

plies to bring to the uptown store where cakes and pastries have been baking since 5 a.m. The proprietor is on top of every aspect of the operation and at any given moment knows the exact amount of ingredients on the premises, the details of the next order to be picked up, and the condition of her absent employee's baby.

Mancino has even taken on the New York Telephone Company, such as the time when a switching office across Broadway from her 214th Street store crossed her lines with a well-known

brokerage company, tying up her phones with unwanted customers calling about their investments.

"I always feel that if I'm not on top of everything, it just won't work," she mused.

Told It wouldn't Fly

The success of the Carrot Top restaurants comes despite much advice to the contrary. She remembers that when she first decided to introduce the Columbus Avenue-style eatery in a working class neighborhood like Inwood, she was told by many people that it wouldn't fly.

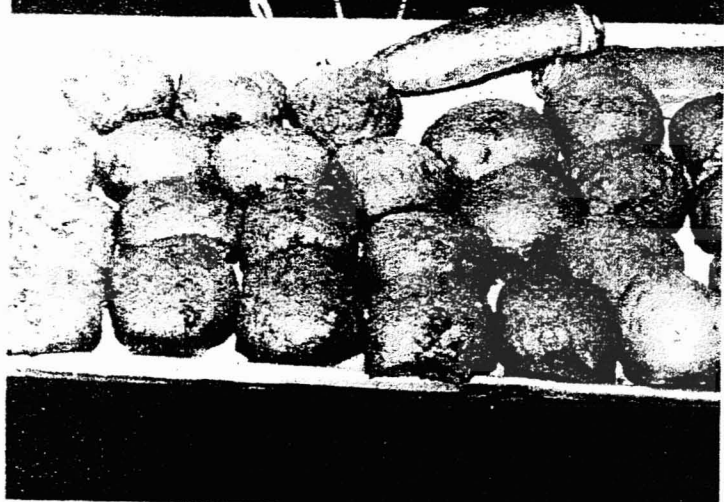
"Not only were they wrong, but since then a lot of other gourmet stores have been successful here," she continued. Still, Mancino is saddened, but not daunted by the problems which afflict the Washington Heights area. Still, there are tentative plans to open another restaurant.

Mancino's exposure in O'Neill's articles and cookbook has brought her a lot of publicity, including a lucrative

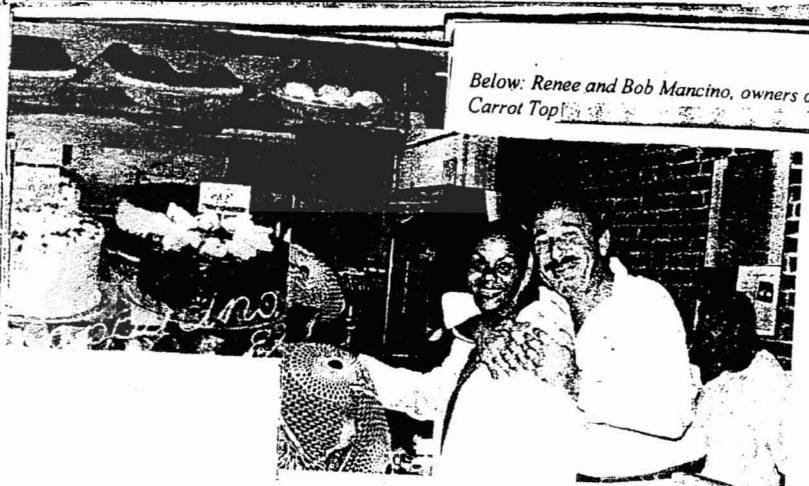
offer from CBS to write her story for a movie of the week.

Shaking her head and looking around the cafe as if still assessing the whole scene, she says, "I really would like to know what makes me tick. I'm sensitive and I'm not a very good boss. My work is down at the factory where I do quality control."

But in an impish understatement, the Queen of Carrot Cake said, "I do know what a good cake tastes like."



CARROT TOP RESTAURANT FOUNDER RENEE MANCINO poses with some of her prized pasteries which have a large clientele of consumers far beyond the borders of Washington Heights, where her two restaurants & bakeries are located. Photograph by Caroline Brown.



