

Patty Erd (left) is co-owner of the Spice House, which opened on Central Street in 1996. Greg Vetter is co-owner of Tag's, which opened in 1937. His family has owned it since 1968.



Geoff Scheerer/Pioneer Press

Central Street boasts eclectic flavor

By KATHY ROUTLIFFE
STAFF WRITER

Ask Tom Erd to describe the street where his spice shop has flourished for the past six years, and he waxes prolific.

Erd said recently he is glad he opened The Spice House at 1941 Central St., where it is one of three in his small chain, catering in bulk spice sales to what he called "serious cooks" from a broad geographic area.

"I always thought, and visitors to the store have always thought, that it's got a real European flavor," he said of the Central Street business district.

"There are cafes, restaurants, a train station that brings hundreds of commuters a day into the area. You have a public library, a post office, two bakeries, two coffee places. There's anything you could really want."

Other business owners along the stretch of Central, largely west of Green Bay Road, make similar comments.

No mall stores here

For Lois Combs, whose Lois & Company women's clothing store has operated for 10 years just off Central, at 2566 Prairie Ave., it's a unique neighborhood "where we pride ourselves on not being mall stores."

Greg Vetter, co-owner of the ven-

erable Tag's Pastry Shop, at 2008 Central St., said he thinks of the district as a family oriented neighborhood with upscale touches, while Sue O'Malley, co-owner of the new Bluestone Restaurant, at 1932 Central St., recently called it "diverse and accessible."

All four people are members of the Central Street Business Association, and each is proud of the increasingly lively commercial feel of the northwest Evanston district.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, newer establishments have turned around what had been a lethargic business atmosphere in the 1980s, they said.

The area has not fallen under the sway of chain stores or fast food shops. Instead, independent boutiques, restaurants and food stores have marked the district's personality.

Now the business association faces different challenges. Among them are involving members in association events and projects, and looking at how to solve some parking tightness.

The owners said they want people to know that they and fellow district business operators are there waiting to serve potential customers.

"The people that shop here

know about us, but it's amazing how many people don't even know we're here," Combs said recently.

On the map, the business district runs from Ashland Avenue on the east to Central Park Avenue on the west, as well as shops along Green Bay Road from Isabella and Lincoln streets on the north and south. But much of the activity takes place west of Green Bay along Central, Combs and Vetter said.

"There's a whole different type of business on the other side of Green Bay," Vetter said. "For instance you've got an auto repair shop over there. They're not separate, they participate in events, but there is some separation."

'The Complete Street'

Vetter has a clear grasp of the geography and history of the district. He and his sister Gretchen, who own Tag's, are veterans there. Their father bought the bakery and pastry shop, which has operated since 1937, in 1968.

"The slogan here used to be that it was 'the Complete Street,'" he remembered.

Attrition took its toll, however, on independent businesses during the mid to late 1980s, he said.

(Continued on page 135)



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Clara Kahn (left), an employee at Tag's Pastry Shop, shows cakes to customer Florence Loizzo. The bakery is one of the oldest businesses in the Central Street district.