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Trees, stars and snowmen are some of the sugar cookies Tammy Nestor has sold in the past at the Folk Art Festival. Courtesy photo

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The SPBH Folk Art Festival opens Saturday morning at the Seward County Activity Center, and with more than 100 vendors scheduled to attend, there's nothing small about it. Just ask "cookie lady" Tammy Nestor, a long-time favorite at the show, who plans to arrive in Liberal Friday afternoon with more than 2,000 cookies.

"I'm not sure exactly how many cookies I have," said Nestor from her home in McPherson. "About 250 dozen? I know this year, to go to Liberal, I've used about 350 pounds of flour ... 100

pounds of sugar ... butter, I'm not sure. Lots and lots of butter."

Though the numbers might sound like a lot to the average Christmas shopper, the amount is no big deal to Nestor, who's been at the baking game for nearly 20 years.

"I got started when my son was 5 years old," she said. "I started taking cookies to his football games, and once a year, I'd make these football-shaped cookies with each player's name in icing."

As the football players grew, so did Nestor's cookies: by the time her son was a senior in high school, Nestor was baking cookies the size of dinner plates. She had also launched a cookie business as a part-time venture. Nestor's full-time job is catering manager at McPherson's two four-year colleges.

"I'm used to managing large quantities of things," she said.

There's one critical difference between cafeteria catering, which relies on bulk quantities of processed food, and Nestor's cookie business.

"These are totally homemade, from scratch," she said. "The icing is from scratch. The cookie dough is my own. I found a recipe and it was one of those deals where I kept tweaking and playing and I've had it forever, and I do not share it. With anyone."

The resulting Christmas cookies in 11 shapes, decorated with colorful icing, "are amazing," Nestor said matter-of-factly. "You can freeze them and take them out six months later and they're just as good as today."

To prepare for the Liberal festival, Nestor began baking and freezing cookies early in November.

“I have a separate kitchen out at my house, and I hire college girls to go out and do the baking,” she said. “All of it is about organization. I sit down with a calendar, and I write, ‘by this date, all the stars,’ and ‘by this date, all the trees,’ and the girls look at the schedule and they know.

“My goal is to have them finished up the Saturday after Thanksgiving every year. There’s just too many things in life that happen to leave it all to the last minute. Do I work on ‘em every day? No, no, it just depends on what’s going on in general.”

Though she makes it a goal to last through Sunday each year, Nestor’s cookies rarely last that long.

“It just has never worked out,” she said, even last year, when Nestor brought close to 400 dozen cookies. She sold out less than two hours after the festival opened.

“One year, we had two ladies get in a little shoving match,” she said. “My husband had to step out and say, ‘ladies, really? There’s plenty of cookies.’”

Several of Nestor’s regular customers have pre-ordered cookies for the weekend, so a portion of her stock is already spoken for.

This year, Nestor will bring a smaller amount of cookies to Liberal. It’s been a busy autumn, she said, with a family member fighting cancer, “so I won’t have as many as usual.”

No worries, she added:

“After I sold out last year, I started taking orders and made a second trip out to Liberal,” she said. “I’m planning to do that again. If I sell out, I will return Dec. 18, and people can place orders up until Dec. 15th. I’ll have business cards.”

Given the scope of the SPBH festival, shoppers will have plenty of options for holiday snacking and hospitality. Besides cookies, vendors will arrive with jellies, jams, preserves, jerky, salsa and soup mixes. There will be pumpkin rolls, fudge, caramel and kettle corn, roasted nuts and coffee blends for sale, along with honey and homemade root beer. Several groups plan to conduct bake sales and the Seward County Community College catering service "Great Western Food Service" will be on hand with hot meals to eat at the center both Saturday and Sunday.

The SPBH Folk Art Festival opens this weekend at the Seward County Activity Center, and runs from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 Saturday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is free to visit more than 100 vendors selling arts, crafts, food items and more. Santa Claus will also be on the grounds with paid photo opportunities available.

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