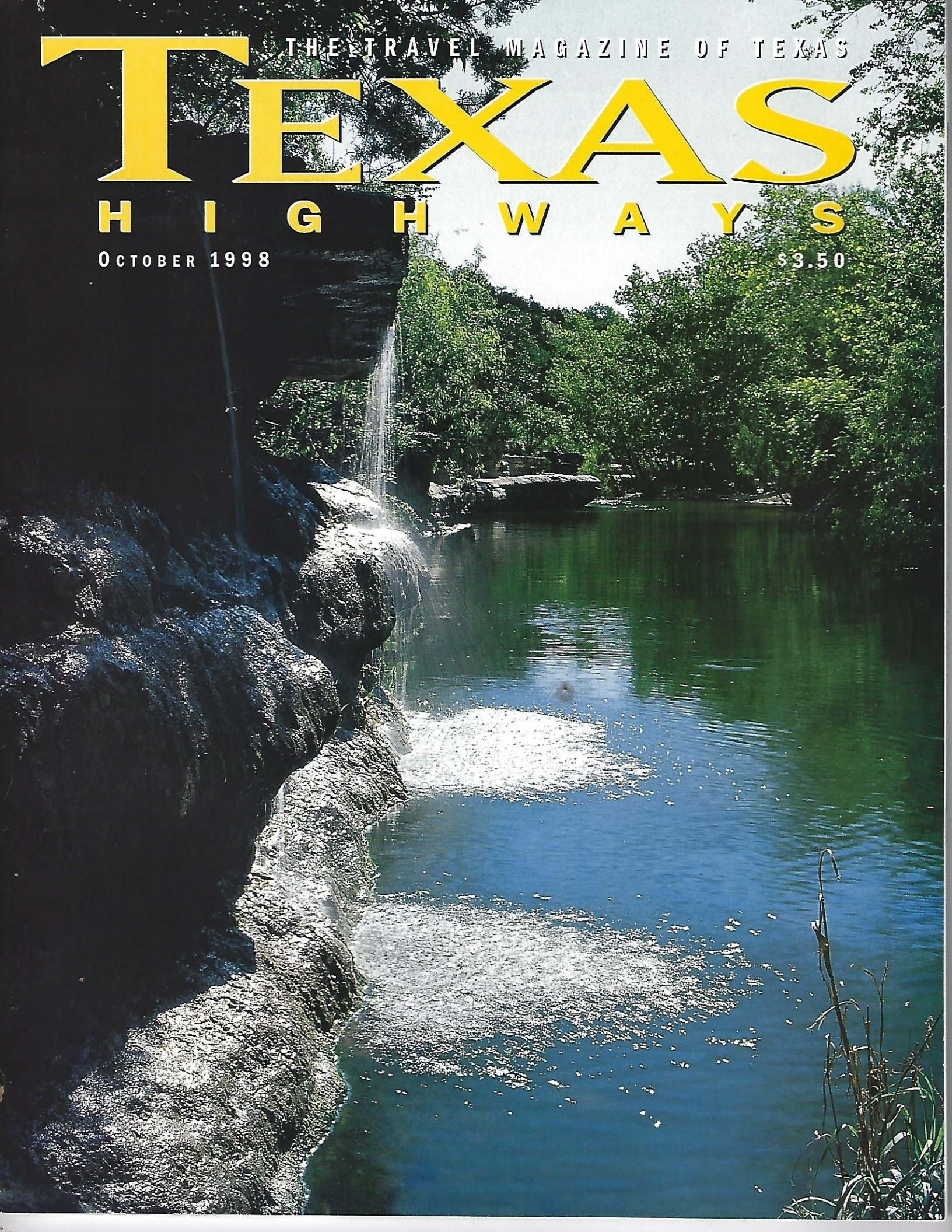


# THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE OF TEXAS TEXAS

## HIGHWAYS

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*Eilenberger's*

# Just Desserts

BY LANA ROBINSON • PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. GRIFFIS SMITH

**T**HE LATE JOHN H. REAGAN, postmaster general of the Confederacy, is Palestine's most famous native son, but the contributions of German immigrant Frederick Herman "F.H." Eilenberger (1878-1959) are what make the East Texas community's history sweet. Thanks to Eilenberger's Bakery, the business F.H. founded, generations of Palestinians have received their just desserts. But not *just* desserts.

When F.H. opened his wholesome business at the corner of Oak and John streets in May 1898, bread-making was its sole activity. Realizing that man cannot live by bread alone, the young confectioner began baking tasty cakes, pies, and pastries, too, and at Christmastime, Old World-style fruitcakes. The original establishment, called the American Home Bakery, burned in 1915. F.H. continued to operate at a temporary site and rebuilt at the present location—512 North John—in 1918.

