



Mike Oliver, center, is one of two apprentice bakers under Jack Elmer, left. Oliver learns the fine art of baking at Heidi's Swiss Bakery on his way toward his goal of becoming a journeyman baker. Here he helps Norma Nelson make caramel rolls.

Starting from Scratch

The day begins early at Heidi's Swiss Bakery in Boring. Two apprentice bakers enter the quiet shop with other employees to begin careful measuring and mixing in huge stainless steel bowls.

Using their hands almost exclusively, Mike Oliver and Trudy Phillips blend flour and shortening, chocolate and eggs and other pure ingredients with a careful eye toward the final product.

And Jack Elmer, their teacher, is never far away. The two novice bakers are learning to bake their daily bread, pastries, cakes, pies and cookies as apprentices under the skillful tutelage of the bakery's chef, Jacob "Jack" Elmer.

Oliver's father also was taught to bake by Elmer. Phillips chose baking over an electrician's program because to be an electrician "you have to go where there are spiders."

Every day the two apprentices help Elmer prepare his desserts and breads for the two Heidi's bakeries, one at the Swiss Village in Boring and the other at Heidi's Restaurant in Gresham.

They are learning from scratch how to bake from scratch. "Basically we began at the very bottom," Elmer says of his students. "Too many get lost in the shuffle of wanting to be intricate cake decorators or fancy pastry chefs. I demand that they know the mathematics and the chemistry of baking too."

This means, Elmer says, the beginning bakers will know what will happen when they add an ingredient to a cake batter or a pastry dough.

"A good baker knows what is supposed to happen and if it doesn't why it didn't and how it can be corrected," Elmer adds.

By the time they are done they will be journeymen bakers skilled enough to work at any bakery. The two will not only have worked in Heidi's bakery, but also will have completed a three-year program of classes at Clark Community College in Vancouver, Wash.

Elmer's skill as a pastry chef certainly qualifies him to teach others. Elmer received a degree in fine pastry in Switzerland. He became part owner of the Boring bakery with Don and Marie Eklund when the Swiss Village opened in 1972 and is owner of the bakery in their Gresham restaurant. For the past three years Elmer has won top honors for his pastries in the Chefs de Cuisine Society of Oregon competition, a prestigious competition among Oregon chefs.

"When you get trained by masters it's hard not to pick up that craftsmanship, that feeling for perfection," Elmer says.

This isn't to say the apprentices don't make mistakes. Once Oliver made about 40 apple pies, all about a half pound short on the filling.

"He (Elmer) just walked by and looked at them and said these are wrong, do them over. I did. Every one of them," Oliver remembers.

Another time, though, the chocolate chip cookie batter wasn't rising correctly when Elmer was away so Oliver took it upon himself to change flours.

"I was scared. I didn't know how Jack would take it. But after it was all done he decided that was what should have been done," Oliver said, shaking his head. "That day I was really skeptical about what would happen the next day."

That Elmer wants to produce a quality product is one reason both apprentices like working at Heidi's.

"The reason I stay here is he (Elmer) puts out a quality product. He makes from scratch, the correct way," Phillips says. She commutes from Vancouver every day to Boring.

While working for Elmer and in the apprenticeship program, the two are paid at union scale, although Elmer's is not a union bakery. The pay ranges from \$4.25 an hour to begin to more than \$8 when they are through.

"I try to demand they have a respect and love for the skill. I am not willing to spend my time and their time if they don't want to be dedicated," Elmer explains. "They are not here to make a lot of money. They're with me because they know that they will learn the skills so someday they can make a lot of money or run their own bakeries."



Heidi's chef Jack Elmer has trained all his employees his baking skills, including his two apprentices.



Trudy Phillips wanted to gain a skill she could have all her life so she chose baking. Here Elmer watches as she carefully measures shortening.

by Lori Callister photos by K.J. Snipes