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SMALL BUSINESS/ABRACADABRA, IT'S VEGAN!

Putting the 'umph' into vegan cooking

By Chelsea Retherford
Staff Writer

When people think of Southern comfort food, the term vegan is most probably the last thing on their mind. That's not the case for Priscilla Armstead, a talented vegan baker who often fools first-time tasters into believing her confections are made exactly like their mama used to make them.

Armstead, 65, was introduced to plant-based cooking a little over 33 years ago, and like most newcomers raised on food infused with bacon fat, her initial reaction was "eww."

"My next-to-the-baby brother, Dexter, is one of those pushers, but he pushes you at our pace," Armstead said. "After he finished his speech — because he's going to give you one about healthy eating and all these things — I thought, O.K., the least I can do is try."

Armstead, a Florence native, was living in Atlanta with her husband, who was stationed with the military in Georgia at the time and had just reached his end of service. Her two brothers also lived in the city and worked at Soul Veg Restaurant.

While she found plenty of vegetarian and vegan items on the menu she enjoyed, she said there was still much left to be desired, especially when it came to dessert.

"In those days, which this was in the '90s, it was terrible," she said. "Living in the area we were in, nobody really knew how to put that little 'umph' into the desserts."

Having already joined the cooking staff at Soul Veg, she was inspired one day when she saw a group of her co-workers, affectionately known as the "Fat Brothers," convert a sweet potato pie into a birthday cake.

"You couldn't cut it because they were not at that point where they had figured out how to thicken it up. You couldn't put candles in it because they kept



Priscilla Armstead of Abracadabra, It's Vegan! in Florence. (DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY)

sweet-potato-pie cake in a sheet pan, I decided then that I was going to waste a lot of food, but I was going to figure out how to put a cake together."

Now the owner of Abracadabra, It's Vegan bakery in Florence, Armstead said her specialty is creating vegan cakes and other desserts that hold up as well as their traditional counterparts, and are just as flavorful.

Some of her most sought-after sweets, like pound cake, red velvet cake and even donuts, are traditionally made with fat-forward ingredients like eggs and dairy products, but Armstead has found a few reliable substitutes.

"If you need rising power or binding power, I've learned that you can take flax seed and mix those in aquafaba, which is essentially bean juice. That's a real abracadabra because when

like beans. It does not taste like beans," she said.

"You can also buy Just Egg at Publix or Walmart. It has protein just like a real egg. You can be confused, but it works wonders, and aquafaba can be whipped just like egg whites. It's amazing."

While she specializes in sweets, she also loves creating savory vegan versions of Southern favorites, like collard greens, cornbread muffins, mac-and-cheese and meatloaf. These were the dishes that turned mealtime into a magical experience for her and her siblings as they were growing up.

"Saturday morning, my dad had the pots jumping," she said with a laugh. "My dad would cook breakfasts, and we'd have gravy and whatever meat. He'd have all the trimmings to go with that. My mom would cook a four-

waiting on Saturday and Sunday, because my parents were going to show out."

She said her mom played a major role in her culinary education, often giving Armstead space to "mess up" and learn from the mishaps. While cooking became a natural passion early on, Armstead said it was her parents' health that motivated the pivot towards healthier eating.

Armstead made the move back to Florence after her father started battling heart disease. Later, her mother would develop Alzheimer's.

She said each of her parents made an effort to eat healthier before their imminent passing, but the decision to move towards a plant-based lifestyle likely prolonged their lives.

Armstead said her own hus-

WANT TO TASTE?

Abracadabra, It's Vegan! Owned by Priscilla Armstead



MISSION: "We are a plant-based bakery and more. Our mission is people first, quality and health."

LOCATION: Shoals Culinary Center, 610 W College St. In Florence

PLACE AN ORDER: Visit www.abracadabraitsvegan.com to order; pick-up times are available between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday. For birthdays and other events that need to be picked up on weekends, be sure to call ahead after placing your order.

CONTACT: 256-648-9222

consumes mostly plant-based foods, but will occasionally eat fish, eggs and dairy.

"If you're starting out and you're thinking, I don't want to do that, I did it too," she said. "We learned so much after my dad died. It's a learning process. What we've found in our travels is that a lot of people can get totally confused with what's what. What's the difference in a vegetarian and vegan or plant-based?"

Armstead, who takes a holistic approach to her own health, said she's just as passionate about educating people and helping them discern which lifestyle best fits their needs as she is about baking.

"We're not trying to convince you to become vegan," she said. "It's all about the focus on healthy eating."