Until 1920, the bakery delivered bread by horse-drawn wagon. Later, the business evolved into a wholesale operation, boasting a fleet of 15 to 20 delivery trucks during its heyday in the 1930s and early '40s. "Eilenberger's Butter Nut Bread" quickly rose to fame, with advertisements of the time touting it as "the choice of all East Texas."

For some 50 years, the wonderful aroma of warm bread permeated the city, luring local citizens to the bakery for their daily provisions. In 1949, F.H. sold the business to his sons, Fred and Herman, and his son-in-law, Claude Westerman. Under increasing pressure from automated competitors, Eilenberger's ceased baking bread in 1968 (resumed 15 years later) and began concentrating on fruitcakes. In the years since, elegant gourmet cakes have become the bakery's bread and butter.

**It's not just sweet-talk. At Eilenberger's Bakery in Palestine, treat-seekers can have their cake ...and their cookies, pies, and breads, too. Folks from afar can also partake, through Eilenberger's mail-order catalog, which reaches about a million people worldwide.**



Today, Eilenberger's Bakery endures as an East Texas treasure, its sweet presence delighting denizens and tourists who have a hankering for cakes, pastries, and confections. The bakery—the state's oldest operating in the same location—celebrates its centennial this year, a milestone made possible in part by the loyal people of Palestine. Charles Calhoun of Augusta, Georgia, president and CEO of Centennial Foods, Inc.—

tries survey an array of picture-perfect pies—apple, apricot, chocolate cream, coconut cream, peach, pecan, and chess.

"We also offer pumpkin pies," says Shirley Wells, bake shop manager. "We sell a lot of those at Thanksgiving. And we do dinner rolls by special order two days a week throughout the year, as well as for the holidays." But be warned, for, as Shirley cautions, "If you place an order for rolls, you have to be here on

*When Eilenberger's opened a century ago, bread-making was its sole activity. Today, elegant gourmet cakes have become the bakery's bread and butter.*

Eilenberger's owner since August 1997—believes the townsfolk's allegiance is due to deeds of the bakery's founder.

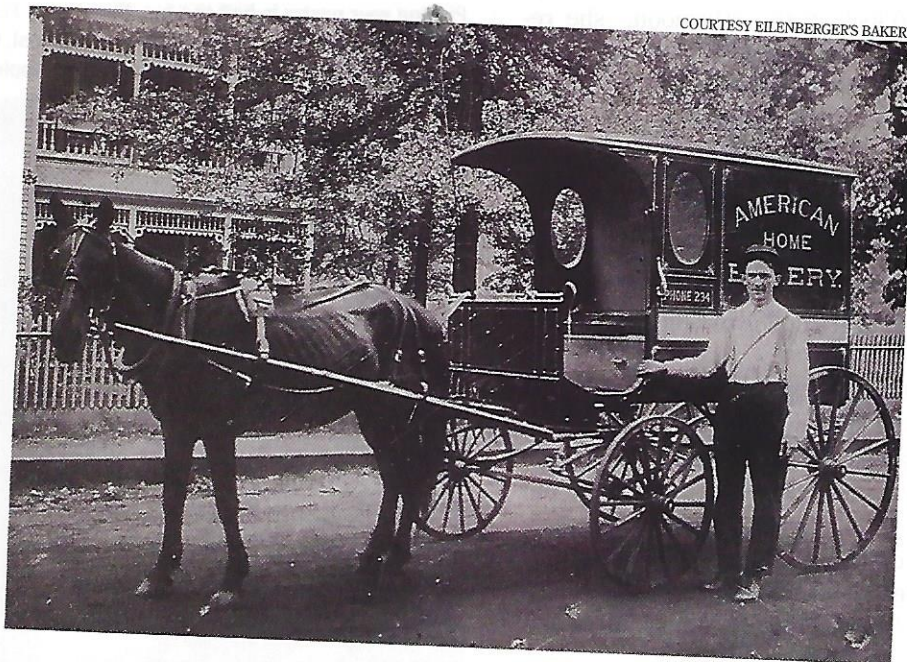
"When you think of how Mr. Eilenberger gave bread to people during the Depression, and the number of jobs the bakery has provided over the years, is it any wonder people here have such a deep love for it?" asks Charles. "Eilenberger's history is special."

Finding the historic bakery is easy as pie. Drive into town from any direction, and follow your nose 'til you spot the emerald-green awning with the Eilenberger's logo. Inside, nostalgic photos reflecting different periods of the bakery's development adorn rich woodwork. Old-timey ceiling fans gently waft the intoxicating fragrance of just-baked goodies. Patrons seated at quaint, tea-size tables while savoring a warm Danish or an apple turnover with their morning coffee hardly seem to notice as the trickle of customers becomes a steady stream.

