

Keeping it simple, keeping it local:



Harry's Bishop's Corner owners Kevin and Anne Plaut met over pizza.

A Connecticut couple promotes pizzeria through community involvement.

By Andrew Abernathy

A pizzeria brought together husband-and-wife team Kevin and Anne Plaut—the owners of Harry's Bishop's Corner Pizza Napoletana (harrysbc.com) in West Hartford, Connecticut—so it's no surprise that the couple has a passion for the business. In 1992, Kevin and Anne took jobs at Harry's Pizza, the precursor to Harry's BC, at the West Hartford Center. He was assistant manager, and she did everything from waiting tables to making pizza. Seventeen years, two moves and several jobs later, the couple markets its recently acquired business with a philosophy that relies on both good pizza and community-mindedness.

"Harry's vision was to spend very little time on marketing and just let the restaurant speak for itself, and he always had a good following with that," says Kevin, recalling his old boss

Harry Ruffeth, Harry's founder. "I always wanted to do it a little differently, because I thought a pizzeria should be part of the community."

Kevin and Anne bought Harry's BC in 2007 and spend very little money on traditional advertising. Instead, they get the word out by cross-promoting with local businesses and organizations. They hold wine tastings with local wine stores, dole out free pizzas for high school functions, and offer draft beer from local brewers at their store. They even sponsor a Little League baseball team. But fundraising can be a valuable tool, too, Kevin says. On certain occasions, Harry's BC extends its hours and gives up to half of its day's profits to organizations such as the Village for Families and Children, the Susan B. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and Autism Speaks. Last June, Kevin and Anne pulled together a large portion of the staff to walk in the local Autism Speaks' Walk Now for Autism race.

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However, cross-promotion and charity involvement are no replacement for good budgeting practices. When customers' expendable incomes shrink, this concern often tops the list for business owners. However, Harry's BC proves that the pizza industry perseveres. Since Kevin started working for Ruffeth as a general manager in 2006, the company has grown from bringing in \$500,000 gross annual income to more than \$1 million per year. Usually, the budget breaks down to about 25% food costs, 30% labor and about 7% to 10% for keeping the rent paid and the ovens burning. "I would say that business is up almost 100% since I started working here," Kevin says.

Keeping It Local

Fresh ingredients can make for good business, and thin-crust pizzas with seasonally influenced toppings are high priority on the Harry's BC menu. In the summer, the house specialty is a tomato-and-basil white pie with garlic and asiago cheese. For the winter, slices are topped with baby spinach, eggplant, roasted red peppers and artichoke hearts. The owners offer a choice between traditional and whole-wheat crusts, and use granite baking stones to give the pizza a crispy yet chewy texture. But there's a twist here—most of the ingredients used at Harry's BC hail from local farmers. "We try and get as many fresh veggies



as possible,” Kevin says, citing a large base of health-conscious customers. “We’re also pushing for more organics.”

While the Plaunts honor the spirit of the original Harry’s pizza, there is always room for change on the menu. Kevin started his pizza baking career at Harry’s Pizza at the West Hartford Center, but the entrepreneur later honed his kitchen talents at Figs in Wellesley, Massachusetts, a restaurant owned by renowned chef Todd English. He then specialized in Italian food at Café Italiano before returning to Hartford County to work for his family’s printing business—and, yes, his ex-boss Harry again. Today, he tries to consistently innovate for fresh angles on the original pizza.

Indeed, Harry’s BC’s menu is highly acclaimed, offering pizza with more than 20 toppings options, including clams, sun-dried tomatoes, anchovies, chicken and caramelized onion, to name just a few. A few year-round specialty options are available as well, such as the Colors of Italy pie, with roasted red pepper, ricotta cheese and fresh basil on a whole-wheat crust. There are a few salads: baby spinach and romaine with the house Caesar and sun-dried tomato balsamic vinaigrette (available for purchase on location in 12-ounce bottles). Lemon sorbet is also available for purchase on-site. These menu innovations were noticed favorably by the community in the last year, and the restaurant was recently awarded “Best Pizza” by *Hartford Magazine* and the *Hartford Advocate*.

Wallet-Friendly Wine

The real shocker on the menu is the price of the vino. Harry’s BC offers approximately 20 bottles, half of which are \$10 or less. “I really hope it starts to catch on,” Kevin says. “We just don’t want to kill people with our prices. In today’s economy, people really appreciate it.” Kevin says that while some restaurants try to make up to 400% profit on wine sales, Harry’s BC looks to make close to 100%. As a result, 30% to 40% of customers order wine with their meals. He estimates a meal for two with a bottle of wine will usually run anywhere from \$25

to \$40. In the summer, Harry’s BC also offers wines made in Connecticut vineyards, staying true to the vision of staying local when possible.

Keeping the Kitchen Open

During work hours, the pizzeria keeps an open-kitchen policy with its customers: The kitchen is open and can be seen from the dining area; customers can come back and watch their pies get hand-tossed, decorated and baked, if they like.

Generally, three to four cooks man the six large Blodgett ovens in the kitchen. “They certainly do a good job for us,” Kevin says. The ovens can cook about six pizzas each at one time (three large and three small), making for the potential to cook 36 pies at once. On a crowded night, this little shop on Main Street can fit up to 55 people, and a staff of about 25 keeps things going seven days a week.

Looking Forward

A family-owned pizzeria can bring a little flavor to any community, especially when that business takes the time to support a few worthy causes. True to that philosophy, the operators at Harry’s Bishop’s Corner Pizza Napoletana keep their hearts in the kitchen and their fingers on the pulse of the town. If all goes as planned, Kevin and Anne want to open a second location near West Hartford next year, but this time the name will be Harry’s Original Pizza Napoletana. They are also developing a catering business, which is already in the works. And, as for their advice for weathering this economic downturn, Kevin thinks it’s best for proprietors to keep it uncomplicated. “Whenever I expand the menu offerings, I always want to keep things in the realm of something somebody else can do when I’m not around,” Kevin explains. “I’ve seen too many restaurants go under because they try to do too much. Keep it simple. A good business does just that.”

Andrew Abernathy is the associate editor of PMQ Pizza Magazine.

The Stats: Harry’s Bishop’s Corner Pizza Napoletana

Website: harrysbc.com

Location: West Hartford, CT

Owners: Kevin and Anne Plaut

Year started: 2007 (originally owned by Harry Ruffeth)

Seats: 55

Average annual sales: \$1.1 million

POS system: None

Oven: Blodgett

Dine-in, delivery, takeout, catering

Total employees: 25

Best marketing tool: Cross-marketing with local businesses

