



COLLECTION OF BAKERY CAFE OWNER STORIES



About the Author



Bonnie Harry joined Great Harvest Franchising in 1988. In the early 90's she began visiting Great Harvest bakeries as a Field Consultant, and has traveled the U.S. to more than 200 Great Harvests over the past three decades.

She loves visiting bakery cafes, working with her colleagues at the franchise home office, problem solving, learning new skills, and drawing on her experience to help Great Harvest franchise owners. Hard crusted breads and overall bread quality are two of her specialties. Customer service is also a passion, but she is a wealth of knowledge in all aspects of running a local bakery cafe.

In down times, she enjoys hanging out with family, friends, or hiking in the beautiful Montana mountains.

Read more from Bonnie on [The Bread Business Blog](#).

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA GREAT HARVEST BAKERY BONNIE ALTON	5
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA GREAT HARVEST BAKERY DIRK SISSON & BARB HOOD	8
DULUTH, MINNESOTA GREAT HARVEST BAKERY IAN & LIZ KIDD	11
CLACKAMAS, OREGON GREAT HARVEST BAKERY JIM & ROBIN CONDIE	13
FARMINGTON, NEW MEXICO GREAT HARVEST BAKERY KIM & TYE BELL	16
HILLSBORO, OREGON GREAT HARVEST BAKERY EMILY KREIG & MICHAEL MUTH	19
JOHN'S CREEK, GEORGIA GREAT HARVEST BAKERY ERIKA & RAY BOLAND	21
DISCOVER MORE & CONNECT WITH US	24

Introduction

Welcome!

You are probably reading this because you are ready for a change.

Perhaps you are craving the chance to implement your own ideas immediately. You may be looking for a way to have your hard work benefit your own family instead of your employer. Creating a business together with your spouse may be an exciting challenge. Or you may be driven to fill a niche that's missing in your town and excited about feeding people with healthy, real food.

Regardless of the reasons, we think this guide can help with your research.

The following is a collection of blog posts I've written over the years, during the course of my visits to Great Harvest bakery cafes across the country. Each post is about a Great Harvest bakery owner and their unique perspectives and experiences in the industry. Some of the owners profiled here have been a part of Great Harvest for over 20 years, and some are newer to our franchise. Each one has a unique story to tell about the industry and what they have been able to accomplish as a local small business owner.

We hope these stories can help you determine if Great Harvest is the right business for you. If you have any questions about bakery cafe ownership with Great Harvest, please [contact our Franchise Development Team here](#).

Sincerely,

Bonnie Harry

Meet Bonnie Alton, Owner of a Great Harvest Bakery in St. Paul, MN

"Success in Small Business is About Relationships"



I met Bonnie Alton, owner of the St. Paul Great Harvest Bread Co., nearly two decades ago when she was about to open her bakery in St. Paul, MN.

While interviewing her recently, I was delighted to discover all the more reasons I like her. I'm continually impressed with how she manages her business and her life.

For most of her pre-bakery career, Bonnie worked in small business. She always thought if she had her own business, it would be a relationship building, interactive type of business where you had the same customers coming back on a regular basis. When she was in her mid-30's, she had the opportunity to work for a large company as Director of Marketing. She thought she should do something bigger with her life, and took the job. It paid well but she hated it. She would go to work every day, work hard, but it didn't matter what she did, as a small cog in a large machine, she couldn't make a difference in people's lives.

“The whole idea of a neighborhood bakery fit right into the relationship-building business she had been waiting for.”

Her business travels took her to Milwaukee, where she visited a local Great Harvest bakery. As it turns out, the owner of the store, Jill, was a marathon training buddy. One day, while living in the Twin Cities area, Bonnie was on the phone with Jill and was informed that Tom and Sally, owners of the Minneapolis Great Harvest, were looking for someone to partner with in St. Paul. Bonnie said the whole chain of events was serendipitous. She had been a customer of Tom and Sally’s Minneapolis Great Harvest for years.

Reflecting on the experience, she noted there were things she could do well from the beginning. Marketing and making the bread and products were easy. She had a marketing background, was detailed oriented, and a Foodie. She had to grow into other aspects of the business.

Bonnie says she didn’t come out of the box being a good boss. She didn’t trust herself enough to trust her people, and was anxious about making sure things were done perfectly. She came to realize they were making bread, it wasn’t brain surgery, and made it her goal to establish a positive, supporting work culture.