Some come seeking Eilenberger's wonderful cinnamon rolls smothered in creamy icing. Others, their fervent sweet teeth at full rev, yearn for a scrumptious brownie: Anxious children press against the antique display case to view neat rows of cookies: Apricot Angels, Chocolate Pecan Clusters, Pecan Nuggets, Russian Rocks, and in the spring, Dogwood Blossoms. Exquisite cakes, piled high with creamy frostings, tantalize perusers, while patrons with a yen for pas-

time to get them, because there are plenty of takers if you aren't!"

If you loaf around, you could also miss out on your daily bread, which typically includes wheat, white, jalapeño, apricot, apple, and savory focaccia. A round, flat Italian bread made from high-gluten and whole-wheat flours, olive oil, lemon juice, oregano, rosemary, pepper, and black olives, focaccia perks up pasta perfectly. Sandwiches made from the bakery's breads and croissants are available, too.



On display at today's bakery, this early-1900s photograph shows one of F.H. Eilenberger's employees, ready to deliver bread by horse-drawn wagon. By the 1930s, the business had a fleet of 15 to 20 delivery trucks.





**Happy birthdays are assured with colorful cakes like these. Such personal touches—and downright deliciousness—have kept the bakery in business for 100 years.**

Retired schoolteacher Shirley Stilwell of Palestine relies on Eilenberger's for customized party cakes, and she also stops by frequently to pick up Snickerdoodles and Pecan-Praline Cookies for her grandchildren. Shirley loves the bakery's cozy atmosphere and friendly staff.

"When my husband, Tom, was still a city judge, we used to enjoy going down and having a pastry or a cookie about four o'clock in the afternoon," she recalls. Shirley and Tom participated in the bakery's product taste-tests this past spring. "We took several cakes home with us and judged them for flavor and shelf life," she says. "They were all delicious, but the Texas Pecan Cake—chock-full of pecans, pineapple, dates, and cherries—is still our pick. I like to serve it with a dollop of whipped cream."

**E**ILENBERGER's century-old success story is due not only to hometown fans like Tom and Shirley, but customers worldwide who depend on the bakery's mail-order service to satisfy their cravings. To make shopping easy for their loyal out-of-towners, Eilenberger's 1998 holiday catalog is filled with all sorts of dreamy desserts.

The bakery's buttery World Famous Fruitcake—made from a secret family recipe with pecans, cherries, pineapple,

and raisins—remains the centerpiece of the catalog's offerings. Australian Apricot and Tropical Pineapple cakes are also quite popular. The bakery also offers robust

Butter Rum and tongue-tingling Lemon Pound cakes—baked in pans lined with nutty-sweet biscotti (cookie) crumbs and hand-dipped in yummy sauces.

Then, of course, there's chocolate. Back by popular demand in the decadent-dessert division is the Triple Chocolate Fudge Cake, doused in thick fudge and topped with white-chocolate morsels. This generously drenched

classic's close rival, super-rich Chocolate Amaretto Cake (a cross between a Black Forest Cake and a gooey brownie steeped in amaretto), and the cool Chocolate Mint Cake round out the chocolate-lover's category.

Along with the collection of cakes, "We have six kinds of cookies in our catalog this year, as well as Traditional Pecan Pie and Bake Shop Brownies," says Pat Skidmore, Eilenberger's director of operations. "We have just introduced Nutcracker Sweets, our assorted candy-coated pecans. Also, for the first time, cheesecakes and boxed fruit—fancy apples, navel oranges, and Ruby Red grapefruit—will be available by mail order."

To handle the influx of holiday orders, Eilenberger's adds up to 100 people to its crew. Temporaries learn the ropes from Pat Skidmore, Shirley Wells, Bill Lanning, Sandy Harris, and Betty Boedeker (Betty is F.H.'s granddaughter), full-time employees with a total of 86 years of experience.

The holiday pace is no cakewalk. Some years, the bakery produces as much as 350,000 pounds of cake. A modified cement mixer blends the stiff batter, and three 60-year-old commercial

**Picking your pastry is half the fun. Here, Mary Ferguson (far left, behind the counter) waits on bakery patrons from the Palestine Christian School, who eyeball the antique display case's tempting assortment of cookies, as well as pies from apple to pecan.**







**Company president Charles Calhoun (left) and vice president of sales and marketing Nick Greene of Centennial Foods, which has owned Eilenberger's since 1997, plan to nurture the bakery's sweet history and small-town charm.**

ovens together bake some 2,000 cakes at a time. The entire production cycle takes 10 hours. The fruitcakes, which are 40 percent sweet, buttery batter and 60 percent candied fruit and nuts, will keep about two months at room temperature and even longer (up to several years) in the freezer.