THE WASHINGTON HEIGHTS CITIZEN & The Inwood News



PUBLISHED IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

"For The Betterment Of Our Neighborhoods"

February/March, 1991

25¢
At New
Outlets

VOLUME 4, No. 5

THE COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER OF UPPER MANHATTAN

INDEPENDENT

The Queen Of Carrot Cake Is Also One Tough Cookie

By JOYCE PERRY

As a child, the only times Renee Allen Mancino was sure to be at her Cleveland, Ohio home was when her mother was baking.

A self-described little hellion for most of her childhood, constantly at odds with her mother and six siblings and eluding her grandmother's strap, a sweet tooth for her mother's chocolate fudge, breakfast rings, cakes, pies and cookies was her only taming influence.

The memory of these occasions may have ultimately saved Mancino's life, and was the genesis of her thriving Carrot Top restaurants, and what New York Times food critic Molly O'Neill described as the "best carrot cake in the world."

"(O'Neill) had heard about the cake and came here for the recipe," Mancino recounted. "In order to get in the food editor's section of the Times, you give them a good recipe, she tests it and if she likes it, they print it."

Not only did O'Neill print her carrot cake recipe in her column, but Mancino graces the cover of a cookbook O'Neill authored entitled "New York Cookbook," a compilation and history of current and legendary New York recipes which includes Le Cirque's spaghetti primavera, Lindy's cheesecake and Sylvia's barbecue ribs.

"I'm honored to be selected for the book because New York food is so unique. Tourists come from all over the world to sample the different dishes here. I've gotten calls from all over the United States."

150 Cakes An Hour

The two Carrot Top restaurants employ 20 and are located on Broadway in Inwood and at 165th Street & Broadway in the lower Heights. The baking begins at 3 a.m. at the lower Broadway store (which boasts a seating capacity for 70).

The state-of-the-art ovens from Paris turn out over 150 cakes and pastries an hour serving many of Manhattan's finest restaurants and specialty food stores. The cakes have been shipped all over the country including to such celebrities as Stevie Wonder, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Richard Pryor.

Mancino's efforts have accorded her all the hallmarks of success: an Eldorado Cadillac, a Four by Four vehicle, and a van; a beautiful, 21-year-old daughter, Tanyika Allen, educated exclusively at private schools, and a sprawling home in Rockland County, recently completed under the direction of her husband, Robert.

An Imaginative Child

But she seems inextricably linked to her past and the tortuous journey she endured to get here.

"I was always a very different child," she recalls. "I had an imagination and used to think about a lot of things, weird things. I was aware of people at a very young age. I always wanted more and I had a strong desire to live."



SWEET SUCCESS: Entrepreneur Renee Mancino in front of her Inwood bakery-restaurant. Photograph by Fred Fortunato.

Mancino's story is the stuff of a good movie of the week. After her mother and grandmother's "good Christian efforts" failed to keep her at home and out of trouble, at 14 she was sentenced to a year's residency in reform school for truancy. An otherwise bright young girl, the experience was the catalyst that began to re-shape her direction. "I went in that school a tough juvenile delinquent and came out a straight-A student," she recounts.

Educated during the early sixties when integration and busing laws were being enacted, Mancino took advantage of every opportunity that came her way. She responded to an ad for a job at NASA and at 16 became one of their youngest employees, rising at 5:00 a.m. and traveling two hours to get to their facilities in a Cleveland suburb. "I went to predominantly white schools, so everything they taught their own, I learned too," she said.

Mancino received a scholarship to Howard University in Washington, D.C.,

moved to New York and began an internship at St. Luke's Hospital morgue. She became a Black Muslim, married badly ("and dangerously," she adds), and within two years found herself a widow with a baby girl to support.

Began On Post Avenue

A Muslim minister asked her to bake a cake and liked it so much that he passed her name to the Muslim inmate population. She began baking and selling carrot cakes to pay for her daughter's and her own tuition. Within a year, she was baking 1,200 loaf-shaped cakes with buttercream frosting a week.

"I began baking under the name of Carrot Top with \$200 of my rent money in my Post Avenue apartment," she reminisced. When Mancino wasn't at home baking, she was travelling downtown taking cake and pastry samples to restaurants. She boasts that Balducci's was one of her first commercial accounts.

"Each morning, I'd get on the #1 train with shopping bags full of cakes.

back on the train, deliver to the restaurants and then go to St. Lukes for my classes."