In her St. Paul store, Bonnie created a culture of people who work hard, like work, do it well together and give customers an outstanding product. “It’s all about relationship, within, and with customers. We only have about 3 sick days a year. Everyone shows up for work. Everyone cares for each other.” Her work force ranges from ages 15 to 76.

“You have to let go, believe in people, accept that mistakes will be made. You can establish a life-giving work environment.”

About small business in general? Bonnie told me, “If something’s not working, you need to go back to ‘ownership by the owner,’ look at behaviors, and make adjustments. I’m not afraid to do any work I ask my people to do.” Bonnie is in the thick of things every day. As a single owner operator, she has no qualms about that. She wants to work side by side with her people. She says to love the work, you have to want to be in relationship with people.

Bonnie and her husband, Brian, live in the neighborhood where the bakery is. They work with other small business owners and are involved in all kinds of local organizations that give back to the community, including those that deal with youth and a lending organization that specializes in loans for women to get started in business. I got unsolicited comments from a customer when I visited about the store being a wonderful part of the community. In addition to their work and community activities, Bonnie and Brian managed last summer to participate in RAGBRAI, an epic annual 471 mile bicycle ride across Iowa.

Bonnie’s store was originally on Grand Avenue for 10 years. Nine years ago, she moved to 534 Selby Avenue. I guarantee you’ll find a pleasurable neighborhood bakery experience when you stop in.

Meet Dirk Sisson & Barb Hood, Owners of a Great Harvest Bakery in Anchorage, AK

“Local Small Business Owners Give Back to the Anchorage Community”



One could say Dirk Sisson and Barb Hood, owners of the Anchorage, AK Great Harvest Bread Co., are on top of the world. Their bakery has become a local icon and has held the top spot in system-wide sales for a number of years.

Looking deeper, their success is rooted in much more than their phenomenal products and service, the cool climate and a market of bread eaters. Like their products, their involvement in the Anchorage community is nothing less than phenomenal. Though I've known them for years, until I asked about it, I had no idea the extent of their dedication to their local community. They feel this connection is 90% of their success. Customers continually comment on how much they appreciate not only what Great Harvest Anchorage does but what Dirk and Barb do personally. It's not for show; they do it because generosity to others is part of who they are. The fact that it benefits the business is a bonus.

“Their generosity begins at home with their employees.”

Recently, Barb and Dirk celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. Dirk is a mechanical engineer by trade and Barb a lawyer. So how did they get mixed up in the bread business? While visiting his Mom in Salem, OR, Dirk would frequent this cool little Great Harvest Bread Co. in downtown Salem and bring back a suitcase full of Honey Whole Wheat bread every time. Having both grown up in Alaska, Barb and Dirk wanted to stay in the state they loved and start their own business there. After discovering Great Harvest was a franchise, they applied and opened their store in Anchorage in 1994. The rest is history. Today, their Great Harvest bakery is an institution.

Choosing to put values ahead of profits, they include their employees in their success by treating them well, paying them well, providing medical health plans and bringing them to Great Harvest conventions.

“Giving Generously to Others” is part of the Great Harvest mission statement. Easily embracing that culture of generosity, they donate products to a multitude of different non-profit local organizations every year. Dirk says the business has been a wonderful avenue for them to give back to the community. While there’s no way to put a dollar amount to what they get in return, he says “it comes back tenfold.” The support of local organizations in itself is not unique. Generosity to the community is a hallmark of most Great Harvest bakery cafes. What’s impressive is the extent of additional personal time and energy Dirk and Barb have invested in their community. They’ve taken generosity to a whole new level.

“These truly humble people are never without smiles, great stories and listening ears.”

A few years ago, Barb stepped back from the bakery to return to law as an attorney for the Alaska Court System. In addition to this responsible role, she is a human rights and community activist. As an avid photographer, Barb’s work has included taking pictures and telling the stories of less fortunate people like the homeless, those ravaged by HIV, and victims of abuse. Most exhibits are done with her own time and resources to help bring attention to those less fortunate in our midst.

Dirk currently serves as president of the local neighborhood Basher Community Council, a job by itself. He has been a leader in local neighborhood campaigns to protect natural places, serving as a founding member of groups like Friends of the Coastal Trail, Friends of Russian Jack Springs Park, and Friends of Near Point. Most of his work has been in the grass roots.

