

FOOD

# Bean Counter reopens on Highland Street with full complement of 'delightful baked goods'

**Barbara M. Houle** Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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In early January, Bean Counter Bakery Café on Highland Street in Worcester, known for its pastries, cakes and specialty coffee drinks closed for interior renovations, with a grand reopening celebration on March 20.

The newly renovated space reflects the brand's commitment to providing "a delightful baked goods experience while maintaining its longstanding history," according to owner/pastry chef Alice Lombardi, who in 1998 founded Bean Counter Bakery in a licensed kitchen at her home. In a short time, she turned her hobby of baking treats into a dessert brand with consistent product quality that helped set an exciting entrepreneurial journey.

Lombardi opened her first storefront, the Bean Counter Coffee Bar, 113 Highland St. in 2001 and Bean Counter Bakery, Route 9, Shrewsbury in 2007. In 2008, she also owned Café Noir in Shrewsbury (formerly Black Diamond Coffee). Lombardi has an engineering degree.

The Highland Street Bean Counter, which seats 40, aligns with the brand's identity established at Lombardi's flagship location, Bean Counter Bakery Café, 270 Grove St., Worcester, launched in 2020 during the pandemic. At the time, Lombardi honored healthcare workers and first responders with free coffee and discounts and she has supported community and nonprofit events ever since.

Lombardi is "extremely happy" with the new interior at the Highland Street Bakery, which enhances the ambiance of the store. She credits contractors for work done in a relatively

short time. New lighting and furniture pair well with classic white tile on white walls, embracing a welcoming design. She recently renewed her lease for 10 years.

From chocolate delights to fruit pastries and cakes, the bakery has something to satisfy everyone's sweet tooth. Customers should know that Lombardi enjoys experimenting with scratch made recipes, especially cookies. A double fudge chocolate chunk cookie is a customer favorite, she said.

Lombardi's husband, Domenico (Dom), an engineer, will retire this spring and spend free time at the Highland Street bakery, overseeing the "re-launch" of the barista program, which will include team training and work with coffee roasters, etc. Lombardi said her husband is a "coffee connoisseur, explaining that he has a "coffee lab" in their home. She said, "When Dom talks to me about different equipment, coffee beans and engineering stuff, I usually say, 'Honey, right now I just want a good cup of coffee.'"

Lombardi as a business owner has weathered good and difficult times, which in ways helped set up her brand for success. She keeps with bakery trends and tracks marketing stats and is deeply invested in online ordering at the Grove Street location, which she said has exceeded business expectations. Note: The Highland Street store does not accept bakery orders, "everything goes through Grove Street."

Visit <https://www.beancounterbakery.com> to discover a full range of products from customers' favorites, desserts and platters, gluten free and vegan, wedding cake samples, celebration cakes and cupcakes, corporate printed and edible image and so much more. Customers select from cake flavors, fillings and colors and choose messaging and writing color. "The best part is customers see beautiful photographs of a complete cake, cake pop, or whatever," said Lombardi. "They love the creative freedom online offers."

According to Lombardi, the store's online ordering system prevents common pitfalls, such as incorrect pickup dates or messaging. "The production management system works efficiently for the entire team and they love it," she said. "About 75 percent of the bakery's ordering is done online and it has grown tremendously in popularity with our customers." FYI: There is kiosk ordering at the front of the Grove Street store that's easy and convenient to use.

If you need a specialty cake in a hurry, Bean Counter decorators showcase cakes (Roses, Balloons and Sprinkles category) sold Thursday through Saturday at Grove Street. Lombardi often posts photos of the decorated cakes on Instagram, letting customers know what's available for sale.

Visit the business website for all store hours, contact info, etc. The bakery continues to sell products using original recipes from Worcester's iconic Crown Bakery that permanently closed in 2020.

Lombardi by appointment does wedding cake and custom cake consultation. She is a member of the prestigious Boston Wedding Group and is a Hall of Fame winner in The Knot's Best of Weddings, taking consecutive wins since 2010. Last year, she took WeddingWire Couples' Choice Award.

"COVID taught us (business owners) a lot," said Lombardi. "I know I personally have grown as an owner. We learned that in business you not only need to improve your relationship with staff, but also provide a healthy atmosphere. Good customer service is always key. It not only increases brand loyalty, but also provides a competitive advantage. Community support is so important, and I'm so fortunate to have it.

"Honestly, at this time in my life I'm probably the most happy and relaxed than I have ever been," said Lombardi, who has dropped some wholesale business accounts, focusing more on retail. She joked, "After all these years, I figured out how to do it right."

On a personal note: Alice and Domenico Lombardi have two adult children. Their daughter Marianna is a tattoo artist at Studio 31 Tattoo Social Club on Park Avenue in Worcester; Married son, Domenico, resides in California, where he is in medical research.

No matter the location, great food and hospitality is the core foundation of Bean Counter Bakery Café.

Stay tuned for more Bean Counter news this spring!

## **In search of fish and chips ...**

Craving fish and chips, so where do you go?

I've done past stories about how fish and chips is a long-standing Catholic tradition of not eating meat on Fridays during Lent, substituting fish instead. I looked back on one T&G story, where I listed city places such as the Sole Proprietor, the Boynton, Quinn's Irish Pub or Herbies as popular spots. Ronnies in Auburn, a seasonal haunt, is out since it's permanently closed. However, Ronnie's in Charlton, which has a different owner, is still in business and will open next week.

When I'm out and about, I often hear diners' updates on restaurants and the higher costs for food on local menus. I sometimes wonder if they shop for groceries. Whether retail or wholesale, food costs have increased.

Let's talk fish and chips. On the West Side of the city, "fish n chips" is promoted as a \$9.99 Friday special, all day, dine-in only. Take-out for fish and chips at a nearby deli is in the \$14 price range.

Patti J. Foley, who operates Foley & Son Fish and Chips, 274 Plantation St., Worcester, a family business started by her mother, the late Evelyn Foley, in 1967, says she charges \$12 for an order of fish and chips. "I remember when we charged \$6," said Foley, who has used her mom's recipes for seafood since taking over the business in 1996. For fish and chips, Foley uses cod, dipping it into a wet batter before being fried. She makes coleslaw and tartar sauce served with seafood. The business opens from 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Fridays. Cash only.

Craving fish and chips, I recently headed out of the city for a seafood fix. At a popular bar and grille, I opted for fried haddock, served on top of fries and onion rings. Coleslaw and tartar sauce were on the side. The presentation was great. Crispy batter and tender, flaky fish. Chips and onion rings were soggy and almost room temperature. Price, \$14.95.

OK, I've always leaned more toward a fish (haddock or cod) with a crispy batter and non-greasy fries. Win some, lose some.

Thinking back, the best fish and chips I had this year was early in January when Worcester Restaurant Group offered \$10 specials (dine-in only) at the Sole Proprietor and VIA Italian Table. It reportedly was one of the most successful promotions WRG has ever held.

At the Sole, I had the \$10 fish and chips special, a generous portion of fried food, perfectly prepared. I lost count of how many orders passed by our table. Early afternoon, it was a

packed house.

We all have personal tastes and preferences when it comes to food. Fish and chips are no longer just for the Lenten season. It's an entrée or special you can find year-round at pubs, pizza spots, restaurants and cafes.

Just remember that all fish are not created equal. And, price points for fish and chips vary significantly.

*If you have a tidbit for the column, call (508) 868-5282. Send email to [bhoulefood@gmail.com](mailto:bhoulefood@gmail.com). This article has been adjusted to clarify that Ronnie's in Charlton is still in business.*