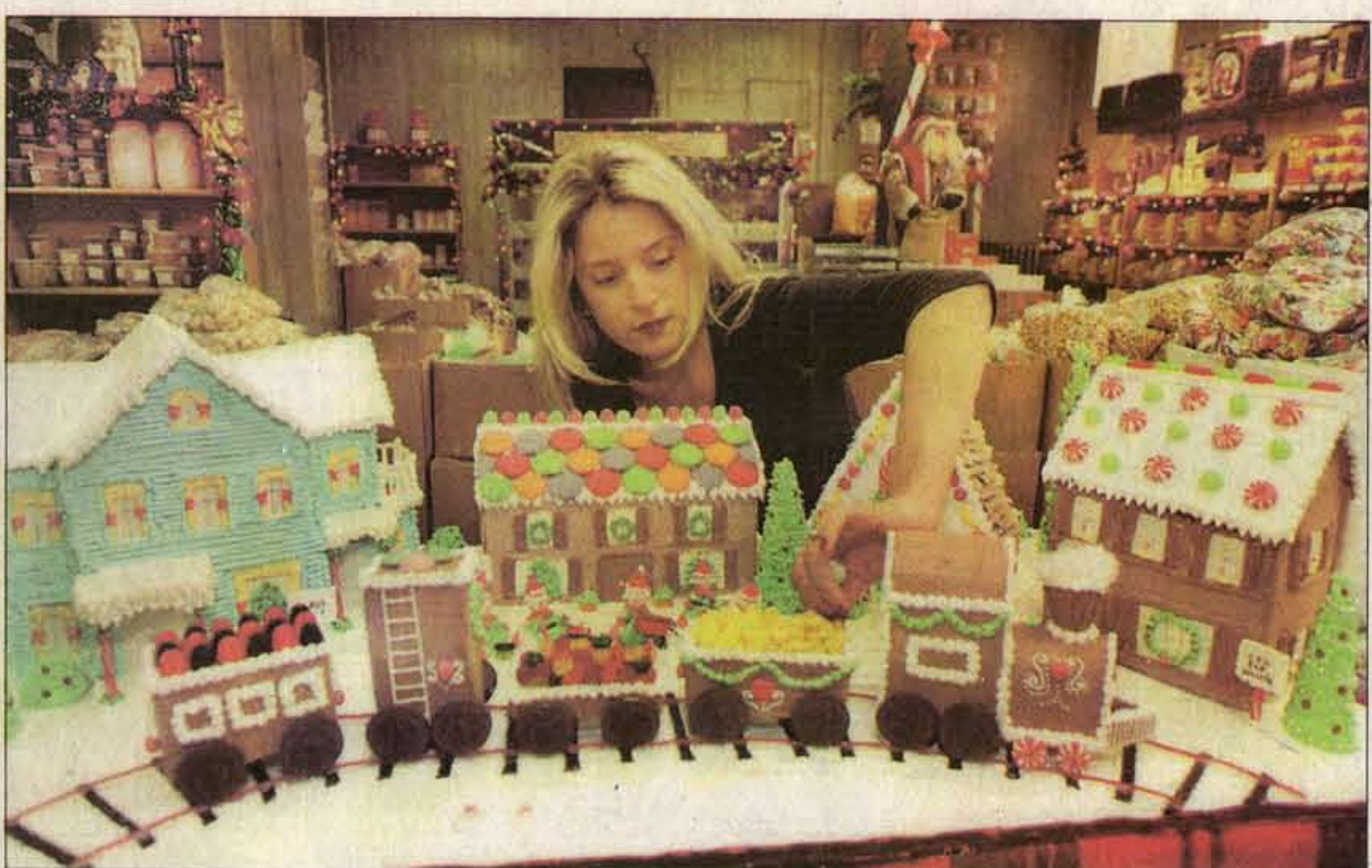


VISIONS OF SUGARPLUMS



JED KIRSCHBAUM: SUN STAFF PHOTOS

Liz Sitaras Wilcox, a trained pastry chef, adjusts her gingerbread-house display in Jeppi's. Below, burlap sacks of peanuts at Jeppi's await roasting.

