



By the Slice

Back at my local bakery for our story again today! It's a measure of how 'exciting' my life is recently, when most of the interesting things that happen to me all take place within a few minutes walk of my home!

The people at the bakery are currently 'struggling with success'. Things are difficult these days for many businesses, and theirs has been no exception; their costs are up, and yet consumers have come to expect ever-lower prices. To try and help keep their sales up, the bakery people are constantly trying out new products, and it is rare for more than a few days to go by without something new appearing in the showcases. Each new item is obviously 'on trial', and if it doesn't meet with a positive response from the customers, it is soon replaced with something else.

Some time back, they tried out quite a major new product - they baked some pizza in one of their ovens, and offered it for sale 'by the slice'. It turned out to be well accepted by the customers - myself included - and became a daily part of their offerings. Each pizza was cut into eight portions, and once these were gone, that was it. I learned that if I wanted to have a slice on any given day, I should arrive early enough to ensure that there would be some left.

I wasn't alone in doing this; as time went by, the pizza sold out earlier and earlier, and customers began to become frustrated. I had the experience of the woman in line just in front of me taking the last two pieces and wanting to shout, "Hey, just one per person please!", but of course kept quiet. (Although the bakery sales clerk could certainly read my face!)

The obvious solution to this would be to make more pizzas every day, but here is the heart of the problem - the craftsman-baker who runs the back room doesn't want to make more pizzas. He is a 'baker'. He wants us to buy his bread. And I guess I can sympathize with his feeling.

Now I have no idea at all what has gone on 'behind the scenes' there, but can report that the conflict has been resolved. They now produce three or four pizzas each morning for the lunch crowd. And the baker?

He is gone. The business is now being operated entirely by the young ladies who were his assistants, along with the shopclerks. I see them through the glass window - working on the large table in the back room, kneading dough, shaping the loaves, rolling croissants, sliding things in and out of the large oven doors, and yes ... also spreading cheese over the large round circles of dough that will become more pizzas for the hungry customers.

It looks a bit strange to see all this happening without the man in the tall white cap being there in the middle of the action, and I have no idea how this change will affect their business down the line. Can a bakery survive without a trained and experienced baker at the helm? I wouldn't think so ... Perhaps one day sometime soon the signboard will come down, to be replaced by a new one ... "Grand Opening - Ome Pizzeria!"

I certainly hope not. Although I have indeed enjoyed eating a slice of their pizza now and then (it has lots of cheese, and is not greasy at all), I would be very sad to lose the 'bakery'. It's an interesting question for a business - and for a craftsman ... do you allow your customers to set your direction, or do you try and push them where *you* want to go?

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