The Anchorage Great Harvest is also business partners with three schools in Anchorage—West High School, Romig Middle School and North Star Elementary. In addition to providing bread and cookies for different events, they get involved in regular school events, like workshops on how to run businesses, get jobs, and be good employers.

On top of all of this (in their “spare” time), Barb and Dirk are avid outdoor enthusiasts; they enjoy hiking, canoeing, cross-country skiing – you name it. And they live in the perfect location to pursue their favorite activities.

Meet Ian & Liz Kidd, Owners of a Great Harvest Bakery in Duluth, MN

"A Healthy Franchise is the Answer to Life After Hockey?"



Walking into the Duluth, MN Great Harvest, I was immediately welcomed by Ian Kidd behind the coffee bar, chatting with and serving his regulars that meet there every morning. If ever there was a picture that echoed the ambiance of "Cheers," this was it. This man is a natural. His easy and friendly way with customers beyond a doubt makes the Duluth Great Harvest bakery a neighborhood gathering place. The icing on this impression was watching Ian hanging out with his crew for a casual cribbage game after a long day of production.

Ian Kidd may be a familiar name to those who follow hockey. Growing up in Gresham, OR, Ian played Junior Hockey in British Columbia, Canada, helped take the University of North Dakota to the National Championship, and continued to play professional hockey for 9 years after that. In the mid-nineties, Ian and his wife, Liz, decided to look for something new--their "life after hockey". They were intrigued by the idea of a franchise.

“Everyone is in it for the right reasons. It’s a group thing. We’re all in it together.”

Liz loved the atmosphere and the products in one of the Wisconsin Great Harvest bakeries. When they discovered it was a franchise, they started researching and the rest is history. They opened their own store in Duluth, MN in May, 1997. Ian says Duluth has been a great place to have a business, as well as live and raise their three kids.

He has also gained a reputation internally as owner-trainer extraordinaire for new Great Harvest bakery cafe openings. A few years after opening, he was recruited to help open new stores with the opening trainers from the franchise office. To date, he has done more openings than any other owner-trainers.

I asked Mark Peterson and Paul Tikalsky, two of Ian’s friends here at the home office, why he excels as a small business owner and trainer. They told me his strength is team-building. He coaches well, but he’s a “player’s manager.” He works side by side with his crew and wouldn’t ask them to do anything he wouldn’t ask of himself. He built the store hands-on and is 100% woven into his business. His people respect him as their boss. Not only does he manage well, he’s invested in his employees’ lives and helps them out when needed. He has a big heart. On the surface, he’s quiet (until he pulls a practical joke on you!), but as the saying goes, still waters run deep.

Paul told me of a story at a store opening: Ian was explaining to a sweets baker that he could train her in systems but in the end, if she wanted to be good at it, she had to throw herself into it. Sounds like a coach who has been there, who knows what it’s like to play and work hard and do one’s best for the benefit of team.

Meet Jim & Robin Condie, Owners of a Great Harvest Bakery in Clackamas, OR

"Growing a Strong Bread Business with Great People"



Jim and Robin Condie took over the Clackamas Great Harvest in February 2006. The store was thirteen years old. In their first seven years, they nearly doubled the sales and have had a lot of fun in the process. Jim was an attorney in his prior life (still licensed) and Robin worked in the Biotech industry (immunology). Robin laughingly told me the bakery is much more fun than her prior work! They were tired of commuting and loved Great Harvest and the idea of doing their own business. They jumped at the chance to buy the Clackamas Great Harvest when they heard it was for sale.

Robin admits that part of their success is their great location - right next to a Nordstrom Rack in a shopping center with high identity. As we all know, potential doesn't always translate to success. It requires the right management.

"It's based on trust and being open, vulnerable, flexible and teachable."

Jim and Robin are hands-on. They don't have managers. They work with the crew and do the training. This keeps them in touch with the day-to-day workings of the business. In a bakery where everything is made daily from scratch (it's a production facility as well as retail), being in close touch with the business and the crew is critical for success.

What about their crew? It's an understatement to say when I visited them, I was impressed. Their people were attentive, enthusiastic, caring, really one of the best crews I've encountered in my years with Great Harvest. I asked Robin about the crew. Her response was "I love them. We have an awesome crew." I've learned over the years that owners are not just "lucky" to have good people. It's a result of how they manage. I asked Robin what their secrets were in developing such a great crew. How do they empower them, encourage them?

