

Bakery takes the cake

By GEORGE WILKENS
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ARMENIA GARDEN ESTATES - Breads, cakes and pastries prepared daily are the recipe for success at **Housewife Bake Shop**, a family business celebrating a half-century at the same Central Tampa location.

Owners **Anthony and Dana Perrone** are the second of three generations involved in operations at the 50-year-old bakery on the corner of Sligh and Armenia avenues.

While some may view the mom-and-pop shop as a throwback to a bygone era, the owners - who are related to the founders of Tampa's famous Alessi Bakery - say such long-lost qualities keep customers coming back.

"They know everything we sell here is baked on the premises," said **Anthony Perrone**. "We still do everything from scratch," including custard for the shop's popular eclairs. "All the Italian cookies - we still use the same recipe Mario always had."

Mario Sciortino, who came here from Italy in 1960 to help the startup bakery, always carried in his back pocket a small notebook of handwritten family recipes he brought to America.

"And nobody could look at it," **Dana Perrone** said with a smile.

No matter, added her husband. "It's all in Italian."

Now retired, Sciortino serves as a consultant and occasional assistant to other loyal longtime employees such as Kathy Chastain, who started 23 years ago and arrives early enough to ready the shop for its 7 a.m. opening.

The Perrones' daughter, Tena Fernandez, 32, joined the family business in 2003 as the designer, decorating cakes and hand-cut cookies, plus the storefront's window.

"It's kind of in my blood; I grew up with it," she said of the bakery business. "We've always worked here since we were little," she said of herself and two siblings, whose help still is relied upon during the busy Christmas holiday season.

Her father, a Tampa native and 1972 University of South Florida graduate, left Delta Air Lines in 1987 to devote all his work hours to the family business. He, too, had an early internship at the bakery. "Since I was a kid, 12, 13 years old," he said, recalling cleaning pots and pans in the shop's back room.

The origins of the family business date to 1944, when **Anthony Perrone's** father, Tampa native Louis Perrone, returned from his World War II military service in Europe. He soon married Frances Alessi, daughter of Nicola and Rosalia Alessi, who founded Tampa's Alessi Bakery in 1912.

In the mid-1950s, Louis Perrone opened his own bake shops at each of the area's first large retail complexes, Britton Plaza and Northgate Shopping Center.

He later sold both, but held on to Housewife Bake Shop which he had opened in 1959 at 6821 N. Armenia Ave., a former grocery.

Anthony and Dana Perrone, now both 60 years old, took over the bakery in 1976.

About 15 years ago, they added "deli" to the name of the family business, expanding the menu to include sandwiches, salads and other items. The deli line - it includes chicken and yellow rice, Cuban pork roast, Italian sausage with peppers and onions, and other hot foods for delivery to office lunches and party platters - accounts for 35 percent of the shop's business.

Baked ziti is among the shop's most popular prepared dishes, while scacciata, a pizza of tomato meat sauce and Romano cheese served at room temperature, is uniquely Tampa.

South Tampa resident Dennis Johnson, a Tamko Building Products representative, was among customers placing an order one recent morning. He previously introduced some Pasco County clients to a couple of the shop's specialties, which left them begging for more.

"You've got to bring that pizza from the Housewife bakery," they told him. So Johnson stopped en route to Hudson to buy pizza and some sandwiches.

"They have good food here; no question," said Johnson, who said he heard people talking about the shop and decided to give it a try.