

TRIPLET SISTERS RISE TO THE OCCASION, OPEN ALLERGEN-FREE BAKERY

REBECCA SODGREN

SHENANGO TOWNSHIP - Identical triplets who grew up in Hopewell and opened as a vocal group for the Oak Ridge Boys have opened a second joint business venture of their lives — an allergen-free bakery.

Melissa Matrazzo of Cranberry was shaken to the core when her daughter, Lily, was diagnosed with life-threatening food allergies as a 10-month-old baby. Ms. Matrazzo's sisters, Stephanie Lauffer and Kristin Shay, both of New Castle, quickly banded with her to learn new ways of cooking. Over the years, they've moved from learning for Lily's sake to baking for others at a sterile, allergen-free bakery in New Castle called Consider the Lilys. And, now they've begun selling their baked goods locally.

The triplets, whose maiden name was Semenکو, always cooked and baked. "We literally grew up in the kitchen, and we love serving people through food," Ms. Matrazzo said.

While growing up, she remembers her mother had a friend whose baby had food allergies, and Ms. Matrazzo was horrified when she heard about it. "Oh my gosh, how is his mom going to feed him?" she recalls asking. Little did she know that her own daughter would one day face the same challenges.

No one in their family had ever been diagnosed with food allergies. But when Lily, now 6, was born with extremely dry skin, the pediatrician warned Ms. Matrazzo that it was a potential sign of food allergies yet to be identified. Lily was placed on a special baby formula. When she turned 9 months old, the doctor tried to switch her to a regular soy formula.

"Her skin looked like I burned her," Ms. Matrazzo recalled. That was the impetus for a visit to the allergist. Results showed that Lily was highly allergic to about a dozen different foods. The allergist ordered Ms. Matrazzo to go immediately to a pharmacy for an EpiPen.

Ms. Matrazzo questioned what it would do to the family get-togethers and holidays? "We live in a food-driven culture, whether we like it or not," she said. But the sisters vowed that Lily would not be excluded. Lily's first birthday "cake," two months after her diagnosis, was pureed mango. The triplets still had a lot to learn. For her second birthday, Lily had a delicious, allergen-free cake.

"We ended up changing all the family traditions," Ms. Matrazzo said. "My family has been just so great. The whole Thanksgiving dinner has been changed to safe foods. We want Lily to be able to sit down with us and break bread." Together, they learned to cook and bake in new ways just as they did as a vocal act. They grew up singing in church and later performed as a vocal group dubbed Chandler during their early 20s. That's when they performed with the Oak Ridge Boys during the group's Christmas tour in 2000.

Ms. Matrazzo recognizes that in many ways, she has had it easier than other mothers. She has the support of her sisters. She has been a stay-at-home mom, and she has only one child. She has had plenty of time to experiment in the kitchen. She would bake, and if it did not turn out well, it made her cry and she would throw it away. "My husband would try to encourage me. He'd say, 'You're finding out what doesn't work.'"

Ms. Shay agreed: “We’ve thrown away a lot more than we kept in the early stages of this discovery. It’s a science because a lot of gluten-free baked goods can be delicious if you use egg, but we can’t use egg. Or sometimes people will use nuts, like almond flour, but we can’t use nuts.”

The trio stayed with it until they found what did work.

They try to avoid artificial ingredients such as xanthan gum and egg replacer. Instead, they use such natural ingredients as beans as stabilizers and vinegar or lemon juice as leaveners. They use a lot of pureed apples, beets and squashes.

“We’ve had to be very creative,” Ms. Shay said.

But they’ve done it, and they now know how to bake beautiful cookies, cakes, pies, cupcakes and other desserts. Their next goal is to help others in similar straits.

“A lot of other moms don’t have the luxury of time” to learn allergen-free baking, Ms. Matrazzo said. “I want to serve and minister to all food-allergy families and reach as many families that would need this kind of service as possible.”

Early in their journey, Ms. Lauffer kept thinking of the Bible passage that eventually inspired their bakery’s name, Consider the Lilies. Matthew 6:28 says, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

We thought that if God takes care of plants and animals, he will surely provide for Lily, Ms. Shay said. The name also reminds the sisters to help the other Lilies of the world who have food allergies.

They bought a former slaughterhouse on 20 acres near New Castle, and rebuilt it as a commercial kitchen in summer with a glass partition that walls off the cooking space from the public area where customers pick up their baked goods.

Eventually, they’d like to plant their own apple trees and grow squash, beets and other vegetables on the surrounding acreage.

Last week, the sisters began selling mini pie pockets, cupcakes and sugar cookies at Naturally Soergel’s in Wexford. Soon, their website will be ready for online orders, and eventually they hope to sell through other retail outlets and accept mail orders at considerthelilys.com. Customers will be able to pick up orders at the baking facility.

All their baked goods are free of the top eight allergens: dairy, egg, wheat, soy, peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish. Each sister has a hand in every aspect of the business, but they’ve also developed their individual niches. Ms. Matrazzo buys ingredients and bakes most of the cookies and cupcakes. Ms. Shay bakes the pies and does all the frosting and decorating, while Ms. Lauffer handles most of the administrative tasks such as bookkeeping, correspondence and social media.

And Lily?

She’s now in first-grade at Seneca Valley School District, and is growing up not only healthy but also is included at every family meal.

Rebecca Sodergren: pgfoodevents@hotmail.com; @pgfoodevents.