

Dave Cohen:

Welcome to the SeaComm Podcast, your place for the latest on what's happening at SeaComm and helpful tips on saving and protecting your money. I am Dave Cohen. Thank you for joining us for another episode of the SeaComm Podcast. We are here with a wonderful business member of SeaComm today. If you're ever in the Brainardsville area, you should definitely check them out. But instead of introducing them myself, I'll have them introduce themselves. So please introduce yourself.

Linda Lewis:

Hi, I'm Linda Lewis.

Russ Lewis:

I'm Russ Lewis.

Dave Cohen:

And what is your establishment?

Linda Lewis:

The Brainardsville Bake House.

Dave Cohen:

Can you give us a history of the Brainardsville Bake House?

Linda Lewis:

I'm going to give that over to Russ.

Russ Lewis:

Well, we started in what, 2008?

Linda Lewis:

Yeah.

Russ Lewis:

I believe 2008, and we were here till 2016. And then an opportunity came up for us out west. And I picked up the bakery out there and pretty much pulled it out of the ashes. And while we were out there in Washington State, this building came up for sale in an estate sale. And we were here the first time, we didn't own the building. So we bought the building and-

Linda Lewis:

Reopened in 2020.

Russ Lewis:

... reopened this, it was 2019 during the start of COVID.

Linda Lewis:

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Russ Lewis:

So that was a challenge in itself, but we got things going and it's been a success ever since, thanks to the local following that we have.

Dave Cohen:

So that means that here you guys have been around for, this will be seven years in this specific location.

Russ Lewis:

Yeah.

Dave Cohen:

That's amazing. I think that any business going through what COVID did, the food industry, I think it could be very, very tough. So what are some of the ups and downs that you guys have had here since you've opened?

Linda Lewis:

Probably the only down was the construction last year out front here. That definitely, a lot of people didn't want to come this way and I didn't blame them. It was kind of a mess out there. So I think that's really the only down that we've had. We've been very fortunate. We're very blessed.

Russ Lewis:

My motto has always been, once you try the product, you're hooked. And that's seems to have been true.

Linda Lewis:

And we've always got done well with word of mouth. We've been doing this since... Well, let's just say a very long time, since the '90s. And we've never advertised. We've never had to. There aren't a lot of people that do what we do and everything's from scratch.

Dave Cohen:

Being in a specific industry, the food industry, what do you love about working in the industry that you work in?

Linda Lewis:

For me, I think a big part of it is the people. We have some amazing customers and I've met some amazing people, so I would think it's that. And it's very fast-paced here, so it goes very quick.

Russ Lewis:

Yes. And for me, it's taking the raw ingredients and actually making something with it and having it come out aesthetically beautiful and taste good at the same time.

Dave Cohen:

So the location I think is very interesting. The North Country itself is a very interesting demographic. You said you were out West a little bit.

Russ Lewis:

Yeah.

Dave Cohen:

So how does that compare to the clientele here and just doing business in the North Country as opposed to other places?

Russ Lewis:

For me, it was proving my product on both coasts and we were successful. And it's always been about the product and that's what's carried us through. People love our product and they know that we work hard at doing it and the following has just continued.

Linda Lewis:

And it's very transient, I would say, out west. There's a lot of... We weren't far from Seattle and it was a very, very busy... We were very big out there and we had a very big footprint out there. We took over two very large buildings and so it was totally different. We try here, we try to be able to do things just us. We could definitely have many employees, but we kind of like it just, we have summer help and we have help when we need it but for the most part we try to do it ourselves.

Russ Lewis:

Try to do what we can do and that's pretty much the model.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah, that's it.

Dave Cohen:

Sure, sure. You said you went out, you came back. Why did you go out there and then what was the decision to come back?

Russ Lewis:

I went out there because when we were here the first time, we didn't own the building. And we had some confrontations with our landlord, bumping heads. And this opportunity came out for us out west.

Linda Lewis:

A friend of ours-

Russ Lewis:

A friend of ours had moved out there.

Linda Lewis:

... had moved out there from Vermont.

Russ Lewis:

She's like, "You guys got to come out here." And she's like, "There's this great bakery that's been shut down for four years." So we took a little week vacation, went out to visit her. I met with the owner of that bakery that had been closed down and pretty much set a deal on a handshake. I went out there six months later and ran it for three years.