... AND PEANUTS

Visitors to Jeppi Nut Co. find lots of tempting holiday treats and a bit of old Baltimore.



By ELIZABETH LARGE
SUN STAFF

Christmas Past doesn't always come in the form of a Dickens ghost, clanking its chains and moaning. Sometimes it's a bit of Baltimore frozen in time, when things were simpler and the season seemed brighter. Jeppi Nut and Candy Distributors (everyone calls it the Jeppi Nut Co.) is one of those magical places.

It doesn't look magical — and that's assuming you can even find it, hidden away behind the Fayette Street post office. If you use a computer map-search Web site for directions, you're guaranteed to get lost. This is Christmas Past, remember?

It's a little like Brigadoon, the mystical village that appears once every 100 years, only Jeppi appears when you need freshly roasted hazelnuts to make fruitcake or one of those fat 5-cent peppermint sticks you used to get in your stocking. (They now cost 75 cents.)

If you finally get there, you may wonder at first what all the fuss is about. Jeppi is in a dingy old building at 312 N. High St. — almost a warehouse. The inside is, not to put too fine a point on it, a bit grim. Boxes are stacked everywhere, and in back, mysterious cast-iron machines revolve ponderously.

Then you take a deep breath. The warm, seductive smell of roasting peanuts acts like magic pixie dust to transform everything. The mysterious machines turn out to be ancient nut roasters. How charming! Christmas music is playing on the radio, and you notice the well-worn and surely well-loved holiday decorations — probably the same ones that have been brought out every year since Jeppi moved to its current home in 1974. A large American flag hangs over it all.

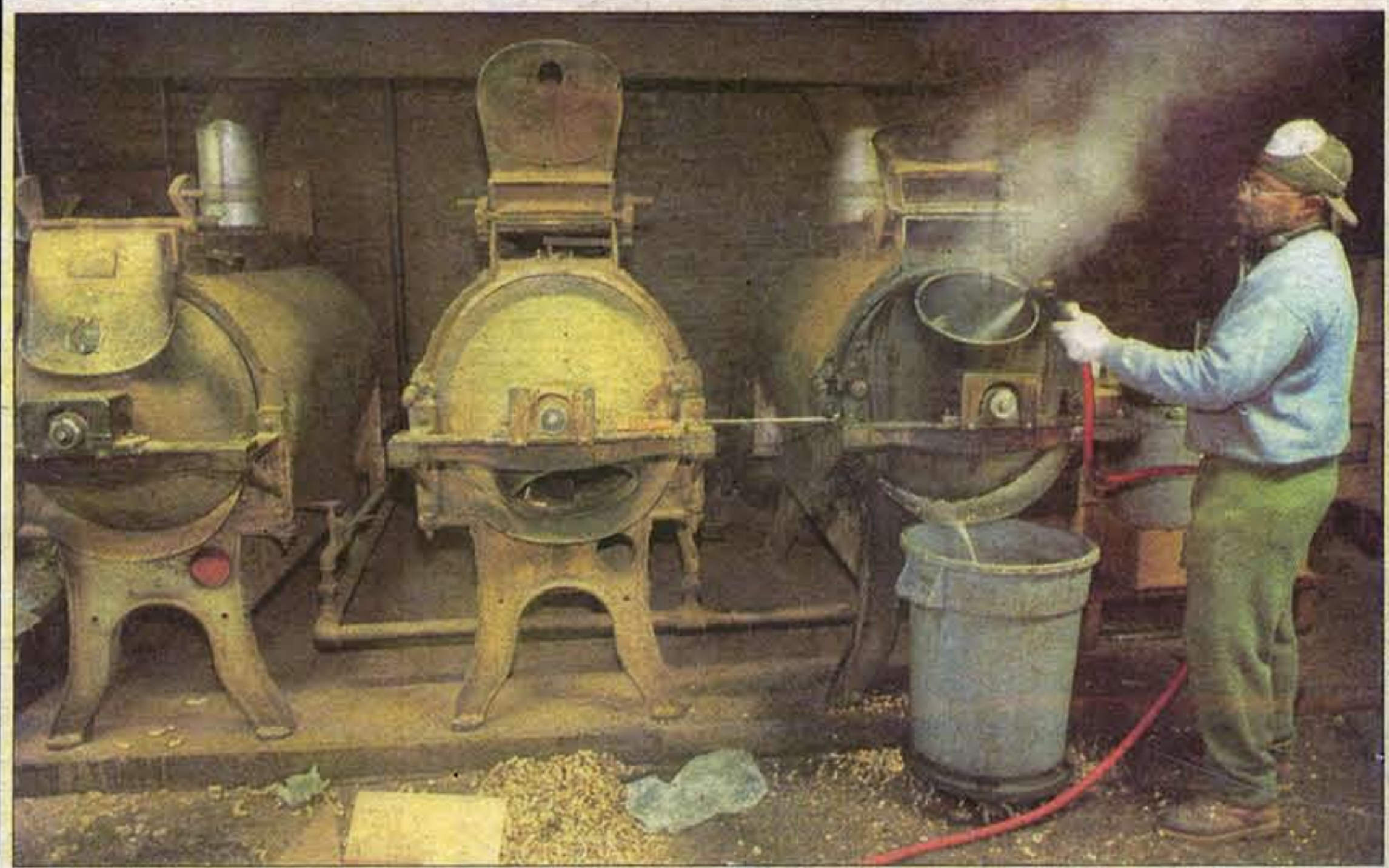
Those boxes are filled with the candies that delighted you as a child: Mike & Ikes, lemon heads, French burnt peanuts. Shelves are lined with vanilla, lemon and orange extracts for baking, glazed fruit,

