

## [Avenue Bread has big plans for 2011](#)



Wendy DeFrest, who owns Avenue Bread with her husband, John, has big plans for her artisan bakery, including a new bakery and expanding sales in Skagit County. Isaac Bonnell | BBJ

by [Isaac Bonnell](#)

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Man cannot live on bread alone, but you sure can make a good living selling good bread.

Such is the case for Wendy and John DeFrest, owners of [Avenue Bread](#). Since the couple purchased the business in 2001, they have turned what was a small artisan bakery into a thriving business with three Bellingham locations and 60 employees who produce more than 1,000 loaves of bread a day, not to mention hundreds of sandwiches and pastries.

The business is poised to grow even more this year. At the end of December, Avenue Bread bought a 3,600-square-foot commercial space at 2020 Humboldt St., the former home of Triad Electric. The building will house the commercial bakery and pastry operations, which are currently crammed into the tiny kitchen at the Railroad Avenue shop.

“We’ve become a big fish in a small bowl,” Wendy DeFreest said. “This new bakery will allow the breadmakers and pastry makers to work side by side.”

Currently, the bread and pastry crews share the oven and work in rotations, which limits the production capacity of the bakery. As the company has gained more wholesale accounts, delivering to restaurants and grocery stores around Whatcom County, the operation has been stretched to the max.

With the new bakery, DeFreest plans to expand to Skagit County, where she has been eyeing locations for a satellite store.

“It’s going to be a big year,” DeFreest said. “Anthony’s in Anacortes carries our bread, and we figure one account isn’t worth the drive, so we’re actively expanding to Skagit County.”

DeFreest never planned on going into the bread business. After graduating from Western Washington University in 1991 with a management degree, she moved to Seattle and spent a few years “working in the real world,” she said. She knew she wanted to open her own business and had plans to open a café in Queen Anne.

But that changed when her husband, John, lost his job; DeFreest was a full-time mom at the time. After a visit to Bellingham, the couple decided to leave Seattle.

“We were looking out at Lake Padden and I thought ‘we could live here,’” DeFreest said. “It was the best move we ever made.”

At the time, DeFreest’s brother happened to be working for a small bakery in town called Avenue Bread. Better yet, the business was for sale. Sensing an opportunity, the DeFreests jumped in with enthusiasm.

“We did our due diligence and found that everything was in order,” DeFreest said. “John took over the bakery and I took over the business side of things.”

Purchasing an existing business can be tricky, especially if you have little experience in that industry. But the DeFreests had wind and tide on their side. Firstly, the business was financially sound and had already built a good name in the community. Secondly, the head bakers agreed to stay onboard.

“We wouldn’t have been able to do it without them — we didn’t know how to make bread,” DeFreest said. “The last owners had created a really strong product and John and

I came in with a lot of enthusiasm. We walked into a turnkey business — we started making money immediately. We were really lucky in that respect.”

From the beginning, DeFreest had plans to grow the business. She opened the Fairhaven shop in 2005 and then opened the James Street location in 2008.

Besides focusing her attention on growing business in Skagit County this year, DeFreest is also promoting Avenue Express, a new online ordering system. The system allows customers to order and pay online, skip the lunch line and pick up their order at any of the three shops.

So what does an average day look like for the proprietor of a burgeoning artisan bread bakery?

“I am fortunate in that I don’t have an average day,” DeFreest said. “Every day is different.”

Besides overseeing daily operations, DeFreest tries to spend as much time as she can getting to know her employees and finding out what they need to make Avenue Bread a better place for both customers and employees.

“It’s important for me to know my employees,” she said. “In the beginning, I’d be in there making sandwiches — not so much anymore. As much as I like it, I need to be working on the business. If you want to grow your business, you can’t be working in your business.”

Though DeFreest has big plans for Avenue Bread, she is intent on keeping the feel of a small bakery — especially when it comes to making bread. Each loaf is made by hand and baked on a stone slab the way bread has been made for centuries.

“Artisan bread is truly an art form,” DeFreest said. “When people get our bread, it’s going to be a little different every time.”

But since it’s Avenue Bread, there’s no doubt it will be delicious.