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DE GUSTIBUS; From Bitter Seeds, Carrot Cake Empire

By MOLLY O'NEILL

RENEE ALLEN MANCINO, the proprietor of Carrot Top Pastries in the Bronx, may bake the best carrot cake in the world.

In less than 10 years, she has expanded her original home-oven operation to a two-cafe, one-commercial-bakery empire. She bakes cakes for dozens of Manhattan's finest restaurants and fancy-food stores, as well as for Stevie Wonder, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Richard Pryor and hundreds of other celebrities.

Once, all she had for transporting her supplies was a shopping cart; now she drives a black BMW M3. She is not unimpressed by her success, but she doesn't take it personally, either. She sees herself as a straightforward product of the American dream.

"I'm just your basic Buckeye in the big city," said Mrs. Mancino, who grew up in Cleveland and moved to New York City in 1970 to study mortuary science. Certain Ohioans, she said, are born with the daring it takes to leave home on a lifelong quest to "find your family in you." She is now 42 years old and that process has been inextricably linked to carrot cake and certain aspects of her character. "I learned everything the hard way, but once I learned it, baby, I never forgot," she said.

The lessons began in adolescence. "I was bad," she said. "I was so bad my mother and grandmother, who were good Christian ladies, by the way, taught me how to bake to try to keep me at home and out of trouble."

Their efforts were not immediately rewarded. At 15, Renee Allen was sentenced to a year's residency in reform school for truancy. "I came out of that place a straight-A student, determined to go to medical school," Mrs. Mancino recalled. At her grandmother's funeral, she realized her specialty: forensic medicine.

She moved to New York where, in short order, she studied mortuary science, joined the Black Muslims, married badly, had a baby and was widowed. Her husband's death left her with a baby girl to support in Inwood. She began baking carrot cakes.

She sent her earliest efforts -- gratis -- to a Black Muslim who was in jail upstate. Word got around. Within a year, she was baking 1,200 loaf-shaped cakes with buttercream frosting a week. "Prisoners could call Wednesday," she said. "I'd write orders all day."

And then she went to work. "I'd take my .38 and my shopping cart, go pick up my supplies at Pathmark and come home and bake," she said. The cakes were picked up on Saturdays by a group of families on their way to visit prisoners upstate.

She studied on Sundays. In 1977, she was accepted by Columbia University's medical school. After a summer of baking to earn both her tuition and a Montessori School tuition for her daughter, Tanyika, she took a Florida vacation. Two days before she was to enter medical school, the car in which she was a passenger crashed; she went through the windshield. Her memory has never completely recovered.

"I forgot everything I wanted to be," she said. "Medical school? Are you kidding? I couldn't even remember my name."

She did remember that she had a daughter. Gradually, she said, she recalled other things: "Embalming, certain facts about chemistry, how to make carrot cake."

She re-established her pastry-prison franchise and began delivering cakes to fancy-food stores and restaurants.

In 1980, she married Robert Mancino, a New York City police officer. While he was on patrol he found her a place for a store, on Broadway at 214th Street. In an effort to expand their market to the other end of Manhattan, the couple built a mobile bakery on the back of a flatbed truck and drove it to Wall Street every day for two years. Seven years ago, they opened a second cafe and bakery on Broadway at 164th Street.

Mrs. Mancino has learned a lot about carrot cake -- for instance, Canadian carrots are too bitter and carrots from California are best; carrots grated too far ahead of time don't give a cake proper moisture; vegetable oil bakes more evenly in the batter than butter.

Mrs. Mancino has learned a lot about herself, too. "They say God protects babies and fools," she said. "I fall under that clause."

After 17 years as a Muslim, Mrs. Mancino is a Christian again. Her daughter has graduated from college. Her husband just built her a new house. She has a six-foot boa constrictor named CleoPatrick. And more cake orders than she can handle.

Mrs. Mancino believes in just deserts. On a recent afternoon, wearing a tan silk jumpsuit and lizard pumps, a rope of nine-centimeter pearls around her neck and a Marine cap perched on her hair, she furiously repainted the front of her store, brushing away the graffiti that a new generation of incorrigibles had left.

"People are bad for lack of knowing what makes them good," she said.

And then she stood back to admire the nine-foot orange fluorescent carrot that hangs over her doorway. She glanced across the street to the Riverdale Funeral Home, smiled contentedly and said, "I feel real comfortable here." Carrots Are for Cakes, Too Carrot Top Cake
Total time: One hour, 20 minutes
For the cake: 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon vegetable oil 2 cups sugar 3 cups freshly ground carrots (about 7 medium carrots) 1 cup walnuts, coarsely chopped 2 cups flour 3 teaspoons baking powder 1 teaspoon cinnamon 1 teaspoon nutmeg 1/2 teaspoon salt 4 eggs. For the frosting: 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) butter, at room temperature 1/4 cup solid vegetable shortening 1 1/2 cups (3/4 pound) cream cheese, at room temperature 2 tablespoons milk 1 tablespoon vanilla extract 1 1/2 cups confectioners' sugar.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Use one tablespoon of the vegetable oil to grease a 9- by 11-inch sheet pan.

2. In a large bowl, combine the remaining oil, sugar, carrots, walnuts, flour, baking powder, cinnamon, nutmeg and salt. Stir to combine, then add eggs and mix well. Pour the batter into the pan and cook for 45 minutes or until the cake is springy to the touch. Remove from oven and cool, in pan.

3. To make the frosting, cream the butter, vegetable shortening and cream cheese with a wooden spoon or hand mixer. Add the milk and vanilla extract. Add the confectioners' sugar and stir until smooth. When cake is cooled, frost.

Yield: 8 servings.

Photo: Renee Allen Mancino bakes cakes for fine restaurants, shops and celebrities. (Jack Manning/The New York Times)