



OFF MENU

Freshly baked in history

BY MITCH BARBER

On its 60th anniversary, then-City Councilman Darrell Steinberg signed a resolution congratulating New Roma Bakery for its longtime service to Sacramento.

That was in 1994—and it's a milestone that's quite a feat considering many small businesses don't make it past three years. This year, New Roma, the little bakery on the corner of 18th and E streets, celebrates 85 years of assorted pastries, towering wedding cakes and fresh-baked breads pulled straight from its brick oven.

The bakery first opened in 1934. For a bit of period reference, the Tower Bridge was completed a year later. It's nice to think that the iconic bridge's builders once enjoyed New Roma on their breaks. So what lends to a bakery's permanence? A recent casualty is The Bread Store, which closed its doors in February after being in business since 1990.

Spots that have solved this riddle for now include Freeport Bakery and Grateful Bread. There's also Mahoraba Japanese Bakery known for its sweet Kobe Cream filling and ABC Bakery with its delicious Chinese steamed and baked pork buns. New Roma is cradled by the charming,

tree-lined streets of the Boulevard Park neighborhood that looks like something out of the opening credits of *Portlandia*. A faded vintage neon sign with glowing pink letters shines bright in the early morning hours. Upon entering the bakery, customers are greeted by the smell of sugary sweet donuts one minute, while the next is dominated by the aroma of piping-hot French, sourdough and rye loaves.

On a recent weekday morning, a handful of customers gathered in front of glass display cases filled with eclairs, turnovers and pies. A visiting contractor wore blue jeans covered in white paint. A young girl selected a doughnut before heading off to school across the street. English, Spanish and Japanese conversations blended in among the chatter, and there was not a single smartphone in sight.

Doug Maxwell, a regular customer and owner of the E Street Bike Shop (formerly Rex Cycles) across the street, said he's hooked on peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches made with New Roma's milk bread that he's enjoyed for the last decade.

Cathy MacBurnie, a clerk for two years, explained that the popular

milk bread has the same ingredients as French bread, but substitutes milk for the traditional water. The bread is pillow-soft on the inside, and its crust has just the right amount of crunchy chewiness. She'll ask if you'd like the loaf sliced. The bread slicer looks like a long, narrow white-toothed mouth, and it has been providing convenient sandwich bread at New Roma since, you guessed it, 1934. As the bread is sliced, my eyes wander to the freakishly large Texas doughnuts in the display case: \$2 a piece in maple and chocolate varieties. Nearby are the "Glazed Men," pudgy sweet breads with frosting for eyes and mouths that attract excited children to the glass.

Master baker and owner since 1997, Tim R. Costa is unseen on the sales floor. MacBurnie described his work schedule as 72 hours a week plus extra time on his days off. Maybe he's thinking about the century mark that beckons 15 years in the future.

When asked what she enjoys about New Roma, MacBurnie explained, "It's a family place. The last of the small hometown bakeries are dying out like weeds. No, no. Flowers."

It's a fitting concern for the Camellia City.

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