

Tough Market Gobbles Grote Goodies

By MARGARET JOSTEN
Business Reporter

In a town reputed to be super-smooty about the quality of its baked goods, Grote Bakery probably sells enough cakes and cookies, breads and buns in one year to pave the Western Hills Viaduct many times over.

With nine bake shops and 14 supermarkets and 12 restaurants, the Northside-based family bakery headed by Leonard Grote Sr. expects to tally \$2.2 million to \$2.3 million in 1981 sales. That's a lot of dough in any kind of business.

But Joseph Grote, 25, sales manager-spokesman for the rapidly-expanding operation, assesses their success realistically. "Cincinnati historically is a good bakery city. People know what good baked goods are. They're tough to please."

"We've been fortunate to have Cincinnati's support," he adds with a touch of the humility that appears to be a part of the Grote family heritage.

At the bakery's headquarters, 4163 Hamilton Ave., where all of the goods are produced, a very ordinary week finds the huge ovens turning out 3,200 dozen doughnuts, 1,500 dozen buns and 5,000 loaves of bread.

BUT HOLIDAY time is the zenith of the year. The five-member holiday cookie packing crew headed by Bob Grote, 14, a freshman at Labadie High school, begins packing nights the first week of November and continues through the week of Christmas. The crew hand packs an estimated 4,500 pounds of butter cookies to be sold in all stores.

Cincinnatians not only gobble up such Grote-produced German holidays fare as Springerle, Pfeffernuss and Lebkuchen at an amazing rate themselves, but purchase the products for out-of-town friends. Sales manager Joseph says their Christmas Stollen (a coffee cake filled with candied fruit and nuts) is a particularly popular item for out-of-town shipment.

While Grote Bakery will celebrate its 30th anniversary in 1982, officially, it really got its start back in the 1920s, when Leonard Grote was earning extra money after school working in Northside bakeries.

By the time Grote graduated from Roger Bacon High School in 1947, he was so sure about his career that the yearbook recorded his desire to own a retail bakery. It was only a natural outgrowth of his after-school efforts.

But first he joined the U.S. Navy. There, not surprisingly, perhaps, he became such a master at baking that he eventually became head baker on the famous USS Midway during the Korean War. By the time the young man was discharged from the Navy in 1952, he was ready to set up his own shop in Cincinnati.

Armed with the Navy cookbook containing valuable hints on baking in volume, Grote started in South Cumminsville at a Borden Street site (long since overrun by I-74). Times were tough, but he persisted. It was not until he opened his store in Brentwood in 1956 that he really began to glimpse the commercial success he sought.

THE GROTE Bakery has been growing ever since. The empire now encompasses the store at Brentwood, the store and bakery in Northside, as well as shops at Amelia, Bridgetown, Cheviot, Fairfield, Springfield, Western Hills Plaza and Pisgah.

Joseph Grote, the sales manager, reports ambitious plans to expand the Northside plant, plus hopes to open new shops in Blue Ash and Kenwood. "We're always looking for new locations," Grote says. There's another big development on the drawing boards for the family opera-



LEONARD GROTE Sr., top photo, founder of the chain which bears his name, often refers to his old Navy cookbook when experimenting with a new creation. His daughter Barbara, above, is studying to be a nurse but also finds time for more artistic pursuits.

tion, but Joseph says it's too hush-hush detail at this point.

Leonard Grote Sr., 52, is the owner. By the four grown sons make the bakery the full-time business. 100. Besides Joseph they are Leonard Jr., 29, the production manager, Stephen, 27, the controller, and Tony, 24, assistant production manager.

Daughter Barbara, 18, currently enrolled in the Deaconess School of Nursing has turned her artistic talents to such areas as holiday and other displays. She also assists in scheduling employee hours in the retail outlets.

The youngest, Bob, 14, has duties in addition to the holiday cookie packing operation. On Saturdays, Bob works as part of the maintenance crew (this is where all the Grote children started) preparation for a future in the bakery.

Only one of the children, Chuck, 20, is not part of the business. He works for Jumbo Manufacturing, a plumbing supply firm in Plymouth, Ind.

Joseph insists that a great deal of the credit for the family's success should go to his mother. "Sometimes she feels she doesn't have a part in it," he says, "but she's just as important a part as anybody. Raising seven children is a big job."

Leonard Sr. mentions still uses the U.S. Navy cookbook to solve knotty problems in the bakery business. "He checks back and looks at the different ideas," Joseph reports. "Some of the old formulas can tell us what we're doing wrong."

THE BAKERY founder attributes much of his success to the help he received from other Cincinnati bakers, who he claims taught him what it takes to make a bakery successful. Today, he makes himself available to the young bakers just coming up in the business.

Leonard Jr. also is active in the industry. He will be national chairman in 1981 when the Retail Bakers of America hold their annual convention in Cincinnati. A part of the family takes part in baking industry conventions and seminars because it's a good way to exchange new ideas.

As an example, a new item soon to appear on the Grote shelves is the croissant. Since the croissant is not easy to produce, the Grotes purchased a special croissant machine at the national baker convention in Las Vegas. Once it arrives according to Joseph, they'll probably need three or four months to get the highly prized item into production.

A big part of the Grote tradition is to maintain a quality image, according to Joseph. "We feel we have a quality image and I think the customers agree. We resist the use of extenders or anything else to increase the shelf life of the product. We don't cut corners."

The size of the operation also is a help. Because the bakery can buy ingredients in quantity, prices can be held down according to the sales manager. "It helps us compete with the wholesalers on products that are found in the supermarket," he says.

Grote Bakery makes a big point, too, of keeping high type sales people and managers in their stores. "A quality salesperson makes the product look that much better," according to Joseph. (The store employ 58 sales people and managers at the bakery headquarters employ 10 production people and two office workers.)

Joseph also speaks of the closely-knit family organization as another big factor in the company's success. He says the look after, communicate with and have deep respect for one another.

"But the biggest reason for success has been our father and mother, who have given us the opportunity to carry on the business," he says.



SIX OF the seven Grote children take part in bakery operations. Seen here with their parents, Leonard Sr. and Barbara Grote, are, from left, Barbara, Joe, Tony, Bob, Leonard Jr. and Steve. Son Chuck works for a plumbing supply firm.

Enquirer photos by MARK TRETEL