

# MATTHEW CLARK



CONTENT  
DEDICATED  
FRIENDLY  
GENUINE  
OPTIMISTIC  
CARING  
POSITIVE  
GENEROUS  
WELCOMING  
PERSEVERANT  
THOUGHTFUL  
CHEERFUL

# Measure of Success

BY JUDY MASTERSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS BALSAMO

TO TASTE MATTHEW CLARKE'S IRISH SODA BREAD is to understand, on a purely palatable level, the place where he was born and the woman who raised him.

The humble, round loaf is a moist, savory compilation that's fruited with golden raisins, flocked with nutty crunch, and is substantial, but not heavy. One, two, three slices gone; the breaker of Clarke's bread is at once led into temptation and the tastebuds are wholly unrepentant.

It is veteran baker Clarke's job to create things scrumptious, to nourish, to feed, as his dear mother did many years ago for her 14 children in their native Ireland. Her soda bread, and a tender, hearty Irish brown bread, are the gastronomic cornerstones of Clarke's downtown Barrington bakery.

"They're my mom's recipes – tried on all of us and we ate a lot," Clarke said one recent afternoon as he sat at in the sunny lunchroom of his business of 26 years, Clarke's Irish Bakery and Deli, at 455 W. Northwest Highway.

When Eileen Clarke passed away last year at age 91, her surviving children returned to the small dairy farm where they grew up, in Oldcastle, an hour-and-a-half northwest of Dublin. The siblings, most of whom now live in the United States, crammed into the "little home place" where good things from their mother's busy oven had helped to pass many a long, TV-less winter. "It was like we never left," said Clarke in his soft brogue.

Like so many immigrants, Clarke, 54, came to America looking for opportunity. He emigrated when he was 18, along with thousands of others of his generation, leaving behind a country torn by political and economic instability.

"I wanted to work," Clarke said. "I wanted to make my own way. But there were no jobs. Back when I left Ireland, it would have been tough for somebody like me to go to a bank and ask for a loan. They'd want to know your blood line."

Clarke had family in New York City, where he found work in construction. Within a year, he and a brother landed jobs in Washington, D.C. for a company that was setting-up a bakery-commissary and where he came under the tutelage of famed pastry chef Philippe Laurier.

Used to waking up before dawn to milk his father's cows, the baker's life suited Clarke, who apprenticed under Laurier for three years, learning the basics of dough-making, mixing, and how to flawlessly frost, fill, and decorate cakes. He saw the jolly Laurier perform culinary feats, once at Christmas making a completely edible electric train – except for the engine – out of chocolate and sugar.

In 1981, he moved to the Chicago area, where he worked as a pastry chef for the Marriott Hotel chain for seven years, and where he learned the importance of consistency in product and quality. At the Marriott he also met his former wife, Leone. Determined to go into business for themselves, they did just that in 1986 in Barrington, a growing community with a solid tax base and no real bakery.

They had been open a month when a woman with the former Recon Optical Inc. visited to inquire about ordering sheet cakes to feed 1,500 employees at its nearby plant. Clarke did the pricing for fresh strawberries and whipped cream for 15 to 20 sheet cakes that required more inventory than he had on hand for the past month. It was not going to be cheap. He called the woman.

"She said 'That's fine,'" said Clarke, recalling her amusement at his caution. "I wanted to make sure she was going to actually order them, that we could deliver them, and that we would get paid," he said. Clarke's would sell cakes, lots of them, to the company for the next 25 years, until it closed in 2012.

Another early customer banged on the bakery's door in the wee hours. Clarke, busy in the kitchen, first ignored the man, who was covered in mud and who turned out to be a local "repo man" who, in search of a certain truck, had fallen into a bog. Clarke rustled up a cup of coffee for the gentleman, who has been a

loyal customer ever since.

The bakery, which early-on opened a deli to capture the breakfast and lunch trade, moved a short distance to its current, larger location 20 years ago. Clarke runs the business with the help of his two daughters, Stacey, 25, a graduate of Western Illinois University, and Kathrine, 22, who will soon graduate Northern Illinois University.

"You measure success in different ways," he said. "And sometimes you do wonder. What does it all mean? To me, it's having two kids, raising them, sending them to college. It's not about me. It's about what I can do for my family, for my kids, to see they get a better shot." Clarke attributes his prosperity to an everything-in-season, no-shortcut approach to making and baking.

