



Sisters Cheryl, left, and Catherine Reinhart enjoy a successful partnership in the kitchen of their Sweet Life Patisserie.

Life for sisters full of sugar and spice

Cheryl and Catherine Reinhart, owners of Sweet Life Patisserie, share a history of hard work and spirited adventure. Over time, they've learned to "balance each other" in the bakery.

By Linda J. Sellers
Photos by Collin Andrew
SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS

Most people experience a point in their lives when circumstances come together to alter the course of the future. For sisters Cheryl and Catherine Reinhart, that moment occurred soon after college, when they had both broken up with boyfriends and wanted a change in their lives. Cheryl, three years older, called Catherine and said, "We're going out West." And Catherine said, "Let's go."

That was the turning point that brought them to Eugene, where the sisters later started their own successful bakery called Sweet Life Patisserie. But after spending only an hour with the women, it's easy to see that the sisters' bond is so tight that if it had not been a trip out West in an old VW van, some other set of circumstances would have drawn them together in a way that intertwined their lives.

Except for their college years — Cheryl at Cornell in New York and Catherine at Boston University — the sisters always have lived in the same house or neighborhood. "We're right around the corner from each other," Cheryl says, "and we like it that way."

Growing up together

After their parents divorced — at the time Cheryl was 8 and Catherine was 5 — they moved from the Bay Area in California to Thornville, Ohio, with their mother, Patricia Reinhart. It was in that setting the siblings began to bond.

"We were in a rural area, so we spent most of our free time at home," Cheryl recalls. "We did 4H, and we raised animals, and we both were in the drama club at school."

Catherine also spent ample time in the kitchen, making cookies and candy and decorating each piece individually. "I love sugar," she says with a laugh. "Baking was a way to have the sugar."

"They made my life easier," their mother, Patricia, comments. "I told them I needed their help, and they understood that. They had a lot of responsibilities."

Still, they had issues like any other siblings. "Cheryl was the older sister who would be mean to me sometimes," Catherine recalls. "And I was the poor little 'me' sister. It was just something we had to go through."

Cheryl remembers it a little differently. Turning to her sister, she says, "You were really close to Mom, and I was the antagonist, the outsider. It was just the three of us, so it was a weird dynamic."

Young adults on the move

Under those aprons, the Reinhart sisters are hardy women who have challenged themselves repeatedly. They both spent time in Africa in their early 20s, and after a few months of traveling the West Coast, at Cheryl's urging they took jobs on a fishing boat in Alaska.

"We worked 12 hours a day, every day, for four months, and sometimes we worked round the clock," Cheryl recalls. "The captain told us he didn't think we would last out our four-month contract. He didn't know we had a hard-core working class mom who had taught us to work hard."

Catherine fills in the details: "We started with four cooks, but two of them left, so it was just the two of us, serving a crew of 90. We were cooking and mopping and



Delicious fruit tart made with TLC.

doing dishes. It was crazy, but we made it.”

The reward for their tenacity was a paid flight back to Seattle and \$9,000 in savings for each of them.

Catherine saw the money as an opportunity to buy property, something their mother had drilled into them as a better option than renting. Cheryl still wanted to travel. While Catherine went back to Ohio to get the rest of their belongings, Cheryl spent a month in Guatemala.

Settling down

They met back in Eugene and bought a house in the Whiteaker neighborhood. Like many other East Coasters who end up here, they had come through Eugene during their Pacific travels and fell in love with the town. Their dream was eventually to buy a farm and live the country life.

The boat-cook job was at the top of their résumés, so they found work in local restaurants. (Looking back, the sisters make jokes about their “nice liberal arts degrees” and how “college enriched our minds.”)

They often worked in the same restaurant or bakery, but discovered that “bosses tried to pit us against each other.” Other employers were “angry or unhappy” or too rigid in their approach to creating desserts. “I was bursting with creative energy and I felt squelched,” Catherine says. “I realized it was always going to be that way working for someone else.”

One night while sitting on the back porch, they decided to start their own business. “We realized it wasn’t rocket science,” Cheryl says. “We thought if they



Cheryl, left, and Catherine toast their “sweet life” together during a family meal.

could do it, we could do it.”

So they converted their garage into a licensed bakery and started making wedding cakes.

Becoming partners

Sweet Life Patisserie began simply enough, but it quickly became successful. Learning to operate a business wasn’t that challenging for the bright women. “We picked up what we needed along the way,” Cheryl says. “We studied, we talked things out, and we applied logic.”

Learning to work together full time was more challenging. “Cheryl can say something to me, and

because she’s my sister, it’s like pushing this button right here,” Catherine says, pointing to her torso. “Someone else could say exactly the same thing, and it wouldn’t bother me. A mountain of history comes with the phrase.”

After they expanded their business to include the retail store, the sisters sought counseling to make their relationship better. Cheryl says, “It has been really good for us to be adults who work together. Because our relationship is completely different now. We balance each other.”

Their personalities are distinct, yet hard to characterize. Cheryl, who now has three children, is more analytical and prefers to move more slowly on a decision. Yet she’s the one with the adventurous spirit who went to Africa with the Peace Corps, spent a month in Guatemala, and wanted to work on the fishing boat in Alaska.

Catherine is more creative and impulsive, yet she pushed to purchase real estate, start the business, then expand it. She also would rather be “Auntie” than a mother.

“I gave them permission to be anything they wanted,” Patricia says.

She was surprised at first that her daughters had chosen to work in restaurants, then start their own. But she’s not surprised they’ve spent so much time with each other. “When they were kids, we ate all our meals together, we gardened together, we did everything together. It was all about family.”

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