She didn't just mean the crew - it applies to all of them, including Jim and her. They want people to express their opinions, to come up with new ideas. She says their crew is smart. The team training model is "to be open to what other people have to say."

Jim and Robin always give positive feedback when a crew member takes care of something, goes the extra mile. And they've developed a peer system where crew members call out their peers in a positive way. In essence, the crew holds each other accountable. Robin told me about exercises and games they play to show the importance of all supporting each other and being team players.

"Life is about connecting to everybody."

She stopped at one point, concerned she might be embarrassing herself telling about the games! Quite the contrary. I was fascinated by how effective these exercises are in getting the point across - plus they're a fun bonding experience as well.

The team spirit extends to the customers. Getting to know customers' names and preferences and including them in the fun is stressed. Robin told me "Life is about connecting to everybody." It's no wonder customers enjoy coming to this store. Not only are the products outstanding, the atmosphere is inviting and fun with a wonderful friendly, positive group of people to meet you when you step in the door.

Meet Kim & Tye Bell, Owners of a Great Harvest Bakery in Farmington, NM

“Meeting the Challenge of Starting a New Business”



July 2011 was a bittersweet month for Kim Bell, co-owner with her husband, Tye, of the brand new Farmington, NM Great Harvest Bread Store. On July 15th, Kim had just completed her first week of on-site training and everything was in motion to open the store July 23rd. Her mom had been in the bakery the day before and told Kim how beautiful the store was and how proud she was of her. The next day, her Mom passed away unexpectedly.

The store opening was postponed a week and when it opened July 29th, it was to throngs of happy and expectant customers. They've been going strong ever since. Kim's dad stops by the store daily to check in on Kim, help with his grandchildren, TJ and Emily, and lend his support however he can. How Kim handled the stress is a tribute to her strength and upbringing, and is no doubt continuing to make her mom proud!

I had the fortune to help Kim and Tye open their bakery. Kim hired an awesome crew to launch the store. Their opening was busy, to say the least!

“This startup was a great example of how success results when opportunity meets preparation.”

Keeping up with the demand for the awesome fresh-made bread, sweets, and sandwiches proved challenging, but the crew did a great job. They continue to rock, sales are strong, and still, some things unexpectedly sell out early.

Being this busy is a wonderful problem (albeit a little overwhelming) for a small business owner. It's not something that happens by accident. It's easy to put the promotion checklist on hold with the stress of opening a new business. But Kim and Tye followed the protocol and did all the marketing groundwork in getting their store open, and continue to get their products and their smiling faces out into the community to let people know they're there.

It helps that they grew up in Farmington and have a lot of connections. After living in Albuquerque for five years, they fell in love with Great Harvest. That spurred them to apply for a Great Harvest when they returned to their home town. Tye sells commercial insurance and continues to work his job and help in the bakery as he can, while Kim takes the lead in the store. Tye has lots of connections with hundreds of customers in Farmington. Kim is outgoing and has all kinds of connections around town, both social and work-related. Her last job was driving a school bus! One of Tye's friends told her, “Kim, everywhere I go, I run into people who know you, are you just really friendly or what?” Yes, she is that friendly, and it's genuine. She quite obviously cares about her customers and her crew. You can feel it when you walk in the door. They love wonderful food, are great with people, hard workers and well-focused and organized.

“They love wonderful food, are great with people, hard workers and well-focused and organized.”

Kim and Tye’s personalities are a perfect fit for the Bread Business. They had no idea how well those attributes would serve them! When I asked if I could write a blog about them, Kim didn’t feel they were doing anything that special. I beg to differ with her. They’ve taken the business and made it their own in an outstanding way in a short time. It is without any doubt, Kim and Tye’s neighborhood bakery!

Meet Emily Kreig & Michael Muth, Owners of a Great Harvest Bakery in Hillsboro, OR

"Growing a Healthy Bakery in Hillsboro, OR"



Small retail business success in any local market is always challenging. It's not enough to create a great product; the experience needs to be top notch as well.

Emily Kreig and Michael Muth, new owners of the Hillsboro, OR Great Harvest Bread Co., come from a people management background at Target. They know firsthand the importance of creating a winning team. Emily is managing the store by herself while Michael keeps his job. Her energy and enthusiasm are amazing, -- so fun to be around. She's passionate about serving her customers, leading her employees, and growing the business. It doesn't hurt that she's competitive (runs marathons and the like), so failure is not even part of her vocabulary!