A Disabling Car Crash

In 1977, after four years of baking in her apartment, Mancino received a scholarship to Columbia University's medical school. While vacationing in Florida, recuperating from some minor exploratory surgery, a car in which she was a passenger crashed and sent her head first through the windshield.

When I awoke, there was a doctor sticking needles in my face trying to remove all the glass," she recalled. "All I remembered was my daughter's name and how to pray in Arabic."

Isolated in Florida (her family was unaware of her whereabouts and she was unaware of their existence), she began a slow recovery in Miami.

"The doctors were concerned about my depression," she says. "I had always been pretty vain about my looks. The doctors moved me into a hotel near an amusement park and supplied me with Richard Pryor records. Soon I began laughing again and knew I was going to make it."

Through what she calls the clairvoyance of then 7-year old Tanyika, her family did locate her and after two months of treatment she returned to New York. After extensive facial surgery, ("A surgeon was experimenting with a new technique for black skin and I was his test case.") Mancino did, indeed, regain her good looks. Her memory, however, has never fully returned.

"Medical school? What was that. Within an instant, I lost it all...it changed my entire life. There'll just be things you'll never gain back after a head injury that serious," she observed.

One of the few things Mancino did recall was how to bake a carrot cake. She re-established her pastry-prison franchise and began delivering cakes again. "I remembered that I had gotten paid for an order for Warwick Prison and had not delivered. I knew that prisoners are often the target of rip-offs and I didn't want to disappoint them."

In 1978, she met Robert Mancino, a New York City police officer at the 34th Precinct who answered her call to calm her disruptive visiting brother. "He was the first man to come along who believed in me," Mancino said. "He bought me a mixer." Two years later the couple were married. While he was on patrol in Inwood, he found her a place for a store at Broadway and 214th Street and Carrot Top baked goods hit the street.

Carrot Top Hits the Road

In an effort to expand their business to other areas in Manhattan, he built a mobile bakery on a truck, replete with oven, showcase, coffee and a phone, called it "Step up to Carrot Cake Country," and went to Wall street every day for two years.

In 1983, they leased the space at 165th Street from Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, where Robert introduced entrees and sandwiches.

"He's the creative mind behind the changes in Carrot Top," the energetic businesswoman said. "I'm just the idea and the motivation and anything else you want to call me."

A Demanding Routine

Call her the indomitable force behind the business. Mancino rises at dawn and arrives at her factory by 9

Food/Family/Home

Bake Better Carrot Cake & World May Come to Your Door

By MARYANN SORESE

Three years ago, Post Ave. resident Renee Allen labored in her tiny kitchen to produce enough cakes and pies to sell

within six upstate New York prison concessions she was supplying. Making numerous trips to the local Pathmark supermarket, Ms. Allen stocked up on

her ingredients and worked long into the night so her pastries would be fresh when they were delivered.

Today, Allen is the owner of Carrot Top Pastries on 214 St. and Broadway, and although she has narrowed her delicacies to only carrot cake and no longer sells exclusively to the inmates, she still maintains the freshness and homemade quality of her cakes. "I bake only to order and I never have a surplus," Allen said. "I can make sure my product is perfect, because it is the only one I have."

The cake which is Allen's speciality is made with shredded carrots and chopped walnuts and is glazed with a cream cheese frosting. Allen primarily sells wholesale to midtown delicatessens, restaurants and theater groups, but does take phone orders from the public. An eight ounce carrot nut loaf sells for wholesale at \$1.50 and retails at \$2.39. A nine inch bundt cake is \$8 wholesale and retails at \$1.50 per slice. She also bakes a one quarter-inch and a half-inch sheet cake, but the price is determined by the weight and customer's

specifications.

Last May Allen, who is an attractive 31-year-old black woman, rented the storefront on 214 St. but the building needed a tremendous amount of work before it could

I can make sure my product is perfect, because it's the only one I have.

be occupied. "This building had been a sweat shop," she said. "We had to put all new electrical wiring in. It took six months to do, and it was a lot of work."

The majority of the work, which amounted to \$30,000, was done by Allen's husband and their friends. The remainder was done by local contractors. The bakery is bright and airy, and has two large pizza style ovens and a long freezer-refrigerator compartment. Butcher block cabinets are used for storage and supplies. There is also space upstairs which will be used for offices after they have been renovated, Allen said.