Dave Cohen:

And then the decision to come back, what was the process like with that?

Russ Lewis:

The reason we came back was twofold. Mainly it was-

Linda Lewis:

The building came up for sale.

Russ Lewis:

... the building came up for sale. We had no idea.

Linda Lewis:

We knew it and nothing had been in it since we were last in it. So it was still kind of set up for us. And our son.

Russ Lewis:

And our son. Basically, if we stayed out there, chances are he wouldn't have gone to college. And that's the primary reason why we came back is because SUNY colleges make it very affordable. He got a full education and got a job in his field. So I feel like mission accomplished.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah.

Russ Lewis:

And this has always been our favorite bakery. This has always been my favorite bakery. I've had four bakeries in my life.

Dave Cohen:

Oh, wow. Okay.

Russ Lewis:

And this is my favorite location, just the way it's set up.

Linda Lewis:

We have a lot of space here.

Russ Lewis:

We got a lot of space here.

Dave Cohen:

At the Brainardsville Bake House, you guys are a business member with SeaComm. How did that relationship start?

Linda Lewis:

That started the first time we were here when we were renting. So it's been a very

Russ Lewis:

Very long time with SeaComm.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah. I don't remember how it started. I think-

Russ Lewis:

We applied for a loan, I think.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah. I think we got a loan and we liked the way everyone was there and how the business worked. And they were pretty flexible with us. When we came back here, we hadn't opened the business yet and they took a chance too. And yeah.

Russ Lewis:

Gave us two loans, one for the equipment loan and one for the purchase of the building.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah.

Dave Cohen:

What do you think is the biggest value you've seen working with SeaComm as a business member?

Linda Lewis:

I would say the flexibility and the communication. That's what I would say.

Russ Lewis:

Yes. The communication and they're always looking out for you if there's suss charges on your card, they're always on it. I mean they're on top of it more than we are. And I really like that. They send us a text, "Oh, did you charge this?" And it's pretty convenient.

Dave Cohen:

Have you had any times in the history of the business where SeaComm has come through for you, there's been an issue or there's been a time where maybe you needed a loan where it's been something that you've gone to SeaComm and we've been able to help?

Russ Lewis:

Absolutely. Several times I've gotten several auto loans from SeaComm and this was 15, 20 years ago. So they took a chance on me and it paid off.

Dave Cohen:

Being in the community that you guys are, you're very centered. You have Malone on one side, Chateaugay, Plattsburgh. So what does it mean for you to be in such a community where you have a lot of roads that come to you?

Russ Lewis:

It's very important. It means so much. We have a tremendous following at all the local school districts. And we try to donate whenever we can at any functions to help the community. It's all about being local.

Dave Cohen:

So how do you approach building those relationships with your customers? I'm sure you have repeat customers and then there's people who come in for the first time. What do you think is the way that you guys differentiate yourselves?

Russ Lewis:

I think it's the from scratch artisan feature of our business and people know how hard it is and how hard we work to do it. And there's just such an appreciation for that.

Dave Cohen:

The food industry itself has changed a lot, especially since COVID.

Russ Lewis:

Oh, absolutely.

Dave Cohen:

There's been a lot of adaptations that a lot of businesses have had to make. Since you guys came back just before COVID, what are some of the differences that you've seen pre-COVID and post-COVID?

Linda Lewis:

Well, obviously the spacing, the masks. We had to make a diagram in here where people could stand. The state was very involved and you had to adhere to certain guidelines. And obviously it's a lot different now.

Russ Lewis:

For me, COVID kind of hurt the food industry and the fact that a lot of businesses, restaurants, corporations were able to cut corners and saw what they could get away with. And now that COVID's over, the corners are still being cut. The quality of food is not there. And I can honestly say we have never cut corners. And our product is the same since 1988 when I started baking. It's from scratch, the European method style. And it's really quite a travesty the way things are now in the industry for the

prices people have to pay, the services they're not getting, the lack of service, and just the quality is just not there.

Dave Cohen:

That brings me to my next question. What are some of the steps that you guys take in order to make the quality and keep up the quality of your products?