"We bake from scratch and we use fresh ingredients," he said. "People know our quality. You can't not use real cream. You can't not use real butter"

And so the seasons of baking come and go. Every Thanksgiving, 15 pies must be prepared for a local physician, including a coconut cream that becomes the sole possession of the loyal patron's elderly father, who has declared that no one but Matthew Clarke knows how to make one. Every Christmas, melt-in-the-mouth butter cookies fly out the door. Every spring and summer, wedding cakes are slathered with fondant, peppered with rosettes and tip-toed to banquet halls. Clarke once baked a 10-tiered confection for 600 wedding guests and climbed a very tall ladder to assemble it.

And come every March, Clarke's bakery moves, in aroma and taste, a little closer to the old home place in County Meath.

"We go a little crazy around St. Patrick's Day," Clarke said. That's when customers clamor for corned beef and cabbage, shepherd's pie, Irish sausage rolls, Irish stew, and cottage soup. At the bakery, they snap-up Bailey's Irish cream puffs, leprechaun pie, Irish egg custard, and a treat called Irish flake, a pastry filed with plain or raspberry cream.

And behind the showcase of intoxicating, creamy baubles, sits Eileen Clarke's deceptively unassuming soda bread, the loaf that was once purchased by a patron who said her mother was in hospice, had little appetite, and

would eat nothing else.

Matthew Clarke looks back on 26 years of night-time mornings, of the spiraling price of pecans, of fierce competition from big box ovens, of booms and recessions, and of the strange new world of "gluten free" with the cheerful, confident disposition of a man who has chosen his work well.

"It's hard to be a little bakery now," he said. "But I've always stuck to what I've done and I've always done it well. People come because they know we're a real bakery."

And people come because they adore Matthew Clarke, a man who takes the time to get to know his customers, who has hired their teenagers and taught them that "no job is too big or too small," and who counts the people who can't get enough of his turtle cookies as his friends and neighbors.

There is contentment in a man who has "come from very little," Clarke said, who knows what he is doing "is right," who has found a new home in a new country and a new village.

"Barrington has been good to us," Clarke said. "The people here are very loyal."



**Debbie Belknap, NEIGHBOR**

Matthew has been a friend and neighbor for about 20 years. We met when his daughter, Stacey, and my son, Michael, were in kindergarten. Matthew would always supply treats from the bakery for all the kindergarten functions. Being a neighbor and friend, my family would frequent the bakery on many occasions to enjoy the fresh baked goods and lunch from the deli. I meet my son and grandchildren there every Saturday for breakfast.

The bakery is the place to be on Saturdays or any day of the week, because if you are going there for the first time or the one hundredth time, you are greeted by an always cheerful and smiling Irishman – Matthew. If by chance he is in the back, you will be helped by his daughter Kathrine who is so much like her father. Matthew has a big heart and cares about all his family, extended family, long-time customers, and first-timers.

**Jean Capellos, CUSTOMER**

Several years ago either by chance or recommendation, I wandered into Clarke's Bakery looking for a little treat. Thinking I was watching a Broadway musical, out popped a leprechaun baker, Matthew Clarke. Wearing the usual baker's apron, but with a funny green cap, he had a crinkled smile and sparkling eyes which suggested many stories to tell. It was autumn and I walked out with the baker's dozen of apple cider powdered doughnuts. It was mouth-watering good. The chalkboard above the counter boasted of Irish soda bread, corned beef sandwiches, shepherd's pie. One quickly caught on.

Each year I patiently wait for the three days after Thanksgiving. That is when the whole family begins its journey to make Clarke's monstrous Christmas gingerbread house. Each year's creation is more magical than the last with frosted latticed shingles and chimney top, cascading mounds of snowy frosting, dripping with gum drops, licorice, candy canes, silver, red, and green button tops, and eye-popping window sills. Inside there is a doll house table with chairs and a tiny tree with decorations. There are trains and toys around the house, ready to entice a child and adult's imagination.

Each season promises a new Matthew concoction. Matthew is the only person I know, beside my mother, who could make the old-time sandwich loaf but this one frosted with red and green poinsettias for a December ladies' luncheon.

The best time to have a little private time with Matthew is after two in the afternoon when the baker's day is winding down. He can take you back to his family in Ireland, days of a happy family filled with many siblings, a village where there was always music, dance, and stories to be told of baptisms, marriages, and treks to the cemetery. It is best to pull up a chair and settle in for a lively conversation. Matthew Clarke is the iconic story of a young Irishman who created a tiny bakery tucked away on Highway 14.

