

# Connecting to Their Roots Through a Winning Cake Recipe

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

It's ironic – desperate to see the world, young people leave home and never return but eventually realize that the experiences they had while growing up fundamentally shaped them and were as significant as anything that came later.

That's been the case with cousins Derek Lowery and Brian Rhone, owners of Delectable Cakery in Mount Rainier. The two moved away from their hometown of Portland, Ore., decades ago, but these days they freely acknowledge that it's the people – and the recipes – from their youth that have made them who they are today.

It started with Lowery. Growing up African-American in Portland, “there weren't a lot of role models,” Rhone explained. So when his cousin moved to San Francisco, “it opened my eyes” to possibilities. And since Rhone followed everything Lowery did, soon enough he left town, too, living in Texas while Lowery moved to New York City and later Washington, DC.

During that time, though, Lowery began reconnecting with his roots. He'd always been interested in baking, and when his mother, Laurine, sent him the recipe for her sweet potato cake, he tried it out. You might say the dessert – with its light crumb, spicy flavor and cream cheese frosting – was a success. “I took the cake to a potluck dinner that night, and two girls got into an argument over the last piece. They started shoving each other,” said Lowery. That was his first indication that the cake might be something special.

Soon after, he moved to Washington and joined a choir. It proved fortuitous: he made the cake for a member of the choir who worked at the prestigious Club at Franklin Square, and within two weeks, Lowery was selling it there and at the other City Club location.

A couple of years later, while shopping for a suit at Nordstrom, Lowery mentioned his cake to the salesman. Within two days, Lowery said, he got a call from the espresso bar manager at the Pentagon City location and, shortly after, began selling the cake at area Nordstroms.

That was about 10 years ago. These days, his cakes are on offer at all mid-Atlantic Nordstrom stores. The sweet potato cake is the big seller, but he also makes a pound cake (“with a half pound of butter”) that comes in seasonal fruit flavors like strawberry and peach.

Enter Brian Rhone. As the senior vice president for a Houston accounting firm, Rhone had 170 people working under him but hated his job. So when his cousin asked him last year to come to Washington and help with marketing and branding, Rhone said, yes. The cousins have



Derek Lowery and Brian Rhone in their Mount Rainier shop, Delectable Cakery. Photo: Amanda Abrams

always been close, and two months ago, their teamwork culminated in their first retail outlet, Delectable Cakery, on Rhode Island Avenue.

“This is the first job I've had where I haven't had to wear a tie. It's excellent, and look what we've created!” said Rhone, excitedly gesturing around him.

Ultimately, Rhone said, the store's inspiration was Laurine, who died in 2005. “She was very old fashioned and traditional, but also very generous,” explained Rhone. “Her nurturing character is instilled in the company's style.”

The cousins recently invited 300 elementary school students to visit the bakery, pick a pumpkin and decorate cupcakes. They plan on holding etiquette lessons in the store, and they'll be giving out turkeys at Thanksgiving, just like Laurine used to do in her neighborhood.

And of course, the bakery features their flagship cake, which hasn't changed a bit in the past 10-plus years. Lowery, the quality control guy, sees to that. He sticks to a firm schedule, buying sweet potatoes at a wholesale market twice a week: “If they're not fresh, they have a different consistency,” he maintained. Together, the cousins produce 500-600 hand-frosted cakes a week.

They've still got big dreams for the cake. Lowery is talking about opening a store in New York, maybe franchising the business; Rhone is determined to get a small retail spot at Eastern Market. But right now, they're mostly concerned with covering the upcoming holiday season, their busiest time.

*Delectable Cakery is at 3311 Rhode Island Ave. in Mount Rainier, Md. Visit the bakery online at [www.delectablecakery.com](http://www.delectablecakery.com) or call 301-577-7115.*



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