

Roeser's rolls with the paczki

Relatives, staff, customer tell story of Chicago's oldest family-owned bakery

By LOUISA CHU
Chicago Tribune

When you tear a paper ticket at Roeser's Bakery in Humboldt Park, you might be there for a box of sweet rolls or a torte dripping in sticky strawberries or, if you're like more than half the customers, a custom-made cake. But you're also there for something else: the smiling faces that have kept this bakery in business for 106 years.

Since 1911, one family of bakers has survived through four generations by changing with the neighborhood and maintaining a strong connection to the community. Oh, and by making a heck of a butter loaf. Here is a history of the bakery, in the words of current family members, employees and a customer.

Part 1: 1905-1946

John Charles Roeser III (owner, 1985-present), 63: In 1905 my grandfather, John Roeser, arrived in Chicago from Germany. He went from Germany to England to Canada to Chicago. He was on his way to Australia. A friend of his convinced him to go to Chicago instead, so they got on that ship.

He and another fellow, Jaworski, they opened a wholesale bakery in 1907 at 740 N. Wells St. But my grandfather decided he no longer liked the wholesale bakery business because you worked all night, then you got in your horse and wagon and delivered it, and you came back, and you started all over again.

He really had a propensity for cakes. He had it all lined up to buy a bakery at Armitage and Kedzie from a widow. They had a good cake business. Right before they closed on the deal, she backed out because she said she could not leverage her future on a single man with no children. So he ended up buying the bakery where we currently are. Which just goes to show you how luck goes your way. North Avenue ended up being the big street versus Armitage not being such a major street.

In 1911 when my grandfather opened the bakery, the neighborhood was predominantly Scandinavian and Norwegian and some German. He made sweet rolls, rye bread, Danish and cakes. Our basic cake is a lot different than what most bakeries offer; we make a hot-milk sponge cake. That is something most people do not do anymore because it's labor intensive and more sensitive.

John "Johnny" Charles Roeser IV (vice president), 28: The butter loaf is one of our oldest and most famous products. It's an all-butter braided Danish baked in a bread mold. We put the sweet-roll icing on top with some streusel. (In my great-grandfather's era), people would walk to the bakery and get their coffee cake and sweet rolls for breakfast, and then they'd walk back and get their French bread for their sandwiches for lunch. And then they'd walk back and get their crunch cake or Linzer torte for after dinner.

Roeser III: My grandfather hired my grandmother, Hattie. He was substantially older than her, like 18 years, and he wanted to date her. So he fired her, knowing either her mother or father would bring her back to the bakery to find out why. He said, "Because I'd like to ask her out and I can't if she works for me."

In 1936, my dad started working full time. He came in between wars, in the middle of the Depression. He took a class from a guy named (Joseph) Lambeth in the '30s, who was the ultimate of decorators back then. When you see wedding cakes with all that really intricate thin lattice work, where you see a border that's added on and on and on, so it keeps piling up, that's the Lambeth style of decorating. It's string work and drapes on the side. And that style now is coming back, so always what's old is new again.

In 1946, John Roeser II installed the bakery's neon sign, which still hangs outside today.

Part 2: 1947-1985

Roeser III: My dad (John Roeser II) took over sometime in the 1940s. Each time a new generation of Johns comes into the bakery, the neighborhood changes. Which is probably one of the reasons we've been successful, because each of us was willing to change with the neighborhood. After World War II, the next big influx of immigration to the city was from Poland. A lot of Humboldt Park and all the way along Milwaukee Avenue, starting in Logan Square going all the way up to Forest View Bakery, was all Polish. (The Polish community) had the same basic tastes in bak-



Weekend mornings are always busy at Roeser's, with customers coming in to pick up cakes or order from the bakery case.



John Roeser IV regularly works 12-hour days, seven days a week. Says his dad: "Last October, I semi-retired. I still own the bakery, but Johnny's the boss. He's the young one, and I'm the good-looking one."

ery goods, as far as breads and sweet rolls and Danish and all that, so it kept going. (Editor's note: The bakery added paczki at this time.)

There was 12 bakeries between us and Pulaski in an eight-block range when my grandfather and father were working, all of which were doing good business.

Tony Kolaski (regular customer), 74: We've been going to the bakery 60 or 70 years. My grandparents were born in Poland. My mother and father started our business (Loyal Casket funeral home), and my mother always brought bakery goods home because there were four boys in the family. She always stopped (at Roeser's), even on Sundays. For Lent, she got bismarks — they call them paczki. Those have always been good. My parents loved the apple strudel and cheesecake. Us boys loved the chocolate chip coffee cake.

Roeser III: My first jobs, I had two. I was probably 7. Back in the day, bows were big on wedding cakes — ribbon-type bows. And we had a little machine that made bows, and so my dad would pay me a penny a bow. We never got allowances. German family, you worked.

And I used to make sugar molds. They were used on cakes. You would mix sugar and water together (in pan molds shaped like baskets or flowers) and put them in the oven and dry them out. Again, for a penny a piece. (My dad) used to give me all of our bent pans to use, the reason being they would buckle, they would move, so half the things I would make would get broken. Because he didn't need that many, but he had to keep me busy. If I made too many, you'd just break them back up and use the sugar again.

Everybody's the same; whether you're the owner or whether you're a baker, odds are you start the same way, and it's scraping the floor and washing the pans. My dad handed me a scraper one day, and he said "All right, start scraping the floor," just like his dad told him. "Someday you might own the place. You better at least know how to scrape the floor." It still has to get done every day.