**Jerry Conners**

I originally met Matthew at his bakery. Early Saturday morning trips to the bakery for doughnuts became a family tradition as did the Saturday chats with Matt. Coming in early provided an opportunity to take some time to talk and get to know each other better. It also provided an opportunity to run into friends that were also early Saturday risers. Later on, we got to know each other even better because our daughters were involved with the Barrington High School band. Matt is overwhelmingly friendly and makes everyone feel

comfortable. I think this is a trait of his Irish upbringing. It is always pleasant to go into the bakery or run into him somewhere in town. He always has time for conversation. Going into his bakery is reminiscent of growing up in a small town where whenever you went into a shop, the proprietor knew you and made you feel welcome. I would be surprised if Matt didn't know the name of just about everyone that

comes into his bakery and at least something about them. He is always willing to share his stories and listen to yours. He is just a great guy.

**Paul Corwin, CUSTOMER**

I have known Matthew since we moved to Barrington from Fort Worth in 1996. We are also members of St. Anne Church and would see Matthew and his family at various church services. However, I really got to know Matt by getting involved in various fundraising activities for the VFW Post 7706 in Barrington.

Clarke's Bakery has been a meeting place for many of our veterans long before I moved to Barrington. Matthew provides a warm and welcoming atmosphere that makes you feel right at home. He also has that great sense of Irish humor that makes you forget your troubles and go away from the bakery feeling good. Matt truly cares about his customers, especially our veterans. Whenever I would stop by the bakery, Matt would ask me how so and so was doing or provide me with an update on those veterans that may have been hospitalized. The grapevine at the bakery was better than any other way of getting information about our veterans or other people within the Barrington community.

Matthew has supported the VFW and American Legion in numerous ways. His gifts of time, goods and service go a long way in helping our veterans. You can always count on Matthew to provide his support to not only the veterans, but also for other community organizations. Clarke's Bakery is truly a "pot of gold" within the Barrington community, and Matthew is the Chief Leprechaun.

**Sam Loiacono, FRIEND**

I met Matthew Clarke in 1993 when I stopped at the bakery and was greeted with an Irish welcome and a good breakfast. From that time on, my friends and I meet there every morning. I soon realized how civic-minded Matthew is when I learned that he lets the Lions, VFW, American Legion, and other service clubs use his bakery for their fundraising activities. Then, I was told





## We do love Matthew and his girls and have known them for many years.

— ANNA BUSH

he visits the veterans in nursing homes, bringing pastries and his Irish cheer to them.

When his two daughters, Stacey and Kathrine, were attending Barrington High School, Matthew was active with their fundraising, assisted by his talented assistant, Juan. Clarke's Bakery gives employment to many high school students. Matthew teaches the students basic business acumen, and sometimes he becomes their counselor and confidant. I am proud to call him my friend.


### Colin Wickstrom, CUSTOMER

I started going to Clarke's about 12 years ago. We used to live in the village and moved to Lake Barrington, so I was in search of some fresh cooked eggs before work without having to negotiate my way in and out of the village. I stopped into Clarke's and I think Matthew and I became friends on my first visit.

When I go into Clarke's I feel like I am with friends at home. Matthew, his daughters, Juan, and the team treat you like you are part of the family. Matthew is such a thoughtful man; he named a breakfast for me. As soon as I walk in, they welcome me with a smile and say time for a "Colin Special" and being the creature of habit that I am, I rarely deviate and have that Colin Special. It is this type of personalized service that makes Matthew and Clarke's such a special place.

Matthew is a caring man that loves what he does, loves his customers, love his employees, and most importantly, loves his family that he shares his business with. We have all have weathered some interesting economic conditions over the past five years. Matthew and I have had some thought-provoking conversations about challenges we have faced. Matthew consistently stays positive and continues to persevere through his hard work. He never gives up.

### Ken Zei, Friend

I met Matthew at a Color Guard competition his daughter was involved in. I began to frequent his bakery, which led to a work-related relationship. From the start, talking with Matthew is like talking to an old friend. Grab a cup of coffee and a Danish, and you get an interesting history of Matthew's time growing up in Ireland. Throw in laughter, quick-witted humor, and honesty, you feel like you're in the family's kitchen. I have sat with the regulars, come for breakfast, and even celebrated St. Patrick's Day dinner at Clarke's Bakery, which reminded me of the meals I once experienced on a visit to Ireland. Whenever I drive by, I can't help but stop in, and check with a friend. 

*Judy Masterson is a writer who lives in Lake County and is a frequent contributor to Quintessential Barrington.*

**Publisher's Note:** Quintessential People™ is a heartfelt collaboration between our publication and portrait artist Thomas Balsamo. Our goal is to share with you exceptional images and words that ring true about some of the finest, most inspiring people in the community. For more information about Quintessential People™, contact QB at [www.QBarrington.com](http://www.QBarrington.com), or Thomas Balsamo (Portraits by Thomas) at 847-381-7710, or at [www.portraitsbythomas.com](http://www.portraitsbythomas.com).



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