasons.

One time, a recipient remarked, "Oh, my husband and I don't eat this sweet stuff."

Cheryl said, "I didn't have a very satisfied feeling when I left her house, but a few weeks later, the woman called up and ordered six baskets for friends — she enjoyed it after all."

Cheryl also sells her baked goods in a nearby grocery store and a small restaurant.

For more information on gift baskets, wedding, and any occasion cakes, and pies, call The Baker's Basket at Hamlin, (717) 933-4071.

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