

Table Hoppin': Bean Counter Bakery continues rise despite pandemic

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Alice Lombardi of Bean Counter Bakery Café is a successful businesswoman who has led her company through unanticipated twists and turns.

This month amid the coronavirus pandemic Lombardi remained optimistic and held a soft opening of a new flagship location at 270 Grove St., Worcester.

The first Bean Counter Bakery Café was established on June 1, 2001, at 113 Highland St. in Worcester, and then three months later 9/11 happened. "I'll never forget that date," said Lombardi, who recalled she was in the kitchen making pastry cream when she heard the news. After 9/11, Lombardi thought she had faced the worst the industry could experience.

Fast-forward to this month and May 20 the day Lombardi held the ribbon-cutting ceremony of her new 5,000-square-foot flagship store at 270 Grove St. She admitted opening a fourth business amid the coronavirus pandemic has been difficult and challenging.

"As business owners we've weathered upheavals like 9/11, the downturn of 2008 and other crises," said Lombardi. "I've been a businesswoman for 20 years, and I've been through a lot but at the end of the day, especially during this time, I feel blessed that my family and I are healthy."

Lombardi said she had a good feeling about the Grove Street location (former Gervais Car Wash/Auto Body) when she first looked at the property in 2016. She purchased it the same year from Gervais family members who retired from the business founded by their father. The property had been available for a couple of years with no takers, according to Lombardi, who said she and

the owners originally had a good old-fashioned handshake to seal the deal. “The family received several other inquiries the day after my offer but they stuck to our agreement, and to this day I am still touched by the family’s thoughtfulness and kindness to me,” said Lombardi.

When the pandemic began, Lombardi had to lay off about half her staff, but the Grove Street space and the Paycheck Protection Program have allowed her to bring back all the employees, she said. A full-time production manager and front and back of the house managers work at the new site. In time, she said she would like to create more work opportunities.

The Grove Street building will have two other tenants: BankHometown and The Eyebrow Place, with current locations at the Greendale Mall in Worcester and Solomon Pond Mall in Marlboro. After BankHometown’s merger with Millbury Savings Bank last year, the bank first announced it would have a branch on Grove Street.

Lombardi, an engineer, designed the working spaces at the new site. “The work and traffic flow are perfect,” she said, adding that she wants everyone to be comfortable in their work space and is fortunate to have “very experienced bakers and decorators” on staff.

The Bean Counter will go through several operational changes with the opening of the flagship store.

The Highland street store will become more of a café, according to Lombardi, who said customers will still be able to buy coffee, assorted pastries, etc. However, all the store’s custom cake and specialty orders now will be made and picked up at the Grove Street location, which has 32 parking spaces. “It will be easier for customers because at Highland Street, we only have on-street parking,” said Lombardi.

Also, as of May 22, all Bean Counter phone orders have been transferred to Grove Street, the primary bakery where pastry chefs will prepare all wedding and custom-made cakes.

The chef team at the Bean Counter, 288 Boston Turnpike, Shrewsbury, will make only birthday cakes and standard decorated cakes, according to Lombardi, who said customers can still pick up product in Shrewsbury.

The Shrewsbury store and Lombardi’s second brand Café Noir, 307 Grafton St., Shrewsbury, continue to sell coffee and assorted pastries and desserts.

Beginning June 1, the Bean Counter Bakery Café will have an ecommerce menu website. “The online menu will include everything that’s offered in Bean Counter’s pastry cases,” said Lombardi. Customers will be able to browse the menu and photographs and order and pay online.

All Bean Counter locations currently are open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. for takeout and pickup, with at least two employees on site. Lombardi explained that one employee assists customers with takeout orders, while the other focuses on cleaning and sanitizing to keep everyone safe.

Lombardi also pitches in with sanitizing stores. She said she was happy to hear that one Bean Counter customer especially appreciated her work. “A customer recently told my husband that she saw an older woman doing a fantastic job cleaning and sanitizing at the Highland Street store,” joked Lombardi, who admitted to being the “older woman.”

Lombardi said about 50% of the Bean Counter bakery options are takeout, so in some ways the business was more prepared to handle the state’s new protocols during the pandemic.

The wedding season had promised to be bigger than ever for the business prior to COVID-19. “Fortunately, customers postponed wedding cake orders, and we didn’t have a single cancellation,” said Lombardi. “Double bookings could be a challenge, but the new building has more space and that’s a blessing,” she said.

Orders for six- and eight-inch cakes also have tripled. “I really believe people are tired of cooking and baking at home and are ordering out,” said Lombardi, who anticipates busier days ahead, especially for Father’s Day and graduation family celebrations.

Lombardi and her husband, Domenico (Dom), also an engineer, came to Worcester in the 1980s when he got a job here. “We were only going to be in the city for two years,” said Lombardi, “but we fell in love with the community and never left.” She credits her husband with “discovering” all the Bean Counter locations. “I wouldn’t be in business without his support,” she said.

The couple has a daughter, Marianna Lombardi, and a son, Domenico Lombardi, a clinical researcher in San Francisco.

Lombardi said her daughter, a tattoo artist and barista at the Highland Street Bean Counter, is her social media coordinator helping with the production of a new product line. Both children have long encouraged their mother to use social media to connect with customers and help build her

brand, but Lombardi said she sort of resisted at first, saying “OK, OK, later,” she said. “I’m all in now.”

She jokes about working “eight days a week” and always looking for something more to do. “Years ago I was offered a position as a control quality engineer for a casket manufacturing plant in New Hampshire, but I didn’t take the job,” said Lombardi. “I guess you could say I turned into a quality taste tester instead.”

Lombardi has won numerous local and national awards, especially for her wedding cake designs. Her success is the result of loving what she does, she said, and listening to customers. “I’m happy when they’re happy,” she added.

Banner moment at Worcester Tech

When seniors at Worcester Technical High School arrived on May 19 to pick up their graduation caps and gowns they were greeted not only by teachers and staff members cheering them on in the parking lot, but also a large banner painted by Paola Hernandez, a senior in the school’s Culinary Arts program. The banner depicted food and chef instructors at the school.

“Paola painted the banner in six hours,” according to one of her teachers, who joked about looking 20 years younger in the scene. Hernandez plans to study game production and management at Becker College in Worcester in the fall.

Good stuff!

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