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Business

Gene Darny: Lotta's Bakery owner cooks up sweet snacks

(Jason Steinberg/Special to The Examiner)
Gene Darny says he is proud that Lotta's Bakery is thriving in a time when neighborhood bakeries are on the decliine.

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SAN FRANCISCO -
Gene Darny, owner of Lotta's Bakery on Polk Street, says an industrywide decline in small neighborhood bakeries might discourage most prospective pastry entrepreneurs, but for him, it became an opportunity.

Because Darny's is the only shop in the bustling Polk Street district capable of handling immediate or peculiar custom orders, he has established a modest kind of monopoly in the area. Offering bread as well as cakes and cookies, Darny usually bakes with butter but even makes vegan pastries upon request.

"There are no neighborhood bakeries in this neighborhood at all," Darny said. "The closest place where you can walk to around here and get a cake is in Chinatown."

According to Darny, numerous bakeries in The City have shut down as their proprietors aged and retired. Darny recalls at least six small bakeries that served the Castro neighborhood when he was growing up there.

Lotta's, which opened in May 2007 with the help of the nonprofit Urban Solutions, is named after Darny's drag alterego, Lotta. The name is taken from that of Lotta Crabtree, a wealthy 19th-century stage performer who cared for and entertained refugees after the 1906 earthquake. Darny said the character came to life when he needed an outfit for a Halloween party 12 years ago.

"About the only time I dress up anymore is for that party," Darny said. "It's a lot of work."

Most of the snacks under the glass at Lotta's Bakery are identified by a card with a little figure of a mustachioed man in an apron or a "woman" in dazzling dress, or both. Both are Darny — but he says he seldom wears anything but baker's attire to work.

Darny said he has dressed in women's clothes when out with friends since his 20s, but despite harboring hopes for a career in theater, he never performed in drag. He was a theater and arts major at San Francisco State University, but left after discovering that, though he already worked professionally in costumes art, many of his instructors were not employed in the business.

He worked in theater for 13 years before deciding on a career change. He applied to the California Culinary Academy and after a short while, learned he really wanted to do pastry.

Darny worked 11 years as a pastry chef in various restaurants and as a baker before thinking about opening his own shop. But it was 15 more years until Lotta's Bakery became a reality.

The shop is decorated with works provided by Darny's partner, who collects and deals fine-art prints. Darny said the prints do sell frequently, but he does not consider the space a gallery.

As far as there being any parallels between Darny's drag life and his bakery work, the baker says both pursuits are artistic.

"I've always made my living being creative," Darny said.

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