"What's the secret to making this happen? The people!"

“Their passion for producing the best quality products and delivering awesome service is obvious!”

Emily (in the pink shirt) inherited some great employees from Craig and Lynnette Hardy, former owners of the Hillsboro store. She dove in head first, working side by side with employees to gain their trust and get them on board after the transition, with the full understanding that it takes a team to run a bakery. No matter how much you care about the business, if your employees don't, it's going to be very hard to succeed, if not impossible.

Buying an existing store is a bit like jumping on a moving train, and requires a different approach than starting one from scratch, especially when it comes to employees. After all, the employees have worked there longer than you and they're concerned about changes; no one is thrilled about having the status quo upset. Unless they understand why you're changing it. And once they do understand, the ones that care about making things better, are on board. I am totally impressed with Emily's honesty, appreciation, and care as she's helped the employees through the transition, and at the same time made changes without upsetting everyone.

Oh yes, and customers are others that don't like the status quo upset. She's been spending lots of time with them as well, listening to their needs and concerns, and doing her best to keep everyone happy.

Meet Erika & Ray Boland, Owners of a Great Harvest Bakery in John's Creek, GA

"5 Secrets to Building a Strong and Profitable Small Business"



How do you create a strong and profitable business? Ask Erika and Ray Boland in John's Creek, GA. Although...they are so humble about what they do, they'll say they don't know exactly why they keep winning awards and growing their business.

I recently had the opportunity to help them open a second Great Harvest bakery in Alpharetta, GA. Seeing them in action left no doubt in my mind why they're so successful.

So what are the 5 secrets to local retail business success?

1. **Hard work.** Wow...that old fashioned concept of working HARD every day, not only hard but smart and focused. These two are walking the walk. They do everything they do with gusto and they don't waste time over-thinking things. Once the decision is made, they act.

“They’ll say they don’t know exactly why they keep winning awards and growing their business....but here’s what we’ve observed.”

2. **Partnership.** They have a great partnership; both have unique strengths that support the business and each other.
3. **Interesting and relevant offerings for customers.** They’ve done a great job crafting their menu and tuning into what their customers are looking for. They provide enough varieties of products to keep customers interested, but keep it simple enough to stay really good at what they do. When every product is made from scratch, you have to make sure the craft stays intact as you expand your offerings. And you have to be tuned into your customers to understand what they want.
4. Stay on top of **efficiencies and numbers.** Tracking these every day keeps you in touch with where your business is financially. Erika and Ray know at the end of every day where they stand, and where adjustments need to be made.
5. **Work side by side with your employees and develop rapport with customers.** I couldn’t get tired of hearing Ray & Erika talk to customers at the counter, greeting people, figuring out their needs, sharing information about the products, offering free slices from the breadboard, and telling customers why our fresh-milled, made-from-scratch whole grain breads are different than anything you can get at the grocery store. An excellent way to connect with customers, and mentor employees in great service.

“Proving that strong work ethic and passion for what you do is alive and well in America!”

Opening an additional store, especially when everything is fresh-made, is not an easy task. It requires having a great team in place and working through a lot of logistics. Ray and Erika drew on their crew from the existing store to provide a solid foundation for their new location. That said, hiring, constant mentoring, teaching, and training is an ongoing part of their bakery business, as it is for any business. Building a team is paramount. It's impossible to run a business on your own. Getting a great team in place is the biggest challenge of any small business.

Ray worked for Coke in the early days of their first bakery. Erika ran the store with lots of behind the scenes support from Ray. Erika's experience as a registered dietician fed right into her passion for providing healthy products for her customers. In the last few years, the store reached sales where Ray could move from his job to helping run the business full time. Balancing their work life with their family, their two kids and outside activities is a challenge, but one they handle gracefully.

Hats off to these two for showing us how it's done, and proving that strong work ethic and passion for what you do is alive and well in America!

Discover More

If you're interested in learning more about bakery cafe owners and their successes, subscribe to our Bread Business blog. In between stories about owners, we cover real food recipes, nutrition, and our unique brand of business!

You can subscribe [here](#).

<https://blog.greatharvest.com/>

Ready to ask us more questions? We love talking to people about Great Harvest. Our Franchise Development Team is ready to assist you.

Contact them [here](#). Or give them a call at 800.442.0424 (toll-free) or 406.683.6842 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Mountain Time).

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