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NEW BERN

Sweet Serendipity

Baker's Kitchen has weathered storms — literal and metaphorical — to keep its community in baked goods and breakfast foods (with a side of butter syrup).

written by SUSAN STAFFORD KELLY / *photography by* BAXTER MILLER

New Bern residents know that butter syrup pairs well with just about everything — especially chicken and waffles.

BUDDY BENDEL will never forget the holiday season of 2011. That year, on December 23, he got a call from his father, who owned a historic building. After eight years, his tenant, a restaurateur, had decamped in the dead of night, leaving only a Dear John letter. “He didn’t tell his employees, anyone,”

Bengel says. “Those poor people, two days before Christmas, relying on paychecks for presents. Just ... gone.”

When no buyers stepped up, and despite zero culinary background in his family, Bengel uttered the service industry’s infamous last words: “How hard can it be to run a restaurant?” The Bengels changed the name

slightly — from Baker’s Square to Baker’s Kitchen — rehired the previous employees, and decided to give it a six-month go beginning in February 2012. Six months became a couple of years, and then, one magical Saturday, it happened: People were waiting for a table to free up. Then, there was a wait on a Sunday. Then, seven days a week.



Baker's Kitchen is best known for breakfast, but the restaurant's new chef, Duke Kroger, has been expanding its lunch menu, too.

Walk into Baker's Kitchen Restaurant & Bakery today, and you'll find vintage cupboards and hutches holding equally vintage colanders, rolling pins, and flour canisters. Photographs of New Bern sights — the waterfront, Tryon Palace, the trolley, a sunset — decorate the walls. First, though, you'll have to pass the bakery case, filled with cinnamon rolls, cookies, and s'mores bars topped with mini-marshmallows. Every offering is made in the bakery upstairs.

"I want an experience," Bengel says. "I want you to come in here and we take you back to Sunday afternoons

at Grandma's house, the whole family sitting around the table. I want you to feel like you're at home, eating food that Grandma made."

That food, for plenty of customers, is breakfast, the better for enjoying the restaurant's not-so-secret star condiment: butter syrup. Baker's Kitchen is open every day until 2:30 p.m., and while Nic Whitehurst, the manager, swears by the chicken salad, an awful lot of trays filled with pancakes, waffles, eggs, bacon, and sausage leave the kitchen right up to closing time.

IN 2012, BAKER'S KITCHEN SERVED 60,000 folks. This year, it will serve more than 200,000. Used to be, tourists made up some 60 percent of those customers, but that's changed in the past year, Bengel says. More and more locals are wending their way to Baker's Kitchen. Why? Bengel doesn't hesitate to answer: "Hurricane Florence," he says. New Bern was inundated by the storm in September 2018. "People have seen pictures, but if you were here ..." he trails off. Post-hurricane, would-be tourists had nowhere to stay, shop, or eat. But the community came together, often over breakfast at Baker's Kitchen.

"I think it will be a two- to four-year process to recover, but I'm proud of the resilience of our community, especially downtown," Bengel says. "And I'm proud of Baker's Kitchen. Volunteers from the New York and Oakland fire departments were staying at the church next door, and we opened at night and fed them. We fed close to 10,000 people as a way of saying thank you."

At a nearby table, French toast has arrived for one diner. His friend has opted for lunch, instead, with The Yard Bird, a fried chicken patty topped with pimento cheese, smoked bacon, and Creole aioli. Both, though, reach for the famous butter syrup: pourable, tangible proof that even in sad stories, from Dear John letters to a hurricane named Florence, you may find a little unexpected sweetness. *Os*

Susan Stafford Kelly is a novelist and a frequent contributor to Our State.

Butter, but Better

Dip. Dunk. Drizzle. Over and onto fried chicken, hamburgers, and, of course, pancakes, waffles, and anything with a breadly texture, the better to absorb the sugary, buttery, palomino-pony-colored "craft syrup" that is Baker's Kitchen's signature condiment. "Move over, maple!" reads the label. While the recipe is what the owners politely call "proprietary," here's a secret: There's not a drop of maple syrup in the potion.

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