



## **Anshai Torah's Key Ingredients The heart and devotion of our Kitchen Queens**

by Deb Silverthorn

Anshai Torah has mixed up the recipe in the kitchen this year and the results have been providing delicious kiddush lunches, simchas, Shabbat dinners and more and the key ingredients to the fine foods coming out of the newly renovated kitchen are our Catering Coordinator Connie Hochberg and Kitchen Director Nancy Howard.

From our start, Anshai Torah's taste buds were delighted by the loving hands of Helaine Kramsky, who retired last summer after 16 years of delicacies dished from her heart. Her love for the synagogue and care for each of our members was felt each and every day she walked into the synagogue building and we wondered, "how would we replace her?" Replacing not an option, or a desire, last July Connie joined Nancy, who has been working in the kitchen since 2008, and there are no grumbling tummies in the building.

"It has been an absolute joy to welcome Connie, who is so very talented, creative, and caring, to our staff," said Rabbi Stefan Weinberg. "She has brought a level of culinary delight to everyone associated with the shul and we never know what new dish she is going to present to us. When preparing a meal recently for a group of rabbis, they all asked, 'who is your caterer?!'"

"I love all the fresh items that have come in and the many ways that Connie makes the best of all we have," said Nancy, highlighting the soups—mushroom barley, variations of vegetable, and more, raving as does anyone who is asked. "Flowers are lasting longer and being rearranged to still look incredible, all the vegetables, every bit of every bite."

Anshai's *simchaitis* is spreading as Connie, Nancy, and their amazing team have been providing our families with many menu options and the ability to meet the needs and *yummilicious* desires of all, by using our own great team for their special celebrations. Planning time ranges from three to five months before the occasion, but the options are open.

"We've had people bring us their recipes so that their simchas 'taste like home,' and we've had four generations of

one family in here baking with us, bringing their family secrets," said Nancy.

From b'nai mitzvahs to baby naming and brides, from auf rufs and the Scholar-in-Residence weekend, with a Shabbat dinner for 260 and a turnaround next day Kiddush lunch for 175, to last week's Purim in the Lion King "jungle," there isn't much these ladies don't have up their sleeves.

"There are many creative new dishes being served with seemingly simple ingredients turned into phenomenal creations," said Rabbi Michael Kushnick, noting salads and French toast casserole as his favorites. "There are menus, but just ask, and they'll deliver."

Connie, the mother of Kyra, Lynzi, and Dovey, has been in and around the kitchen since she was a young girl. A native of Taiwan who moved to the United States when she was 10, she followed her parents into the family business. "We lived in Thibodaux, Louisiana and I caught the 'bug' from my parents when they opened their Chinese restaurant, 'Formosa Gardens,' when I was a kid.

Connie attended Tulane University as an undergrad and she received her MS in Bio-Chemistry from the University of New Orleans before forging into her own path as a restaurateur in North Dallas. She sold the restaurant to start her family, and then for many years ran "Cooking with Connie," teaching cooking classes and catering.

Nancy, the mother of Adam (Ana), Michael (Christal) and grandmother of Addison, Emma, Lenora, Bennett and Juliet, is an Atlanta native and also a longtime Dallasite. After teaching at the JCC for 10 years, with another decade spent working in retail, Nancy found herself teaching in Congregation Anshai Torah's preschool. While she had some waitstaff background, not-so-much in the kitchen, three years later she gradually found herself at Helaine's side and now the lead in creating the baked magnificence—from Hershey bar cookies to lemon bars, and the chocolate chip coffee cake to the whoopee pies—many recipes shared from congregants themselves—that waft fresh each week through our halls.

"One of the reasons for the smooth changeover this year was training in the summer by Helaine and the support and guidance she has received from Nancy, whose presence regarding the various kashrut concerns in the kitchen helped to provide a level of consistency during our period of transition," said Rabbi Weinberg. "Her institutional knowledge of the history at the shul gave Connie an inside view of the expectations for various events here."

"We're excited in our new space to have the room and ability to really create so much, and the feedback has been incredible," said Connie, noting the space's blueprints were in the works but still raw enough for her to tweak and make the best use of all the space available.

Connie, Nancy and their crew are not the only mitts in the oven. . .latke duty still belongs to the Men's Club, Hazak just got doughy baking hamantaschen for their Purim celebration, and Bob Westle and his volunteers prep dinner for Hebrew High on Wednesdays and breakfast on Sunday mornings.

"The kitchen, which is certified by the City of Plano because it's now commercial grade, is a dairy kitchen, with the exception of one meat oven," said Connie. "We bring in any meals that are meat but we can accessorize."

The kitchen is "cooking for family" say both ladies. "We know which congregants 'need' chocolate and who is gluten or nut-free and we meet the needs and the wants, pretty much on target."

As the days of the calendar turn and Pesach is on the horizon, the entire kitchen will be cleaned – all utensils and cooking pots and pans exchanged for those spared for the holiday; still, there will be matzah kugels, blintz casseroles, salads, and even preschool lunches, that are promised deliciousness.

"The kids I taught, who were just preschoolers when I got here, are now celebrating their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs but somehow, I'm still 'Miss Nancy' to them," she said. Many school kids later, Nancy says the kitchen's "regulars," are the CAT preschoolers, for whom 80 meals—from pizzas and quesadillas to pizza bagels (among Rabbi Weinberg's own favorites) and grilled cheese sandwiches—are made each week. "I've loved being here, watching the children grow, watching the school and congregation grow, and now. . .it's been a great year watching our kitchen and all that we can do in it here grow."