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Meet the folks behind Brandon's Rolling Pin Emporium

By Ernest Hooper, Metro Columnist

The roots of one of Brandon's most prestigious businesses can be traced back to a deep-seated love of Southern cuisine, a passion for cooking and the humble approach a mom and dad used to feed their family.

Dave West's mother hailed from Savannah, Ga., and his father was a native of Jacksonville, so Southern cooking proved to be the norm as he grew up in Sarasota. The family raised chickens and pigs, and nothing went to waste. Nothing.

Yes, West eats chitterlings, or pig intestines.

"We grew up learning how to use everything," said West, noting his mother would bread and fry chitterlings, giving them a calamari-like consistency.

"I've never met a pork I didn't like. I've never met a part of the chicken I didn't like. And not only did we eat collard greens, we would eat mustards, kale - anything we could grow in the garden.

"I think I was poor, but I didn't know it."

The background, the zeal and the humor have all served West and his wife, Karen, well as they've built Rolling Pin Emporium, at 2080 Badlands Drive, into a food and cooking mecca.

Now in its 15th year, Rolling Pin received special recognition last month when the Florida Retail Federation gave it the 2010 Retailer of the Year Award For Leadership in the \$1 million to \$10 million category. The honor, which it received after being nominated by state Sen. Ronda Storms, marks just how far the Wests have come.

Back in 1993, Karen and Dave both held executive jobs with McDonald's Corp. before Karen walked into a Rolling Pin at WestShore Plaza and left inspired to own a store that sold high-quality, hard-to-find cooking utensils, coffees, teas and other complementary items.

"They had an espresso machine, and you could smell the coffee," said Karen, a native of Anderson, S.C. "People were sampling food, the owner was there, the staff was friendly and they had every gadget imaginable.

"I fell in love with the concept."

Having lived in Brandon since 1987, and with Westfield Brandon mall (then Brandon TownCenter) under construction, it seemed like a perfect time to spread her wings even though her husband was more of the cook in the family. In 1995, Karen opened her own Rolling Pin and two years later assumed control of the West-Shore Plaza location.

Dave joined Karen in 2003, but the big change came in 2006 when the Wests combined the two stores into a new location that featured a culinary institute with a state-of-art kitchen, including granite countertops and cooking classes.

Many of the classes quickly sold out, and they drove traffic like never before.

It helped that Dave spent seven months training at the French Culinary Institute in New York.

The pair quickly outgrew the space, and are now in a 4,500-square-foot store with a kitchen and retail space that contains 18,000 items.

Dave manages the cooking classes, which feature him and other area chefs such as Rib Dog and Dr. Barbecue.

He said the classes typically attract three types: serious cooks who want to follow recipes and enhance their skills, enthusiasts who want a mix of cooking education and entertainment, and folks who just love good food.

Meanwhile, Karen runs the retail side and is working to expand Internet sales.

"Thank God she does it and I don't, because she's phenomenal at it," Dave said. "I can't talk highly enough about her."

Dave also speaks highly of Slow Foods of Tampa Bay, a group devoted to creating greater market access for the suppliers of produce, meat, cheese and other foods.

The Rolling Pin's involvement with this group and its overall philanthropic efforts were two of the virtues cited by the retail federation's selection committee.


Like everyone, the Wests have seen the down economy cut into business. But Dave points out a silver lining: More people cook at home.

Helping folks exact more joy out of food is great, but the impact of helping people find better and more economical ways to feed themselves and their families can't be underestimated. This may be the Rolling Pin's greatest contribution to the community.

Either that or making chitterlings sound appetizing.

That's all I'm saying.

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