crystallized ginger, whole Turkish figs, blocks of chocolate and even a few modern additions like Jeppi's own granola and trail mixes.

Most of all, there are nuts: shelled Brazil nuts; two kinds of pignolias, Chinese and the sweeter Portuguese (which local Spanish restaurants like Tio Pepe buy from Jeppi to make their pine-nut rolls); almonds sliced, slivered, whole and blanched; and pounds and pounds of still-hot peanuts in their shells.

J.J., the good-natured elf — er, John Jordan, the man in charge of the roasters — estimates he roasts about 2,000 pounds of peanuts a day. In the 11 years J.J. has worked at Jeppi he hasn't gotten sick of their warm fragrance, but "I don't eat 'em anymore," he says.

He also roasts all the hard-to-find nuts that are a serious cook's dream. This is what Alexa Drubay has to say about it (she owned the now-closed Cafe Drubay in Cross Keys and has been coming to Jeppi ever since her father first [See Jeppi, 5r]



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Peanut roaster John Jordan cleans one of the old roasters after preparing a batch of shelled peanuts. He estimates he roasts about 2,000 pounds of peanuts a day, and although he doesn't mind the fragrance, he doesn't eat them anymore.

Sometimes you feel like a nut

[Jeppi, from Page 1r]

brought her 24 years ago): "You can find any specialty nut here. It is a trek [she lives in Towson], but it's fun to see familiar faces.

"It's a little dream world for children," she adds. "When you walk in, you feel like a kid again."

She comes to buy her supplies for holiday baking: candied orange peel and big bags of natural pistachios, hazelnuts and blanched almonds.

Another frequent visitor, Rose Jackson, has traveled from Pikesville for nine of the 10 years she's lived in the area.

"This is the only place I can get pistachios for my biscotti the way I like them," she says. "I send my cookies to friends and family all over the country."

Of course, not all of Jeppi's customers are bakers. Others have fallen under its spell, even against their will.

"No, I'm not a customer. I'm part of the family," says Johnnie Allen, a longtime Baltimore resident who at first admits only to being "five years older than the Bible."

Today he's wearing a snappy black felt hat that goes well with his grizzled beard. He's standing at the counter with a pound of cashews in one hand and a package of rainbow coconut bars in the other. He comes in two or three times a week, and has been doing so for at least 20 years.

He doesn't want to. "I try to stay away because I'm a little plump," he says. "But I drive by, and the car has a mind of its own and turns into the parking lot."

