Written by Carol Pomeday
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When it comes to making Christmas cookies, there are few bakers who compare to Peggy Uselding, whose Port Washington kitchen becomes a festive bakeshop at this time of the year.

She makes 20 to 30 different kinds of cookies — rarely more than one batch of each — and adds a few new ones each year. The vast majority of the cookies are given away to friends, family, neighbors, co-workers at
Ozaukee Press and customers at the Patio, a Port Washington restaurant she and her husband Al, better known as Junior, own.

“I make a batch and freeze them. I just keep making them until I have too many,” Uselding said.

“I think people are baking a lot less. When I bring the cookies to the Patio, everybody is on them.”

Uselding’s granddaughter Mackenzie Nourse, 13, has been helping with the holiday tradition since she was 3.

“She was doing the cut-outs and eating a lot of the dough,” Uselding said. “She’s a great help, and it’s fun doing it together.”

Mackenzie’s sister Lilly, 4, is almost ready to help, but enjoys eating them more.

Encouraging the next generation to carry on traditions is important, Uselding said.

“I think Mackenzie will continue baking cookies for gifts,” she said.

Uselding’s mother Alverta Ernster taught her to bake.

“I was baking before I could read a recipe,” she said. “Every Saturday we were in the kitchen baking cookies, pies, cakes and kuchens.

“We made lots of Christmas cookies she gave away as gifts.”

Uselding’s father worked at the We Energies power plant in Port Washington and came home with the utility’s cookie cookbook every year. Her mother would try all the recipes, Uselding said.

She still uses some of those cookbooks

“I don’t remember Grandmother baking, but I do remember going to her house to make caramel popcorn balls,” Uselding said. “That was her tradition.”

Uselding’s son Tim made cookies with her when he was young.

“Now, he likes eating them,” she said.

Making cookies is the fun, easy part, Uselding said.

Finding time to make them is difficult. Not only is she the full-time business manager at Port Publications, Inc., the parent company of Ozaukee Press, she also is the caterer for weddings and parties at the Patio, makes soups for the restaurant and fries fish on Fridays.

This year, she started baking cookies before Thanksgiving.

“I’ll whip up a batch at night and bake them that night or the next day if the dough needs to be refrigerated,” Uselding said. “I do my baking at night or on weekends.”

Mackenzie comes several times to help with the cookies. She also helps cook for weddings and parties, then cleans up and washes dishes. Her mother Tina is a bartender there.

“I do whatever needs to be done,” Mackenzie said. “I love being there. I used to want to be a chef, then a writer, then a photographer. I haven’t decided. I like to cook.

“I love baking with my grandmother and going to her house. She’s always baking something, and it smells so good.”

Mackenzie couldn’t name a favorite cookie, but said she enjoys decorating cut-out cookies. She hasn’t made anything she doesn’t like.

Uselding said the only cookie she makes that she doesn’t taste is an anise drop a friend requests each year. She also doesn’t have a favorite.

“I really don’t eat many of them. I try not to,” she said. “That’s why I make them small. I just enjoy making them.

“I love reading cookbooks. I like to see how they’re putting things together and I get some of my own ideas.”

She clips recipes from magazines and newspapers, compiling trendy and traditional recipes for appetizers, entrees and desserts. She keeps them in a large binder or drawer.

“It’s not very organized,” she said. “Everybody says I should put my recipes on the computer, but it would take forever.”

She would rather be cooking and baking.

Peggy Uselding enjoys baking Christmas cookies with granddaughters Lilly, 4, and Mackenzie Nourse, 13. Photo by Sam Arendt