

Kim & Scott's Pretzel-Fueled Ambition

BY LINDSAY MUSCATO

It's the weekday lunch rush at Kim & Scott's Café Twist in Lincoln Park, where co-owner Kim Holstein is showing me how to twist. I grab both ends of the rope of raw pretzel dough, but when I lift it off the tray, it stretches into a "U" shape. Have I pulled too much too fast? No, Kim says, it's just fine—and I watch her carefully. Kim is a pro.

She's been twisting her own pretzels since the early '90s, when a T.V. news feature about a pretzel vendor inspired her to try her own recipe. Her initial concoction failed miserably, she says, but she kept experimenting with the recipe and eventually enlisted the help of a culinary school professor to truly perfect the dough. Now, a decade and a half later, Kim and her husband Scott own Kim & Scott's Gourmet Pretzels, which sells soft pretzels in grocery stores and retail outlets nationwide. They've been featured on CNBC's "The Big Idea" and The Food Network's "Road Tasted with the Deen Brothers." They've even sold more than \$1 million worth of pretzels on QVC, acing a 24-hour sales challenge.

But Café Twist, which opened this spring, represents the real culmination of their pretzel-fueled ambition. "This is our dream," Kim says. The Lincoln Park eatery offers all-natural pretzel sandwiches, salads with pretzel croutons, and, of course, regular soft pretzels. "Regular" is relative, though. These all-natural pretzels come in a range of incarnations, many stuffed with sweet or savory fillings like grilled cheese, spinach and feta, chocolate fudge or vanilla cheesecake (each \$3.25).

Although most of the lunchtime crowd comes for sandwiches, I've got my hands in pretzel dough because I'm trying the "twist your own" option (\$5.95—usually most popular with kids and groups. Kim walks me through the process until my unbaked rope of dough looks shaped properly, like a paler, stickier version of the classic soft pretzel. Next we push tiny marshmallows and chocolate chips onto its surface. Finally Kim hands me a paintbrush, and we stripe our pretzels in pink,

blue, green and yellow.

While we wait for our pretzels to bake, I try the turkey pretzel sandwich on a sourdough asiago pretzel layered with Boar's Head turkey, cheese and a brown mustard mayo (\$5.95). The pretzel is surprisingly light and tender; a far cry from the pretzels at the mall—and has a more appropriate bread-to-filling ratio than, say, a bagel sandwich. The flight of pretzels includes pretzel knots with a selection of four dips—my favorites were the sweet vanilla glaze and the nutty, spicy Goose Island Stout mustard (\$12.95—very splittable). I also tried the Mediterranean Salad with a pretzel knot on the side (\$6.75) which, although not as inherently thrilling as a pretzel stuffed with cheese or chocolate, was crisp and full of fresh veggies.

Kim says that although high-quality, healthy food is central to the company, "pretzels are a vehicle to express a different kind of purpose." The company works with charities, schools and hospitals to fulfill a social-justice mission, raising money, planting trees, publicizing causes and creating special pretzels like pink ribbon pretzels for a breast-cancer awareness group. Projects fall under initiatives named "Twisting a Difference," "Pretzels for Peace," "Green With a Twist" and "Pretzel Power."

The focus on social issues stems from Kim and Scott's own personal beliefs about a life well-lived—a vision they realized they shared when they first met 16 years ago thanks to (ahem) a simple twist of fate. They both attended a bookstore talk by author Richard Bach about soulmates. Afterwards at the Whole Foods next door, Scott sidled up to Kim and offered her a shot of wheat grass. They hit it off—and from then on, Scott joined Kim in her quest to spread the gospel of the pretzel.

It wasn't easy at first. In fact when Kim first told Scott about her dream to build a pretzel company, Scott says: "I thought it was crazy. Literally." But Scott's own career plans were foggy, and after a failed attempt as a mural painter on Michigan Ave., (30 degrees, sleet) he decided to try the pretzel path. They be-



gan cooking up batches of pretzels in Kim's studio apartment and then contracted with a baker in Cicero until demand became so great that they opened their own baking facility. And Kim and Scott's own family grew—now they have three kids, aged 5, 7 and 10, who all unanimously love chocolate pretzels the best.

Some things haven't changed a bit. Pretzels are still hand-twisted and healthy, and Kim and Scott ask all café employees to visit the bakery at least once to maintain a connection with the company's roots.

There's some satisfaction in a pretzel well-twisted. As lunch ends, I'm about to leave when the cashier rushes over with a box. "Miss, don't forget your pretzel," she says. I lift the lid to peer inside, and there it is—the rainbow-striped, chocolate chip-studded pretzel that I twisted with Kim, fresh baked and ready to eat.

» Kim & Scott's Café Twist
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