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Pastry fans find sweet satisfaction in new group

By Susan Taylor

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Angela Walker lives in Berwyn and "smells bread every day," she said. When she received an e-mail invitation to tour the source of those "heavenly smells," the Turano Baking Co., she jumped at the chance.

"I found it fascinating," said Walker, who works as an event chef for a catering company.

The tour was sponsored by Pastry Chicago, an organization that conducts educational events to help people understand the art of pastry and breadmaking.

"There's been a strong movement talking about your meal, but dessert is still an afterthought. It shouldn't be," explained Renee Bohus, founder and director of Pastry Chicago and admissions director of The French Pastry School.

The Turano event attracted 51 visitors who were guided through the enormous facility, which has four production lines. Donning hairnets, tour guests saw the entire process from bread starter to finished product. It was quite a spectacle: spinning giant bowl mixers, bread dough on moving assembly lines going into 100-foot-long ovens, hundreds of freshly baked loaves coming out of the ovens and deposited on a 15-foot-tall cooling spiral.

The tour was a rare opportunity for the public to get a glimpse of the operations of the company, founded in 1962 by Mariano Turano, an immigrant from Calabria, Italy, who sold bread from the back of his station wagon. The company now produces 250,000 pounds of bread per day, said Joe Turano, an operations manager at the Berwyn plant and grandson of the founder.

Turano Baking Co. is not set up to conduct tours on a regular basis, Turano said. "We do it for an educational tour for The French Pasty School," Turano said. The tour ended in a reception where guests mingled and indulged in a buffet that included such Italian classic pastries as cannoli and sfogliatelle, which are baked in the company's Bloomingdale bakery and sold in its factory shops. (The Berwyn shop is located at 6501 W. Roosevelt Rd., 708-788-9220.)

Geraldine Conrad came on the tour because, she said, "I've never been to a bakery. I learned a lot and ate very well." Like her fellow guests, Conrad took home a gift bag filled with bread.

Pastry Chicago events are free and open to the public on a first-come, first-served basis. Because they can fill up fast, it's a good idea to get on the e-mail list, which is made up of industry educators, people in the pastry and culinary arts, and food enthusiasts, Bohus said. Upcoming events include a cake-tasting contest, a tour of Bloomer Chocolate Co., a picnic and barbecue, and various competitions.

For information, go to pastrychicago.org.

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