In addition to the work and problems of renovating the Broad-

way building Allen had difficulty getting a small business loan. She had contacted Citibank for a \$15,000 loan, but was told they were not giving loans to new business because new business do not make any money.

Determined to open her store, Allen sold all her jewelry, the family's 17-foot boat, and traded in their car to get enough money together to begin renovating the building and buying equipment. "My partner (Allen's husband) and I have invested all our money in this business," she said.

At present, Allen is busy promoting her product in midtown restaurants like Proof of the Pudding and department stores such as Bloomingdale's and Macy's. She is featuring a rabbit shaped carrot cake for Easter and hopes to set up a small booth in the well-known Manhattan department stores to take orders. "I will only sell it where I myself would go to shop or eat. My cakes are quality products and have to be sold in quality stores," Allen said. "We hope to get so well known that people will come from everywhere to try my product."



Renee Allen, owner of Carrot Top Pastries, slides rack of carrot cakes into freezer compartment. H•I Photo by J. Suarez.

The Manhattan Times Profile: Renee Mancino

By Lisa Stephenson

It has been said that the greatest gifts in life are unanswered prayers. Renee Mancino, owner and founder of Carrot Top Pastries, has overcome challenges and misfortune to build an impressive career as a businesswoman. Endowed with determination, resilience and a marvelous sense of humor, Ms. Mancino has navigated the labyrinthine path of life with ingenious charm.

One of seven children, Ms. Mancino was born and raised in Cleveland. Her mother was a single parent who worked eight-hour shifts at two jobs; her grandmother was the matriarch of the family who didn't spare the rod to spoil the child. "They didn't give spankings in those days," Ms. Mancino recalled, "they gave beatings." Although money wasn't abundant, her childhood home was filled with love and the memory of an aromatic kitchen.

"My mother and grandmother baked all the time," Ms. Mancino said. "For birthdays we had our favorite cake; there were donuts for Halloween, fudge for Christmas and candy at Easter. My mother could have done it professionally."

By the age of 14, Ms. Mancino was consistently on probation and had become a juvenile delinquent. Her

mother, with a stroke of tough love, sent her to reform school.

"It changed my life and was the best thing that could have happened to me," she said. "There were six students in a class, the school was in the middle of farm country and we were locked in every night. Scott Carpenter, one of the first astronauts, was an instructor and I had a biology teacher who encouraged my love of science. I returned home as a straight A student. When NASA hired me at 16 to work in their information library, I was one of the youngest employees on staff."

Ms. Mancino planned to begin medical school on scholarship at Howard University, until she met a man (at her grandmother's funeral) who was a mortician. Fascinated by the prospect of an alternate career path, her future changed. By the time she turned 21, Ms. Mancino was living in New York had begun an internship at St Luke's Hospital morgue. By the age of 28, she was the widowed mother of a 5-year-old daughter. She decided to return to medical school and applied to Columbia University; two days after receiving a notice of acceptance she narrowly escaped death in a car accident.

Her recuperation, slow and complicated, resulted in short and long term

memory loss, early menopause and years of pernicious headaches. Prior to the accident, Ms. Mancino lived on Post Avenue and baked in her home for additional income. What began as a means to an end evolved into a career.

"Pathmark was right around the corner and I left my daughter alone for 15 minutes at a time to shop for ingredients," she recalled. "I made individual trips for the flour, the carrots and the sugar, rolling a cart with one hand and holding a .38 revolver in the other. I rode the subway to deliver my cakes to Balducci's, did street fairs and distributed samples to restaurants every Tuesday with a follow up call every Wednesday."

Her second husband, Robert, convinced her to turn pastries into profit, and converted an Inwood storefront into a bi-level apartment and food shop; a second location was opened at Broadway and 165th Street. Ms. Mancino described Inwood and the Heights as the best-kept secrets in New York and during the past 20 years she has done bridal showers, wedding cakes and baby showers for clients she knew as children in the neighborhood.

With reflection and hindsight Ms. Mancino agreed that striking, ironic contrasts filled her life. "When I was



Renee Mancino

growing up there were so many of us that only the best kids were allowed to lick the bowl," she laughed. "Now my cakes are done in a 180 quart mixer and my oven bakes 150 cakes an hour. When I look at them, I smile. My life sounds colorful, but there's been a lot of hardship and pain, which I've turned

PROFILE continued on page 9