Though food-safety regulations bar visitors from the kitchen during actual production, simulated production is a feature of the tours offered during Palestine's Dogwood Trails Festival (see *When...Where...How* for details). Also featured: A single iron ring, once used for tying horses that pulled the bread wagons, can still be found behind the bakeshop. The so-called "Molasses Board" still drips, even though it's been 50 years since the board was nailed to the ceiling to prevent leaks after someone upstairs accidentally spilled a 55-gallon drum of the sticky syrup.

According to Eleanor Eilenberger, her husband, Fred (son of F.H. and a certified master baker), hung up his apron last September after 56 years. At one time, Fred's family lived above the bakery. "Fred's earliest memories are of his

father rising in the dark to bake breads, and the unforgettable perfumes of sweet bakery smells," says Eleanor.

That heavenly aroma has also stuck with Palestine native Tom Broyles since childhood. "The old Texas Theatre is next door to the bakery. When I was a kid, we would go to the matinee on Saturday and drop by afterwards for a treat," says Tom. "The smell of spices and warm pastries was overwhelming. There was no way you could pass by without going in." In earlier years, Tom's parents' generation engaged in a Saturday-night ritual of knocking on the bakery's door when the movie was over to get slices of warm bread.

A fifth-generation Texan and the great-grandson of Texas Governor Thomas Mitchell Campbell, Tom saved the bakery from closure in 1978, when he bought it with the help of Dallas businessman Lloyd Birdwell. Tom owned the bakery through 1993; from 1993 to 1995, he managed it for Silverado Foods of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the owner until Centennial Foods took over last year. During Tom's tenure, two new cakes, the Texas Pecan and the World Famous Fruitcake, earned Monde International Gold Medal Awards at the World Food Selection in Brussels in 1980. By 1994, the number of mail-order customers had increased to more than 200,000 worldwide from several thousand.

Taking Eilenberger's to yet another level is now the goal of Nick Greene, Centennial's vice president of sales and marketing. Nick has introduced the bakery's products at

fancy food shows in New York and has presented the Nutcracker Sweets line to a national audience on the Home Shopping Network. Eilenberger's wholesale customers currently include Neiman Marcus, the New Braunfels Smokehouse, and Pittman-Davis in Harlingen. Most recently, Universal Studios chose Eilenberger's to make cookies for its Hollywood and Orlando theme parks.

Meanwhile, back in Palestine, Eilenberger's experienced kitchen crew is gearing up for the bakery's 100th holiday season. When asked if they are up to the task, they wholeheartedly agree: "It's a piece of cake!" ★

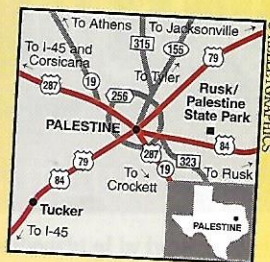
Frequent contributor LANA ROBINSON of Waco says Eilenberger's Australian Apricot Cake is divine. Look for her story on Fort Worth's Weston Gardens in a 1999 issue.

Our favorite food photographer GRIFF SMITH says he ate way too many butterscotch-coated pecans on this shoot last spring.

## WHEN...WHERE...HOW

### How Sweet It Is

**E**ilenberger's Bakery is at 512 N. John St. in Palestine. Take US 287 into downtown Palestine, and go north on John Street; the bakery is 3 blocks up on the right. Hours: Mon-Fri 7:30-5:30, Sat 8-4. Tours of the bakery are given during Palestine's Dogwood Trails, observed each year during the last two weeks of March and the first week of April; ask about other tour times during the year. Wheelchair accessible. For a 1998 holiday catalog or more information, write to Box 710, Palestine 75802; 903/SAY-CAKE (903/729-2253). Web site: [www.eilenberger.com](http://www.eilenberger.com).



As a lasting reminder of Eilenberger's century of business in East Texas, cakes this season come in commemorative tins bearing images of yesteryear—horse-drawn delivery wagons, cobblestone streets, and the bakery's familiar dogwood emblem.

The Eilenberger's/Nutcracker Sweets 24-hour order line is available daily Oct. 1-Dec. 23. Call 800/831-2544, or fax 903/723-2915. The deadline for Thanksgiving orders is Nov. 12; for Hanukkah, Nov. 27; and for Christmas, Dec. 9. (Orders beyond deadlines are accepted, but require special shipping arrangements to ensure timely arrival.) At other times of the year, call 903/SAY-CAKE.