Roeser IV: We have wooden floors here. You have the terrazzo floor out in the main lobby, but behind the cases, those are all wood floors, and they go all the way to the back door. You get on your hands and knees and you

take a metal scraper and you scrape all of the dried-up sugar, frosting and anything else that gets on the floor. I still do that today if I have to.

Roeser III: First you start out as a floor scraper, then you start boxing cakes and then you start learning basic bakery skills, like cooking fruit or frying doughnuts or making buttercream. And then you move up to the live stuff, like Danish or breads or things of that nature. And hopefully, if you have a knack, you start decorating cakes.

In 1985, John Roeser III took over the bakery from his father.

Part 3: 1986-today

Roeser III: By the mid '80s (the neighborhood) was predominantly Puerto Rican. (The families) were great customers for us. I loved it because they were cake people. They loved strawberry whipped cream cakes. They were good family people that liked to celebrate together. Everybody was happy.

Those days are gone. Right around us, you had Continental Can just past North and Kostner, where the Walmart is now. You had Helene Curtis. These were huge, huge companies. You had Brach's candy factory. These people used to come in every morning and afternoon. The shift foreman would buy sweet rolls and doughnuts for his shift workers. When you lose 1,000 people from one corner, that's hard. As these places go away, so does your business, and it doesn't get replaced. (Editor's note: In July 1999, new owner Suiza Foods sold all of Continental Can's U.S. packaging operations. Unilever purchased Helene Curtis and shut the Chicago plant down in 2000. Brach's closed its West Side factory in stages, starting in 2001 and ending in 2004.)

Our employees are critical. For a small place, we have a couple people (who have worked here) over 30 years, a few people over 25 years, several people over 20 years, a lot of people over 15. And it's a grueling job. You're working holidays, you're working nights, you're making something fresh every day. We treat them like family, and they treat us the same way. No business like ours can be successful without truly dedicated employees, and we have been blessed to have them.

Roeser IV: Our longest employee has been here 33 years. Second is 30 years today, actually.

I got him a nice gold watch with a Roeser's emblem on it. He's my main night baker. He's doing the Danish, sweet rolls, coffee cakes, breads and cake layers for us to put together.

Roeser III: The two longest guys would not talk to you. People who work at night, work at night for a reason. They don't like people (laughs).

Virginia Fernandez (employee): I've been working here 23 years. I work five days a week. I start about 11:30 until 8 o'clock, closing time. We get a lot of cakes on Saturdays, about 200 cakes. Sometimes they're kind of heavy. One time I dropped about three cakes in that cooler over there. I don't know what happened (laughs). Sometimes when customers come in, I just know it's their first time. To me, they should taste the tres leches cake. It's a best-seller and really good. I like bread pudding a lot; that's my favorite. For my granddaughter's birthday, it's the strawberry cakes.

Jose Chico (baker): It's going to be my 20th anniversary on May 18. My first job was doughnut fryer person. I start 5 o'clock, Fridays 4 o'clock, in the morning. Every day is different. Some days we work 12 hours, other days 10 or 14 hours. Five days a week, six or seven days a week, it depends. I love my job. I still feel alive (at the end of a shift). I could keep on going another five hours.

Every five years, there's changes here. We used to make 300 cakes every weekend, but those were simple. Now we make less cakes (because) they're fancier and more time-consuming. But our priority is our customers and pleasing them.

Roeser III: All of a sudden in the late '90s and 2000s (customers started asking for) smooth cakes or just flowers, less decoration. Today, it's pretty much anything goes. The Lambeth thing is starting to come back, but it's extremely expensive. It didn't come back the way he did it. Now it's extremely intricate.

When we had our 100th anniversary, we had this huge party in the parking lot. Then we collected donations for our youth foundation. People sent money, like you would at a wedding almost, and we donated to solely for the schools around us, solely for music, arts and their athletic departments. One of the reasons we've survived so long is we've always been involved within the community. And that's a big part of being a family business.



Butter loaf is one of the signature items at Roeser's.



A Neapolitan torte shows off the bakery's cake artistry.

Kolaski: I have a standing order: 12 biscuits in a box. It's there every day when I walk in the door. They put in an assortment: chocolate doughnut, plain doughnut, twist, some got cherries on them, some got apple slices, some got pecans. All of my employees got a 10 o'clock coffee break with a sweet roll.

When it comes to Saturdays, I order two chocolate coffee cakes and a butter loaf, which nobody has anymore. I have families and funeral directors that come down, and it's all gone by the end of the day.

Roeser IV: I started working here when I was about 10 (in the late '90s). My father started me at the bottom, so I was scraping dishes, I was washing floors. I moved up to doing cookies, then I moved up to putting together cakes, then I moved up to icing cakes, then I moved up to decorating cakes, then I started working on equipment. Being a small business, we don't have the financial resources (of) most bigger corporations.

Roeser III: The thing that hurts me the most is I can't find my grandfather's old recipe books. I remember seeing them when I was young, and I don't know what happened to them. They were in German, of course. I searched high and low for those books.

We still make cannoli and challah, but we call it egg twist because otherwise people don't know what it is. We don't make many now, but we made them for all those years. At Christmastime, we make julekake. It's the Scandinavian version of a German stollen, except for it's got cardamom in it.

Roeser IV: We've made so many things here over the 106 years that if there's something we don't make anymore, we can still make it. Just the other weekend, we made this lemon form cake, kind of like a Bundt cake with yellow sponge cake, and we would smear lemon over it and dip it in raw, wet coconut. That used to be a really popular item for us 10 or 15 years ago.

Roeser III: Last October, I semi-retired. I still own the bakery, but Johnny's the boss. He's the young one, and I'm the good-looking one.

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