Russ Lewis:

We're constantly always shopping. I try to do as much organic flour as I can. And for us, it's kind of easy because it's just I'm taking the raw ingredients, basically flour, sugar and creating it, whereas it's not a processed product. And that's another thing, our product is not processed at all. And I think that because of the cost of everything, these industries have no choice but to go the lesser route to make a profit. I mean, at the end of the day, it is all about a profit and it's really difficult. I actually feel sorry for anyone just getting in the business right now because it's tougher than ever because there is no room for mistakes.

Dave Cohen:

What are some of the common misconceptions you think people have about running a bakery or running a food establishment in general?

Russ Lewis:

I think that people have been jaded by the Sam's Club and the Costcos of the world. They're used to it. No one knows what a real muffin is anymore because of Sam's Club and Costco. It's like they think it's pretty much a cake mix that they make their muffins with. And I just think that a lot of people think that because of Sam's Club and Costco is that it's just pull it out of the freezer, thaw it and pop it in the oven for a reheat. And that is just not the case here.

Dave Cohen:

What are some of the things that you'd like people to know maybe who haven't been to Brainardsville Bake House about the bakery itself?

Russ Lewis:

I think that they're in for a real treat, for a real quality from scratch product, European style pastries, breads. And I think once you try the product, the product says it all. I could stand here all day and tell you how good our stuff is. You just have to try it for yourself. And once you do, that's where the word of mouth comes in. People are like, "Oh, you got to try this place in Brainardsville. It's in the middle of nowhere. I can't even believe this place exists." One of the most humbling comments I get over the years is, "Oh, we've been to France and we just want you to know that your product is just as good, if not better than what we had in France." So that feels pretty good.

Dave Cohen:

What would you say is your favorite product that you make on a daily or weekly basis?

Russ Lewis:

For me, the French baguette that we do, that's my go-to. I'm more about the bread. Yeah.

Dave Cohen:

Why?

Russ Lewis:

I just like the taste of the flavor. It's so good. Our bread is so good, you don't need butter. That's my motto. So it's just really slice a big hunk or break a big hunk, dip it in your soup. It actually has substance that you can actually hold the liquid. And so yeah, for me, it's definitely the French baguette.

Dave Cohen:

What would you say is the most popular thing that you guys sell?

Russ Lewis:

That is so hard to say, but I would say one of the most popular thing is our cookies. We do 15 to 20 different kinds of cookies, random basis. And people really like our cookies.

Dave Cohen:

We asked Russell what his favorite items were that you guys sell. Linda, what's your favorite items?

Linda Lewis:

People ask that a lot and I have to say it really depends on the morning. Usually in the morning when I come out here, I take the product and set up the trays. Well, sometimes things break or they're a little too small. I don't want to put them out. So that's usually what I go for. So it really depends and it depends if it's savory, sweet. I love our cookies. I usually have a cookie a day at least. So it just depends. And I love the bread. To me, it makes a sandwich.

Dave Cohen:

Sure.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah.

Dave Cohen:

So what do you think running the business, being in the area, what's the most fulfilling thing for the two of you about Brainardsville Bake House?

Linda Lewis:

Being part of the community. It's a great community and our son grew up here and yeah, I would think community and-

Russ Lewis:

Providing a good product for the local people of the area, Franklin County.

Linda Lewis:

Yeah. And we have some great customers. We really do. We have some great customers that we know their story, they know ours.

Dave Cohen:

Finally, if our listeners or our readers want to know more about the Brainardsville Bake House, how can they learn?

Linda Lewis:

They can look us up on Facebook. We are under Brainardsville Bake House, or they can call us at 518-908-1020 or they can Facebook message us.

Dave Cohen:

And where else in the area can you find products from the Brainardsville Bake House?

Russ Lewis:

The North Country Co-op in Plattsburgh, Perry's Farm & Found in Saranac, the Butcher Block restaurant on Route 3. We are featured on their salad bar, Adirondack Greenhouses in Hopkinton and Malone.

Dave Cohen:

All right. Russell, Linda, thank you so much for allowing me to come out and speaking with us today, being part of our SeaComm podcast. Thank you so much for being business members. And once again, thank you so much for supplying such amazing, delicious products to the community.

Russ Lewis:

We appreciate it. We appreciate SeaComm too.

Linda Lewis:

Thank you for your support. Yep.

Dave Cohen:

All right. I am Dave Cohen with another SeaComm podcast. Thank you for joining us for this edition of the SeaComm Podcast. We hope you'll listen in again.