

S&S Cheesecake Says New York

Thousands of its cakes go 'round the world ...

By Judith Hausman

It's just "S&S" over the narrow doorway. "Ring the bell," says the laconic cardboard sign tacked above the buzzer.

When you walk into the dark foyer, though, one deep breath of cream and vanilla tells you this must be the place.

Like the wagging finger of scent that picks up Popeye by the nose and delivers him to Olive Oyl, the smell of the cheesecake takes you away. You hardly notice the pallets of cream cheese and egg boxes, the windowless space or the hand-lettered price list above the door for the two products that S&S makes: chocolate mousse cake, the new item, and its famous cheesecake, the perennial. That perfume wraps you up and soothes you.

There they are, the little beauties, still warm from the recently overhauled brick oven. It's as cozy as a nursery in the main room, where thousands of plain cheesecakes receive their last priming in a process that begins daily at two in the morning. Here they are cooled, tidied up, packaged, pre-sliced if you like, and sent out into the world.

No cherries, no apple crumb, no chocolate swirl. "That hides the taste of the cake," says Morey Kahan, who runs the mail-order

distributorship end of S&S and the Web site, www.moreyanddoreycheesecake.com.

S&S cheesecake is the definition of rich. Its tang isn't all the way to lemony — it's just enough to offset the tender, melting texture.

No stickiness at all, smooth as satin but more comforting than sexy.

You can't hurry with this dessert: Even the most modest wedge requires a little time to take it in small bites.

S&S has been doing business here in the Bronx for more than 50 years. Frank Shuster began the company and perfected the recipe, after apprenticing in pastry in Switzerland as a young man. Now his daughter Brenda, her husband, Yair Ben-Zaken, and their 10 employees remain faithful to Shuster's exacting approach.

Yair Ben-Zaken brings further expertise in quality control and chemistry, but his wife says: "My mother is the test kitchen."

S&S's only other product, the chocolate mousse cake her husband developed — basically by substituting three kinds of chocolate and butter for the cream cheese — has been very successful.

What's the secret of the recipe? "Only the best ingredients money can buy. Consistency and pride," the patriarch smiles.

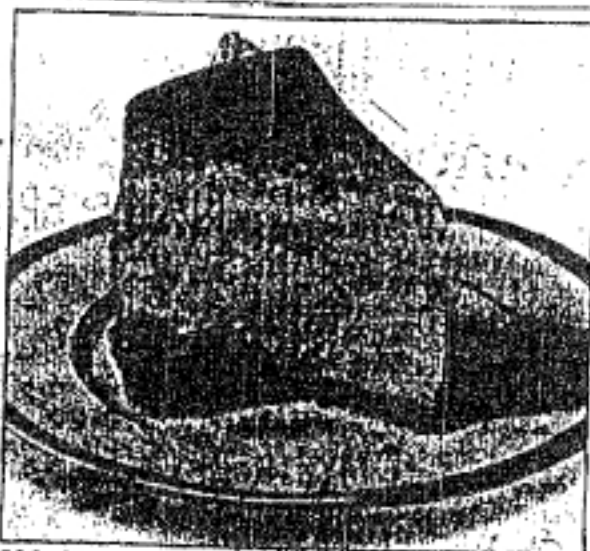
Several suppliers make cream cheese to

S&S specifications, to assure that consistency. S&S has never advertised, but when you order New York-style cheese cake in Morton's, Smith and Wollensky, the Palm restaurant, Sparks or the Coach House, it's S&S you're eating. Zabar's carries it, too. Sergio F. Nigito, chef at the Palm, says, "It's the best cheesecake in the whole world. It's one of the Palm's signature dishes. That's what we're famous for: steaks, lobsters and cheesecake. I go through almost 12 cases a week."

"It's still a treat," says Brenda. "When my three girls are out of school, they come in with their friends and ask for a piece of cheesecake. Of course, for friends or company, it's never not in the house."

"When I travel, it's like a visa," adds her husband, "if I don't have one, I better just get back on the plane. Maybe one of the girls will come into the business. Or one of their husbands."

Unlike Junior's of Brooklyn with its bakery and restaurants, S&S is 90 percent a wholesale operation, says Ben-Zaken. Still, customers show up regularly at the modest Bronx plant for 30 or 40 cheesecakes. Out-



S&S cheesecake: From the Bronx to Manhattan

ward, the firm wears its clout, the deal of his life by sending an S&S cheesecake to 2000. Mail orders go to celebrities and as far away as Russia and Mexico. Even President Bush ate one this year. There's a regular wholesale order from Singapore and, even with holiday orders stockpiled, it's hard to keep up with demand at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"I could do other products," says Ben-Zaken, "but I'd need a bigger place. Maybe a little cheesecake, or the folks people contacted me about doing one with no sugar. I could do a Passover cake with very little flour, only on the outside. But I sell plenty already."

S&S CHEESECAKE

222 W. 238th St., Riverdale

718-549-3888

Fax: 718-549-3905

Prices: 12.95

Five-pound cheesecake

\$13.95 (pre-cut)

One-pound cheesecake