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Bay Terrace toasts Ben's Deli milestone



Photo by Rich Bockmann

Hal Simon (l.) and Scott Dragoon say good, old-fashioned comfort food is what makes Ben's special.

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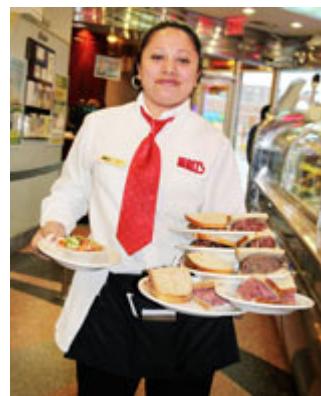
By Rich Bockmann

TimesLedger Newspapers

Ben's Delicatessen may not have invented the pastrami sandwich, but according to the Bay Terrace eatery's customers, it has come pretty darn close to perfecting it.

"It's the only place you can get a good, greasy Jewish sandwich," Dave Dancyger said earlier this week, as he stopped by to pick up lunch.

Ben's was founded in Baldwin, L.I., in 1972, and this year the Bay Terrace location, along with the company's five others, will help celebrate the 40th anniversary with specials such as 40 cent knishes and free meals for



customers born in 1972 if they bring a guest.

Photo by Rich Bockmann

Ben's has delis in Boca Raton, Fla., Manhattan and three on Long Island in Greenvale, Carle Place and Woodbury.

Jessica Monteil serves up plates of Ben's famous sandwiches. Photo by Rich Bockmann

"To some delicatessen is something you put between two slices of bread. To me it's a calling," said founder Ronnie Dragoon, who now runs the Boca Raton restaurant. "We're a family business and our customers are part of the family. At the end of the day, every guest should feel comfortable, happy and full — always full!"

Dragoon's brother, Scott, has been filling orders behind the deli counter in the Bay Terrace shopping center since the location opened nearly 19 years ago.

As he ladled a full container of soup Dancyger had ordered, Dragoon said the pastrami sandwiches were what kept customers coming back.

"And the cheerful guys at the counter," he added saltily.

Ben's opened up in Bay Terrace in the early 1990s, offering traditional kosher fare at a time when the neighborhood was home to a strong ethnic Jewish population.

General Manager Hal Simon said he has watched the way the neighborhood has changed over the years.

"The Jewish population has shrunk as the demographics have changed, but it's also broadened our horizons. We have a lot more Asian customers now. Believe it or not, they eat kosher," he said.

That should not come as a complete surprise, though, as Jewish communities have a longstanding tradition of eating Asian cuisines.

"You can tell how Jewish a neighborhood is by the number of Chinese restaurants it has," Simon said.

The company's motto is "We cure our own corned beef. Our chicken soup cures everything else."

For those like Dancyger, who prefer pastrami, Simon said Ben's double steams its pastrami to overcook it and make it tender.

"Good pastrami will just melt in your mouth," he said.

Simon got his start at Ben's in Baldwin when he was 16 as a "schlepper," running back and forth between the deli and the stock room to keep the front stocked with items like pickles. He said he goes fairly easy on his schleppers, and that the staff is like a family.

"A lot of restaurants have good food. We're all about good service," he said.

Fern Weiss has worked for Ben's for more than 19 years, the last three of which she has spent in Bay Terrace.

"We have a lot of regular customers, and we know a lot of their orders," she said. "Sometimes I see them coming in from the parking lot and it's like, 'I know what that guy's soup is,'" she said.

Ben's will host a reunion party at its Greenvale, L.I., location Feb. 28 for customers of the original Baldwin store.