

Flour Power

By Layah Goldish

It's Friday at 5:00 a.m. Most Harrisburgers are still asleep. A wonderful aroma permeates Varda Gewirtz's home on Green Street as she bakes challah. Proprietress of "Challah with a Twist," Gewirtz used to bake throughout the week and freeze her loaves until Friday. Several years ago she decided to bake all the loaves on Friday morning so her customers could have freshly baked bread for Shabbat.

Gewirtz and her husband, Rabbi Joseph Gewirtz, a Judaic studies teacher at The Rabbi David L. Silver Yeshiva Academy, have been living in Harrisburg since 1985. Over the years, the Gewirtzes have had the privilege to open their home to many people wishing to experience Shabbat. Each guest had the same comment, "Could you please pass the challah?" Although not a businesswoman at heart, Gewirtz decided to market her home-made challah to enhance many more Shabbat tables.

Gewirtz has been baking since 1994, refining her recipe over the years and adding new products to her line. She now sells cinnamon

and chocolate babka, whole wheat challah, whole wheat bread, and two-tone, a challah with both white and whole wheat strands entwined. Her smaller size challahs cost \$4.50, and the rest of her products cost \$6.00.

All of Gewirtz's baked goods are completely natural with no trans-fats or preservatives. The babka recipe she used originally called for margarine, but Gewirtz worked hard to modify the recipe to retain the taste her customers loved while substituting canola oil for the margarine. "Babka is babka," says Gewirtz with a hint of a smile. "It's not a health food, but I don't feel guilty selling mine." Customer Arlynn Weber describes herself as very health conscious and buys Mrs. Gewirtz's babka because it has no trans-fats. Her family in New Jersey and Washington also love the challah and babka.

Since there are no preservatives, Gewirtz suggests freezing the leftover challah slices. Of course, the advice is often unnecessary since many customers admit there are no leftovers. One customer said that her husband can sit and eat

all the leftover slices in one sitting. Other customers say leftover challah makes the best French toast.

Gewirtz currently sells about 75 loaves per week, but for the high holidays, she usually bakes over 400 challahs. Most of her customers have standing orders which they pick up every Friday. Customers who order less frequently can usually order until Thursday or take their chances on Friday that there will be extra on hand.

Contributing to the challahs' home-made taste is the fact that they are actually made in Gewirtz's modest kitchen and baked in her two non-commercial ovens. The total process takes about eight hours and is a blur to anyone watching. She simultaneously keeps track of the ingredients going into the dough, the rising dough, the dough she's braiding, the rising unbaked challah, and the challah in the oven. Amidst all the activity in the kitchen, she is also answering the door and conversing with the early-arriving customers. "I have really special customers. I enjoy getting to know them and

then I'm even happier when they enjoy my challah," says Gewirtz.

Some of Gewirtz's most satisfied customers become former customers because they make their own, using her recipe! Not only does she share her recipe, Gewirtz invites women to her kitchen and guides them through the process so they can feel comfortable doing it in their own homes. "Anyone who is afraid to work with yeast, asks me for my recipe. It's so easy," offers Gewirtz.

If it's bad for business, why does she share her recipe and give lessons? "Jewish women have three special Mitzvahs - opportunities to draw closer to God. Lighting Shabbat candles, keeping the laws of marital life, and making challah including separating a piece of dough as a symbolic gift to God. I'm thrilled when people want to do the Mitzvah of making and separating challah," explains Gewirtz. Before she braids her first batch, she removes some dough and recites a prayer.

Gewirtz's challah has an unforgettable flavor. Customer Jayne White relates that she once brought the challah to a relative in another city who happened to have a

Harrisburger over for the Shabbat meal. Without even being told, the guest knew it was "Varda's challah."

Her customers agree it's worth the extra stop. Customer Devon Jacob says, "We didn't have good challah until we discovered 'Challah with a Twist.' The supermarket challah just doesn't cut it." Bev Isaacson says, "It's the best bread I ever had. We had family from California, and they thought so, too. It's worth the extra trip!" Ricci Doctrow concurs, "It's worth making an extra stop - it's part of my routine."

The challah may be delectable, but there's another reason that people go out of their way. They know when they pick up challah, they pick up a taste of Shabbat. Besides buying challah, they experience the beautiful atmosphere of pre-Shabbat preparation. Customers meet other customers at the Gewirtz's home, and there is a sense of community getting ready and welcoming Shabbat together. Marian Frankston has been a customer since the first week. "I always say, she doesn't sell challah, she sells Shabbos."

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