



Mimosas on the house

Roland Park Bakery and Deli celebrates 25th anniversary

By Jazzmen Tynes
jtynes@patuxent.com

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Anita Ward, owner of the Roland Park Bakery and Deli in the Roland Park Shopping Center, served up traditional breakfast fare -- and free champagne mimosas -- to celebrate the eatery's 25th anniversary Jan. 5.

During breakfast, customers signed well-wishes on an embroidered apron with the words, "Congratulations on 25 Years," printed on it as a gift for her.

As they sipped their drinks and munched on toast and muffins, the customers, most of them seniors, reminisced about the eatery, the longest tenant in one of the oldest off-street shopping centers in the nation.

"The good bran muffins attracted me initially. I like coming here for the ambiance and the people," Gene Byrd, of Madison Park, said over a breakfast of fried eggs, sausage, toast and coffee Monday morning. "It's just a real cozy place."

Bruce Marsh, a former Roland Park resident, who now lives in Hunt Valley, said the family-like atmosphere makes the deli appealing. He and his longtime friend, Bob Condlin, of Roland Park, stopped by to congratulate Ward and grab a quick bite to eat.

But it isn't usually quick for the two.

"Bob and I usually sit and talk for about two hours," said Marsh, a geologist and Johns Hopkins University professor. "It's not like you're in a busy food court in the mall. It's off the beaten path and everyone is just down to earth. It's like family here."

The closeness is what keeps customers coming back, said Condlin, a law professor at the University of Maryland.

"She (Ward) remembers everybody's name," he said. "You can't say that about every restaurant you go to."

Ward, 58, of Middle River, credits her success to her loyal customer base.

"From day one, I kept a book about all of my customers," she said. "I'd write their names, their orders and a description about them. And then at night, I'd go through the book and try to remember all of the customers. I think I know about 80 percent of my customers by name. There are so many places to eat and competition is fierce. If you have that personal connection with people, they remember you and they keep coming back."

Ward said she had no intention of starting a bakery and deli in 1983. At the time, she was a pharmacy technician at Union Memorial Hospital and was considering training to be a pharmacist. But, after learning about a vacant spot in the shopping center from her husband, Patrick, a contractor, they decided to buy the building and open a deli.

"I thought it was time to try something different," she said.

Without any experience running a restaurant, Ward worked for about a week in a sandwich shop owned by a friend to get a feel for the restaurant business.

"I got to see what it was like dealing with the customers and the business aspect of it all. From there, I decided that this is what I wanted to do," she said.

Ward's day starts at 4 a.m., when she begins preparation for baking pastries for the day. By 7 a.m., her

staff is on hand getting ready for the rush of breakfast customers. At 9 a.m., Ward is back in the kitchen baking again as the staff serves up the last few breakfast orders and prepares for lunch customers. By 3:30 p.m., the doors are closed and the staff begins to clean and prepare for the next day.

"It's a lot of work, but it's like you get to see old friends everyday," said Amy Malla, who has worked there for seven years and does a bit of everything, including baking, grilling and running the cash register.

Ward says her most challenging experience was learning to bake.

"At first, we hired people to do the baking," she said. "They'd stay around for a while and then move on, so I figured I'd learn how to do it myself. I read a lot of books and watched our staff and I eventually learned how to bake everything.

"I bake so much here I hardly bake at home. The holidays are the exception, of course."

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