New York trained Nancy Brewer shows off one of her specialties at Pistache Na-Na.

Grand Coteau chef Nancy Brewer mixes city refinement with country traditions

By Becky Tillson
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GRAND COTEAU - When Nancy Brewer returned to south Louisiana from New York, she brought eight years of city life to rest in the quiet of Grand Coteau.

Brewer is a pastry chef trained at the New York Cooking School where she acquired professional polish for her inherent love of cooking. Her New York catering business and the tea room in Grand Coteau carry the same Cajun traditional term of endearment, Pistache Na-Na or "nobody's peanut."

During Brewer's tenure in New York, she and her husband, painter Jesse Poimboeuf of New Orleans, entertained their urban friends with Cajun cooking. At the same time, Brewer was cultivating her own talent for painting into the creation of exotic desserts for a refined New York audience.

"I got my college degree in painting, but now I use those skills to decorate my desserts," Brewer said. "The instructors at cooking school said a lot of their best students come from art or architecture backgrounds."

Brewer's Cajun background also contributed to her success in New York's culinary circles. She says such old-fashioned Southern desserts as pecan pie, sweet potato pie and blackberry sweet dough pie are extremely popular in that metropolitan environment.

But she did not succeed in the New York business world by relying on Southern charm. She perfected such exotic desserts as a beautiful chocolate mousse surrounded by a layer of cake and covered by molded sheets of pure chocolate to resemble a bag which was tied at the top with ribbon.

Brewer uses only pure, natural ingredients in all of the food she prepares. Butter, never margarine or shortening, finds its way in her desserts. For her salads, she picks fresh lettuce from a local garden.

Brewer also grows the fresh herbs and buys farm eggs for the various quiches she serves on the tea room's luncheon menu.

"I know in New York there would be really jealous if they could see the kind of ingredients it's so easy for me to get here," she said.

And ingredients are most important to successful cooking, according to Brewer.

"Measuring your ingredients properly is the most important thing in cooking," she said. "Ninety-nine percent of all the mistakes made come while measuring ingredients."

Like any prolific cook, Brewer has made mistakes. But she says one of the important things she learned in cooking school is how to prevent a small error from becoming a disaster.

Yet even the occasional disaster could not discourage a cook who recalls her first baking attempt as a success.

"I was eight years old and I made a key lime pie for a Girl Scout badge," she laughed. "But I'll never forget that."

The menu Brewer has prepared for the tea room at the Kitchen Shop in Grand Coteau currently includes hazelnut scones, muffins and croissants for breakfast and salads, soups or quiches for lunch. Desserts include cheesecake, chocolate mocha torte and hazelnut scones along with cold drip specialty coffees such as cappuccino, latte and café au lait.

Brewer hopes to teach cooking classes this fall in addition to managing Pistache Na-Na and special order catering jobs. She finds the work in Grand Coteau and her home on Bayou Teche an abrupt change from the clamor of New York, but the couple say they are thrilled with the quiet, the birds and the serene landscape along the water.

"And I think I can bring something here that is new - a way to make food that is a little bit different," Brewer said. "I love Cajun food, but that is not what I'm going to cook here. I want to bring home a little something new."