



HOME SWEET HOME

Halsey has a taste of home in Country Bakery

BY CORINNE BOYER

In a modular home in Halsey, Oregon, Loretta Birky stands behind a kitchen counter where a board sits over a stovetop that now holds a cash register. Across from the kitchen sits a broad wooden table and a dozen metal backing racks that are filled with pastries, cookies, pies and cakes. The screen door opens steadily at Country Bakery as customers come in to pick up their orders of freshly baked doughnuts, fruitcakes, pull-aparts and cake bread just before the holidays.

Birky greets everyone, and is so down to earth and gracious that it isn't obvious whether she personally knows everyone who walks in or if she's meeting them for the first time. Many people drive to Country Bakery off Peoria Road in Halsey and ask for the bakery's famous cinnamon rolls.

"It's me and one other girl," Birky says. She started out small with a sign on the side of the road during the summer as a teacher. "Nobody else had doughnuts," she says.

Country Bakery is open from 7 am until 5 pm every Friday and Saturday. Between greeting customers and discussing her baking schedule, she simultaneously answers the persistently ringing telephone.

Birky's baked goods hobby and roadside stand led her to quit her teaching job to bake full-time. She's been operating on three to four hours of sleep every Friday and Saturday night for the past 23 years.

"How would you like to do that for 23 years?" she asks. "I just baked one time."

And from there it took off. Baking that "one time" morphed into an unchanging schedule that allows the small business owner and Mennonite to operate with minimal assistance. She uses the kitchen and the dining area of her home — that was once owned by her grandfather — to sell baked goods, and the living room is set up for guests to congregate and enjoy their purchases with complimentary coffee. Adjacent to the living room is a gift shop with hand-sewn hot pads, clothes, books and aprons for sale.

On Tuesdays, Birky bakes cookies and freezes them. On Wednesdays, she makes bread. Pies and fruit cobblers are assembled on Thursdays; on Fridays, she prepares doughnuts.

These baked creations are produced from scratch in a small kitchen with a few industrial sized mixers and ovens. A food service truck delivers cooking supplies to Country Bakery.

Birky doesn't use preservatives so she recommends eating the breads and cakes within a few days and then sticking them in the refrigerator.

We left with lemon bars, a banana cake, a half dozen cinnamon rolls and lemon poppy seed bread and ate them within a few days. We froze a few cinnamon rolls and woke up on Christmas morning, popped them in the microwave and enjoyed gooey, rich icing with our cup of morning coffee.

And after baking for the last two decades, Birky says, "It's just like home to me." ■

Country Bakery is at 26615 Peoria Road, Halsey. Call 541-369-2968.

PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER