

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2003

By Mark Kendall

Bakers Start Early To Put Crunch in Trademark Bread

The city of Riverside should be thankful that D'Elia's Grinders never expanded into a big chain.

I suspect this crispy-bread sandwich paradise on University Avenue is keeping a lot of people in town.

Just look at what happens to D'Elia's addicts who live outside the area, according to Johnny Perrone, whose family owns D'Elia's.

- A guy in Northridge paid \$100 for a courier service to bring him grinders.
- Another man shelled out big bucks to have two grinders sent to Colorado by FedEx.
- Visiting grinder addicts sometimes stop in Riverside on the way to the airport so they can bring the sandwiches home for relatives.

Others come from across SoCal. "We drive in there from Orange County just to get a grinder," says Tonya Schneider, 56, of Fountain Valley.

Schneider got hooked 40 years ago as a teenager in Hemet. On trips into Riverside, she had to stop for grinders at D'Elia's. She and her boyfriend even carved their initials into one of the wood picnic tables that used to be outside. Now she comes every couple months, calling ahead to make sure they're not out of bread.

The crunchy bread sets this place apart. It's different from anything you'll find at Subway or Quizno's or Togo's. Just beware that you're likely to find bits in your beard or goatee.

A whole grinder is \$4.99, with ham the most popular meat.

Making the bread is a chore for the members of the Perrone family. They show up at 5 a.m. to bake it fresh daily, even though the doors don't open until 10 a.m.

It takes some time to bake upward of 1,000 sandwich rolls.

For each batch, they pour weighty bags of flour into their giant mixer. Adding steam during the proofing and baking gives the bread its crispy exterior.

The oven is much more high-tech than when D'Elia's opened in the '50s. The original walk-up eatery was torn down for a larger building almost two decades ago.

The D'Elia's story starts in Connecticut, where Italian immigrant Jacquino D'Elia and his family ran a bakery-turned-deli.

His son, Ralph D'Elia, came to Riverside in the mid-1950s to open the grinder shop. Ralph's sister, Gladys Perrone, and her husband, John, soon followed and helped with the new business.

In time, the Perrones took over the location at 2093 University Ave. Ralph and family went on to open a few other D'Elia's, but those restaurants are long gone.

John E. Perrone died in 1997, and Ralph died last month. But Gladys, now 88, still shows up at D'Elia's many mornings to greet customers.

The Perrones' twins, Joe and John, took over the business from their parents. And now, at 60, the twins have given more duties to their offspring. Amy, 23; Brian, 25; and Johnny, 38, all help run the show.

Sure, the family members at times get on each other's nerves and squabble. One dubbed the scene a soap opera called "As the Bread Burns."

But all three kids say they went into the family business only after weighing the alternatives. And they all say they love it.

The kids are talking about building a second D'Elia's, perhaps in the Orange Crest or Mission Grove areas, where all the new homes are going up.

So, after nearly 50 years, this old-fashioned sandwich shop is still on a roll. A very tasty roll.