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Posted date: 7/23/2007

They're His Kind of Dogs

Ali Esmail brings a taste of Chicago to the San Fernando Valley through his small but growing QT's hot dog chain.

By Mark R. Madler

The two customers were lucky the day they came to QT Chicago Dogs in Woodland Hills and weren't sure what to order for lunch.

Owner Ali Esmail was sitting nearby and noticed their hesitation when looking over the menu. He encouraged the pair to try the restaurant's signature snack – the fully loaded Chicago-style hot dog.



QT: All Esmail's authentic Chicago dogs are praised by Windy City transplants.

"I can tell you, sir, it's the best hot dog," Esmail said.

The two weren't disappointed, although one didn't know what to make of the sport peppers topping off his hot dog. He turned to Esmail and asked if he was supposed to eat them.

Sport peppers are an ingredient that sets the Chicago-style dog apart from other regional variations of this summer-time favorite. Add yellow mustard, relish, onions, pickle spears, quarter slices of tomatoes and top it with a hearty sprinkle of celery salt and you have a full meal of iconic proportions that has captured taste buds outside Chicago.

After all, when was the last time a restaurant in California advertised the Kansas City-style hot dog (with sauerkraut and melted Swiss cheese) or Seattle-style hot dogs (with cream cheese and onions)?

For 20 years Esmail has served up this specialty from the city by the lake from his four locations in the San Fernando Valley. He is looking to open a fifth in the food court of the Americana at Brand project under construction in Glendale.

Drawing customers won't be difficult.

Los Angeles had the second highest retail spending on hot dogs last year with \$78,290,600, according to the National Hot Dog & Sausage Council, adding that Dodger Stadium led the major leagues in 2004 and 2005 for the most hot dogs sold at a ballpark.

Esmail worked for Dun & Bradstreet for nine years before turning entrepreneur with a Dairy Queen in Texas. After moving to Los Angeles, he bought the Northridge QT's location in 1986. A second store opened in Sherman Oaks that was later closed following the Northridge earthquake.

The Reseda store at Victory and Tampa opened in 1997 and a new Sherman Oaks store followed in 2002.

The Woodland Hills QT's opened in January of this year to serve customers who went to the other locations from the west San Fernando Valley and the Conejo Valley. Esmail said he was asked to open a location in Calabasas but couldn't find affordable space.

So what is the attraction of Chicago-style hot dogs that makes a man base a business around them?

Esmail chalks it up to those who grew up in the Midwest wanting a taste of home.

One customer of the Woodland Hills QT's agrees.

"I have to say, number one is the overall taste, and number two is nostalgia; the taste of Chicago, if you will," said Jeff Katz, a Chicago native now living in Oak Park, about the hot dog's appeal.

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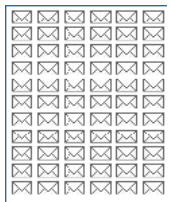
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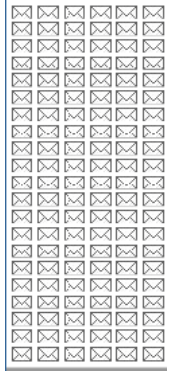
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Kevin Sherfinski and Mitch Kite, operators of the HotDogChicagoStyle.com Web site, boil the attraction down to the hot dogs being a comfort food and that all the toppings blend together well – from the crunch of the pickle to the subtle heat of the peppers and the perfectly steamed poppy seed bun.

“The hot dog isn’t just some kiddie food that has to be simple and easy to eat,” the pair said in an e-mail from Madison, Wisc.

But what of those customers who aren’t looking for nostalgia?

Perhaps it’s the lack of an identifying wiener for Los Angeles that makes the Chicago dog a draw. What does the city have to offer in a trademark dog other than Pink’s in Hollywood with its lines 40-people deep even at 1 a.m. for their chili dogs; downtown vendors selling bacon-wrapped dogs from pushcarts; and the over-rated Dodger Dog?

“Even people not from Chicago, once they try it they are hooked,” Esmail said.

<Chicago dogs are serious business

Aficionados are serious about their dogs. Very serious. And none more so than those craving the Chicago-style hot dog.

Purists debate the best way to prepare the dog – steamed, boiled or grilled – (QT does all three) and whether it needs to be skinless or in a natural casing. (QT dogs are served skinless but available with the casing at customer request). The bun must have poppy seeds, the relish a specific neon-green color and just the right amount of celery salt.

If there is one thing purists can agree on, it’s that ketchup never, ever touches a Chicago dog.

Esmail adds to the authenticity by using Vienna Beef products for the dogs and buns and many of the condiments. For 10 years, Vienna supplied everything when the Chicago-based firm had a distribution facility in the City of Industry but now Esmail works with multiple suppliers for the onions, mustard and tomatoes.

Serving these types of hot dogs involves more than just slapping a piece of meat in a bun, so the training has to be done right.

Esmail himself works with the new employees, taking however long is necessary for them to understand the proper way to serve a Chicago dog.

The quality of the training is reflected in the comments he hears from Chicagoans, who aren’t shy about expressing what they think is done right or wrong with a QT’s dog, Esmail said.

“It has to be right or they won’t touch it,” he added.

Although it’s been several years since he last ate a hot dog back in Chicago, Katz said that QT comes close to the real deal, although he was unaware that natural case dogs were available.

“What comes to mind is usually Chicago hot dogs have a harder casing,” Katz said. “As I recall they have a little more to snap to them.”

A 2004 review of QT’s at the Hot Dog Spot blog earned it the distinction of best Chicago dog although the chain was downgraded several months later for never having enough natural-casing hot dogs. QT’s received mixed reviews (dating from 2004 and 2005) at the Chow Hound website in discussion board postings about where to find the best Chicago dog in Los Angeles.

While hot dog places are plentiful in the Valley, those serving a true Chicago-style dog are less so. One competitor to QT is Taste Chicago in Burbank, owned by the wife of actor Joe Mantegna.

“They are doing alright,” Esmail said of the Burbank restaurant. “They are using the Vienna products and all that.”

To give the right atmosphere at his restaurants, Esmail uses posters and prints of Chicago sports teams and landmarks.

Eventually, he would like to make at least one of his locations a gathering spot for Chicagoans to watch sporting events, Esmail said.

SPOTLIGHT - QT Chicago Dogs

Year Bought: 1986

Location: Northridge, Reseda, Sherman Oaks and Woodland Hills

Revenues in 2005: \$800,000

Revenue in 2007 (projected): \$1 million

Employees in 2005: 11

Employees in 2007: 16