

A CENTURY OF BAKING

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Not many people can say their family has been in a business for a century.

But the Cantore family at Claudio's Specialty Breads in Castroville is celebrating 100 years in baking this year, both in the U.S. and in Italy.

Having grown up working in his family's bakery, Claudio Cantore, a third-generation baker, may have been destined to follow that same path.

"I think it was in my blood," he said.

Cantore was born in Sant'Antonino di Susa, a tiny town in a valley in the Piedmont region of northern Italy, at the foot of the Alps and an hour's drive to France. He started young — he was an assistant in his father's bakery from the age of 12.

As a young man he fell in love with a visiting American who grew up in Marin County. They married in San Francisco, then lived for a short while in his hometown, but its size and remoteness was isolating, and Gayle Cantore grew homesick.

So they emigrated to the U.S. in 1974. Claudio spoke no English when he arrived (Gayle, on the other hand, was fluent in Italian); he picked up English watching "Sesame Street" with their daughter, a toddler at the time.

Cantore worked in a San Francisco bakery, focusing on sourdough, for a few years before moving to Monterey County. Eventually he switched to the Monterey Baking Co., where he worked for 15 or so years before it closed. As a master baker, he's worked as a consultant to bakers and bakeries.

Gayle and Claudio started Claudio's Specialty Breads 22 years ago. Their customers are mostly hotels and resorts, such as the Marriott Monterey, the Lodge at Pebble Beach, the Beach Club, as well as restaurants and markets such as Phil's Fish Market in Moss Landing.

While Cantore's career as a baker took off in the U.S., across an ocean, his brother also kept the tradition alive — he still operates the original Fratelli Cantore bakery in Sant'Antonino di Susa.

"There are a lot of businesses that have been around for 100 years, especially in Europe," Gayle said. "But the fact that it was generational, and that the generations are still involved in it is what I think is so special about it."

Now the Cantores' daughter and son-in-law are also involved in the business full time, and their own young children in turn are showing interest.

Phil DiGirolamo, owner of Phil's Fish Market, said he's worked with Claudio's from the beginning, and that the Cantores are like family.

"I pick up the phone and I get a person," DiGirolamo said. "We do the old style of doing business. Trusting each other with a handshake, no filling out any credit applications. How can I do any better than dealing with my family?"

The bakery specializes in artisan breads and pastries that they make to order — sourdough, biscotti, Italian cookies, cinnamon bread, breadsticks, and countless others. Their strength, they say, is in tailoring products to customers' desires, and coming up with creative solutions to chefs' needs — whether it was the tiny baked-good lady bugs they made once for the Beach Club or the year that they made a thousand tiny pink poodles, or their artichoke cupcakes for the Castroville Artichoke Festival.

The bakery has expanded in the space it rents over the years, a gleaming kitchen full of the smell of baking bread

and the hum of gigantic mixers and ovens. On a tour of his kitchen on a recent evening, when the bakery's workers were just starting their shifts, he lovingly points out a piece of equipment that "mixes the dough very gently, very softly."

Cantore's eyes gleam when asked about the most common mistakes amateur bakers make with sourdough. "They underestimate it, or they overestimate it. But they don't get it in the middle," he said. He's developed Parkinson's disease, which has hampered his left hand and his ability to work.

Cantore's Italian accent flavors his speech. At times, his manner of speaking takes on a lyrical or philosophical air.

"Americans have the attitude: 'baker is an easy job,'" he said, with a snap of his fingers. "I respect every job. I respect the sweeper because he sweeps very well, and I don't know how to sweep, I will have to learn."

As a consultant, he said, when hopeful baker-entrepreneurs were setting out to start a bakery, he always tried to be clear — baking is not simple and it is not easy.

But he quickly tempered that with a pinch of hopefulness: "I believe that anyone can learn to be a baker, but you have to be a little humble and work hard for what you want to have in the future," he said.