



At Home with Karen Holmes

Story by Betsy Dell
Photographs by Tiana Hollomon

Turning onto Karen's street, I look at the clock and worry. I'm going to be a good ten minutes early. "Worse than late," I think, asking myself "What hostess is pleased to have guests arrive prematurely?" I decide I should wait in the car—a reasonable courtesy, if not for the fact that my hostess is puttering in her driveway.

"I'm early," I say sheepishly as she walks over to greet me. She is so completely unperturbed that I realize I've fretted needlessly. Karen Holmes, the owner of and chef behind Karen's Bakery Café and Catering, is one of those rare individuals who takes life as it comes.

Relaxing because she is relaxed, I take in the setting. Karen's home, like Karen, is a gem. Just a sneeze away from suburbia, the house sits on four acres of retired farmland. Studded with ancient oaks, the property has been left largely untouched, making it a sanctuary for critters and people alike. The house, which was originally the chicken coup, is simple but perfectly suited for the property. It belongs to the land.

Just as we head inside, our photographer Tiana arrives (properly on time) and joins us. Crossing the threshold, we are greeted by the rich, homey perfume of banana bread still in the oven. As the house belongs to the land, this aroma belongs to the home. Karen has been baking as long as she can remember. "My Mom was Danish," she explains. "Baking and cooking were square one in our house."

"Everything was fresh and homemade." Karen continues. "My Mom shopped the way they do in Europe, buying only what you need for a day or two. It's funny that seasonal, fresh, local is trendy. I mean, it's good that people are getting excited about it. But to me, that's just the way it should be—the way it always was in my home."

"My Mormor (Danish for Mom's mom) was a great cook, too, but off the cuff. She never followed a recipe; she just did it. There's a great joke in my family about when Mormor was asked to be in a magazine because she'd won a contest with her frikadelle, a kind of Danish meatball. We all laughed because we knew she wouldn't be able to reproduce it."

Although Karen does work from recipes, she seems to have much of her grandmother in her. Describing her rise from a caterer

"on the PTA circuit" to pastry chef for Paragary's and The Waterboy under Chef Rick Mahan to caterer and restaurant owner, Karen simply says, "I followed my nose." Tiana and I follow Karen's nose, too, as it leads her to the kitchen. The banana bread, now golden brown, is ready.

We take a platter of thick slices and fresh butter out to the deck where Karen and her husband Peter understandably spend most of their time. Overlooking the oaks and a dry creek bed, the deck is simple in design and unfussy in décor. I am impressed with Karen's and Peter's restraint in this. Chefs often say that the hardest thing to do is not to over-embellish food. When you work with great ingredients, you want to highlight the flavors that already exist. And that is what they've done here through home decoration. The accent is on the natural beauty of the setting, not on superfluous ornamentation. As if agreeing with my musings, a choir of birds sings an aria so sweet I can taste it.

Speaking of taste, the banana bread is fantabulous. It's like eating a memory—only better, because it is here and now. And that seems to be Karen's secret recipe: the singular ability to embrace what is present through her unique heritage. Yes, she takes life as it comes, but she does not forget who she is. That's the magic you find in her home. And it is the magic that you find in her extraordinary café, where bikers in spandex and men in business suits dine together as naturally as birds sing. You come as you are—even early as I did—and find absolute acceptance. You are enjoyed as what life brought today.

In the Danish culture, this is not considered magic at all. It is simply called *hygge* (pronounced hue-ga), a word for which there is no simple English translation. It is like coziness, reassurance and fellowship wrapped together by hospitality. The art of *hygge* is to elevate the ordinary to the extraordinary while at the same time having the graciousness to offer the extraordinary in ordinary situations. Karen Holmes is *hygge* in action. It draws people to her, just as I am drawn to another slice of banana bread.

Karen's Banana Bread

This is a wonderful recipe because it uses your food processor, which makes everything come together in a snap. If you take a moment to gather all your ingredients together first this recipe won't take you more than 30 minutes from start to finish.

- ⅓ C sugar**
- 3 oz. soft butter**
- ½ t lemon juice**
- 2 eggs**
- 2 very ripe bananas**
- 1 ⅓ C all-purpose flour**
- 1 teaspoon baking soda**
- ¾ teaspoon baking powder**
- Pinch of salt**
- 1 C toasted walnuts**
(or pecans if you prefer)

Process sugar, butter, and lemon juice until mixed. Add bananas, pulse until barely mixed in. Add eggs, process until combined. Combine dry ingredients and add all at once to processor. Process JUST UNTIL the dry goods don't show. Stir in nuts by hand so they don't become finely chopped, otherwise you'll have no crunch in the bread. Pour the batter into a greased loaf pan. Bake 350 for 35-45 minutes or until a wooden toothpick or skewer inserted in the center comes out clean.

You can bring some hygge to your holidays with Karen's amazing Christmas sweets and treats. Visit www.karensbakery.com for a catering menu. Or better yet, stop by the cafe at 705 Gold Lake Drive #340 in Folsom and get a taste of hygge firsthand.