Ruling over this seductive magical kingdom is 52-year-old Ted Pavlos; his sister Marina



Liz Sitaras Wilcox (left), Ted Pavlos and Marina Lillie reign in the magical kingdom that is the Jeppi Nut Co. Wilcox is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

Lillie, more than a decade younger; and their 29-year-old niece Liz Sitaras Wilcox — as beautiful as a fairy princess, only with better makeup.

You can buy your holiday baking ingredients other places, but where are you going to find someone like Liz to give you advice? She's a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., and worked as a pastry chef and for the Food Network in New York before returning to Baltimore to

well, sell peanuts. "My family's here," she says. "I'm very family-oriented."

She's the one who created the snow-covered gingerbread village in the center of the shop, and she's the one to ask about tempering chocolate or substituting ingredients. Call her up, she says, if you have a baking question.

There are some 14 other employees — a few are only seasonal — including 41-year-old Mike Flynn, who must believe that Jeppi is a magic place. He works behind the counter and met his wife, Evonne, here last Dec. 13 when she came in to buy supplies for gift baskets.

"It was love at first sight," he says in a whisper. "I went nuts." (Surely no pun is intended.) They were married this September.

Ted and Marina took over the business from their father, Charles Pavlos, who retired last year. He was the second owner after Anthony Jeppi sold the business in the early '70s. His father, John, an Italian immigrant who came to be known as "the Peanut King," began selling fruit and vegetables in 1884 at a stall in the old Hanover Market and then moved the business to 223 Sharp St. in the early 1900s.

It's still very much a family business, just a different family — one that includes a lot of customers who feel the same way Johnnie Allen does.

"You see a lot of generation after generation coming here," says Ted Pavlos. "It's a holiday tradition for some people to come down once a year."

Pavlos admits to seeing changes in his world, even

though Jeppi thrives by not changing very much.

"People are more health-conscious. It used to be that we'd sell the red pistachios 3 to 1 [of the natural]. Now it's only about 5 percent red. And people are more interested in salt-free nuts. We're selling more dried fruit and trail mixes."

And, of course, now that fruitcake has become a holiday joke, the sale of glazed fruit goes down every year — by as much as 10 percent, Pavlos estimates.

Still, Christmas is no time to be too health-conscious, which is why just as many — OK, more — customers are stocking up on chocolate kisses as dried pears. As Johnnie Allen, who finally admits to being 77, says when he's asked about his longevity and those rainbow coconut bars: "If it was time ago, I'd be dead a long time ago."

How to find it

Directions to Jeppi:
If you're going east on Fayette Street, turn left on Colvin Street (west, turn right). Turn left on Low Street and right on North High Street. Jeppi is located at 312 N. High St. You can park at a meter or against the wall in the adjacent lot.

When you get lost, call 410-539-1221 for further directions.

Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays until Christmas.

Serves 12
1½ cups butter
1½ cups sugar
4 eggs
2 teaspoons real vanilla extract
2½ cups flour
1 tablespoon orange zest
2 teaspoons baking soda
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon allspice
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1½ cups grated zucchini
1½ cups grated carrots
1 cup pecans, medium pieces
1 cup English walnuts, medium pieces
¼ cup golden raisins
¼ cup Thompson dark raisins

ORANGE ICING:
2 cups powdered sugar
water, as needed
1 teaspoon orange extract

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Using a nonstick cooking spray, grease one large or two medium loaf pans. Line with

wax paper and grease again. Cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy.

Add the eggs, one at a time, mixing thoroughly. Add the vanilla.

Sift the flour, orange zest, baking soda and spices together. Add to the butter mixture.

Add zucchini and carrots. Mix until just combined.

Sift in nuts and raisins. Pour batter into the pan or pans and bake 45 minutes to an hour, or until a toothpick inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean.

Cool 10 minutes before removing from the pan, then cool completely.

Sift the powdered sugar into a bowl. Mix 1 teaspoon water with orange extract. Add to sugar and mix thoroughly. Add water, if needed, ¼ teaspoon at a time, until icing is of a spreadable consistency.

Spread over top of cooled cake.