

## Finding a niche in the specialty market, key to Elk Horn bakery's success

“We put our blood, sweat and tears into it,” said Jacqui Christensen referring to her former, as well as current business, the Danish Bake Shoppe and kaffe hus in Elk Horn, Iowa. The business’ closing and subsequent reopening is a success story in the often tough world of small business ownership.

However, her story isn’t necessarily a new one. It is estimated that 78% of all small business start-ups fail within the first twelve months years, and long-term survival is likely for only 22% of all new business start-ups.\*

Originally from Pasadena, CA, Jacqui grew up no where near Iowa with her



*Jacqui Christensen with daughter Madelyn at the bakery in Elk Horn.*

only ties to the region being her grandparents who lived in Elk Horn. In 2001 the owner of the local Danish bakery retired so Jacqui and her father decided to purchase the business with the intention of “stepping it up a bit”, she said. Prior to work at the bakery, Jacqui was a graduate of Cal State, Long Beach and had ten years experience in childcare, so as a new business owner, she faced an extensive learning curve.

Jacqui soon learned from locals how to make the Danish breads and Kringle (Danish pastry). She and her father dove head-first into the business and advertised it heavily. They had good employees, but couldn’t afford to pay them much. Jacqui loved living in Iowa, but she felt very alone with her dad and most of her family still in California. “We had marbles everywhere and no focus,” she said. Finally, the financial challenges of the start-up proved to be harder than they thought so they soon closed shop.

Contemplating a return to her roots, things took a turn when Jacqui became engaged and the bakery came up for sale again. Realizing that she wanted to raise her future family here, she married Jeremy Christensen in January 2003 and reopened the business soon after. This time she went in to business ownership with an open mind and a different focus.

For Jacqui, the second time around meant expanding her food menu by adding breakfast and lunch in addition to the bakery. She now serves up Aebleskivers (Danish pancakes) every morning, Monday through Saturday in the restaurant. She still advertises in the local papers, but tries to gain as much free publicity

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as possible to keep expenditures under control.

“You have to have a niche,” she said. “People are willing to spend money on specialty items and go out of their way to find them. We offer the customer something unique and have great local support coupled with a clean, inviting business.”

Not only does Jacqui’s business rely heavily on the tourists who come to town in the summer and fall, but also locals, often from Harlan, who come to enjoy the specialties. She sells rye bread to the Salem Lutheran Home residents every morning who enjoy the fact that they are baked fresh with no added preservatives.

Jacqui averages about 50 hours per week at her job. She also purchased and manages The Petal Pusher, the local flower shop in Elk Horn. There are currently six employees who work part-time at the bakery and three at the flower shop.

How does she keep up-to-date with the ethnic specialty food industry? “I email my dad who helps me a lot and constantly rely on Internet research,” she said. “We’re currently working on refining our mail-order system for the pastries and Kringle.” Her next big project is to establish a website. “Right now we’ll send some pastries out through Priority Mail, but we need to refine our system before we open it up via the internet just yet,” she said. “Just in case the orders come flooding in, I want to be prepared.”

\* Debbie Jensen, <http://EzineArticles.com/>