

BJ NN Business Journal News Network

Self-taught cookie baker looking for Armory Square storefront

by Alexandra Rojas

Date: 4/21/2016 at 16:34:4



SYRACUSE — A self-taught baker with a growing home-based cookie business is looking for a storefront in Armory Square.

Cathy Pemberton, founder and sole owner of three-year-old Cathy's Cookie Kitchen, wants to move the business that she is running from her house in Camillus to a 1,000–square-foot location in downtown Syracuse. “It’s the natural next step,” Pemberton says. “[I want] everything that’s just mine in one location and have that be the central point.”

She is working with Bethany Holbrook, an economic development and marketing specialist at CenterState CEO’s Downtown Committee of Syracuse, to find locations. Pemberton is also receiving business advice from the Small Business Development Center at Onondaga County College.

“It will be a few months until I have enough money to open up a retail shop,” she says. Pemberton is unsure what banks she will use to finance the move.

Pemberton is her business's only employee, and handles the marketing, shopping, accounting, taxes, bookkeeping, cleaning, deliveries, and of course, baking. She is recruiting two workers that will help with baking and deliveries.

Occasionally, Pemberton bakes at the commissary kitchen at Elbridge Community Church to sell her products at local events like the Junior League of Syracuse Holiday Shoppes, the Buy Local Bash, and the Midnight Shopping Pop-Up in the Sky Armory.

Pemberton has also sold her cookies in fairs and festivals throughout Central New York like the New York State Blues Festival, the Syracuse Arts & Crafts Festival, and the Great New York State Food & Wine Festival in Clayton.

Most of Pemberton's orders are from individual customers and businesses. She has 15 business accounts with companies like Liehs & Steigerwald on West Fayette Street, Finger Lakes Coffee Roasters in Destiny USA, and River Rat Cheese in Clayton. Pemberton has been selling her cookies to Taste NY stores in Binghamton and Albany, and she plans to send samples to more of these stores.

Pemberton calls select clients when she runs special offers. She gets about a whole month of private business orders and 20-25 orders a month from regular customers. Week after week, she sells different amounts of cookies, and she says it's hard for her to estimate how many cookies she sells.

Pemberton says her average sale is \$75-\$100. Cathy's Cookie Kitchen's annual sales have increased five-fold since Pemberton founded the business in June 2013. She declined to reveal sales totals.

Pemberton calls her customers after they receive their cookies to see if they liked them. "I think it's nice and a personal touch you don't get [with other businesses]," she says.

Cathy's Cookie Kitchen's competitors include bakeries that sell products with healthy ingredients, like Zimmer's Bakes in Weedsport and Mo'Dough in Syracuse. "But I don't think any of them compare to my cookies and that's because of the ingredients," Pemberton contends. "There isn't anyone else who uses organic and natural ingredients and can have it taste delicious."

All the cookies Pemberton sells are her own recipes. She sells 18 cookie flavors like Caramel Pretzel Chocolate Chip and Rocky Road—12 that can be made gluten-free. The cookies are sold at \$3 for a pack of two; she also offers a senior citizen discount of \$2 per pack.

Pemberton opened Cathy's Cookie Kitchen while she worked as an assistant supervisor with the Syracuse City School District. "My true calling is baking, and I figured I could do something with it," she says. Pemberton continues to work part time at the district.

When the new store opens, Pemberton plans to sell not only cookies, but also hot chocolate, coffee, tea, and the occasional cookie cake, which is a giant cookie. Pemberton wants to continue to sell to corporate and retail stores, and continue to take online and private orders.

Pemberton will continue to go to the events to network with clients. “I am the face of the company and I don’t think anybody is going to sell it the way I do,” she says.

She is trying to increase online sales, by adding a “Gifts” page to her website, and promoting the “Cookie of the Month Club” on her Facebook page. Customers can buy a dozen cookies for \$19.99 each month. Pemberton is also planning to create a Nutella and pretzel cookie to add to her menu.