

Fresh from Grandma's



Small town America is blessed with many a quaint Main Street, but few can match the diversity and picturesque feel of St. Charles, Missouri. It is a pretty special little town. A stroll through Frontier Park in the Historic District offers an awesome view of the Missouri River and a handsome statue of explorers Lewis and Clark. Venture

a little farther through Kister Park to actual Main Street, and you'll find a charming conglomerate of homey restaurants, tempting bake shops, and small, intriguing stores. Amid this window-shopper's paradise is a little shop whose building is but forty-nine years the junior of the town itself. The colorful sign above the door reads: Grandma's Cookies, and the quaint appearance and sweet aroma beckon visitors inside.

Built in 1820, the small redbrick building with its black shutters and fresh, white-painted trim was once part of St. Charles Borromeo Church. It served as a rectory for traveling priests who needed a place to stay overnight on their journey west to open parishes. At one point, it was also used as an armory, while the property behind held the parish cemetery and a few small homes for church members.

Eventually, the sturdy little building outlasted its intended purpose and, in 1976, it was purchased by Charlotte Thompson, or "Grandma" as she's long been known. One side of the building she made into her residence, and in the other she opened a custom garment shop she called "Grandma's Folly." There, she made handmade special occasion dresses, but in a surprise transition, she found herself the proprietor of an entirely different business.

Charlotte loved baking as much as sewing, and she began making cookies to occupy the kids who waited in the shop with their mothers. The cookies became a big attraction, and the demand necessitated a twenty-five-cent price per cookie. Baking was paying the bills faster than dressmaking! So, the cookies became the store's focus and Charlotte recruited some family members to help her run it.

"I started working here when I was ten years old," said Theresa Rubio, current owner and a distant relative of Charlotte, who was actually the mother-in-law of Theresa's uncle, though Theresa still called her grandma. "When I



started, the cookies sold for fifty cents, and you could get a dozen for five bucks. We say that it's a family tradition since 1976." Sometime in the '90s, Charlotte decided to retire, and the shop was left in the care of Theresa and her Aunt Nancy, who took care of special orders and deliveries. In 2010, Theresa took on the whole business, and in

2017, she hired a manager, Larry Schneider, to help her run it. However, both Theresa and Larry are still around.

Under Theresa's leadership, the shop maintains the same values, as well as the same recipes, as the ones that Charlotte employed. "We treat people like family. People come back because they know they'll get a great cookie and be treated with the respect of a family member. Grandma was the same. She was always so excited and happy to see people when they came in," said Theresa. Excellent customer service is one thing, but it's another to back it up with a product that people enjoy and want to buy. It's not exactly a taxing concern though whether the cookies have lost their touch over the years, because, on a slow day, the shop sells roughly 1,500 cookies. On weekends, they sell somewhere in the thousands. On a festival weekend, such as the Festival of the Little Hills, which is held annually in August, they clear out 10,000 cookies. Those are a lot of cookies.

Day trips, road trips, even a simple outing is always more enjoyable when we park the car and venture around on foot, checking out the more historical side of destinations. And, discovering little gems like Grandma's Cookies, really is a special treat when we take the chance and explore American towns like St. Charles. As for Charlotte Thompson, she undeniably had the perfect recipe for success.

"She was a mom, a grandma, and a best friend," said Theresa. "She had many foster kids, along with four of her own. Something we always said was, 'Even when she didn't have much, she had much love.'"

And you can taste it right in her scrumptious cookies.

But there's no doubt that every one of those kids also had made-with-love, fresh-baked cookies. As Charlotte's framed quote on the shop's wall reads, "A balanced diet is a cookie in each hand."