

PHILLY ITALIAN MAKING WAVES

Canton restaurant expanding across South

Becky Johnson

LOADED UP — Philly Italian Pasta and Subs is beginning franchising, but its local ties have gotten it to this point. Pictured is the restaurant's signature 3lb. Italian sub.



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ITALIAN CUISINE — Philly Italian Pasta and Subs offers a bit of everything, including pizza.

BY AARIK LONG

along@themountaineer.com

Just four years after opening, one local eatery is branching out with new locations around the southeast.

Philly Italian Pasta and Subs first opened in Canton in 2021. Now, the business is beginning the process of franchising, with plans to expand into Charlotte, Raleigh and Durham before stretching out into South Carolina and Tennessee.

"I'm having fun with this. The fact that I'm franchising is even more exciting," said Howard Knepper, owner of the Canton establishment. "I really think this thing is going to fly."

Philly Italian Pasta and Subs 2021 opening represents Knepper's first whack at the restaurant game. He also owns a small motel in Canton. But one lifelong friend runs what Knepper describes as "an old iconic sub shop in Atlantic City."

"They are without question the No. 1 sub shop anywhere on the planet. All their subs were given to the stars like Frank Sinatra," Knepper said.

That friendship inspired him to give the same thing a shot in Canton.

When he decided to start the shop, restaurants began closing down due to Covid. That made the decision to make the restaurant carry-out-only an easy one. It was also an added advantage when it comes to franchising.

"I always thought takeout was the way to go," Knepper said. "For a franchisee, you want to make it simple. We designed the kitchen simple. We designed it where they can get the stuff out fast, and it's top-quality stuff."

In fact, just about everything that the restaurant does was implemented with the idea of eventually franchising.

"I decided to put something together that would be easy to ... be consistent," Knepper said. "I always had franchising on my mind, but it took four years to build the brand."

That brand was key to Knepper. For the first few years of the business, Knepper tried to personally answer the phone whenever a takeout order was called in — even if he was out of state. He also puts an emphasis on creating relationships with his customers.

Throughout the interview with *The Mountaineer*, numerous customers came by the restaurant. Every time, Knepper made sure to greet them and ask about their day.

"The owner is part of what sells the place," said Canton resident Rachel Davis, who frequents the establishment. "Howard is awesome."

A key part of the Philly Italian brand is the balance between cost, taste and the amount of food you get. Hefty portions are key.

"Nobody wants to get a little bit of something that tastes good," Knepper said. "You have to give a huge sub that's really good at a great price. That combination works."

While Knepper is confident in the business, he's most confident in the product he's putting out. He offers a free replacement if someone doesn't like a meal — and he never has to re-place meals, he said. He also noted that building trust with his customers is a crucial part of how he operates.

"If you're going to franchise, you have to



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NEW MARKETS — Howard Knepper, owner of Philly Italian Pasta and Subs, is thrilled to be moving into the world of franchising restaurants just four years into his tenure as a restaurateur.

have a lot of perseverance and believe in the product. But believing in the product yourself is not enough," Knepper said. "It really has to be there. You have to be realistic because it has to be a product that is really good stuff."

The restaurant has achieved this by chasing the highest quality ingredients. While much of the food is delivered fully cooked and ready to be quickly prepared, it's not the cheap stuff you'd find in the freezer section at Walmart.

Knepper ships his steak in from Philadelphia and his sauce in from Italy, something he is particularly proud of.

"What makes an Italian restaurant is the tomatoes and the spices can not be grown anywhere in the United States because the soil and the climate in southern Italy produces a special marinara," Knepper said.

With the sauce figured out, he was able to think about the rest of the menu.

"We were able to move on to other fantastic items like the meatball sub, which is beef, pork and veal," Knepper said. "That's difficult to get that into a takeout situation."

And it's an extensive menu. With everything from pizza and pasta to subs and cheesecake, Philly Italian has a bit of everything to offer.

Knepper prides himself on his menu's options, but also its flavors and the consistency of those flavors. Now, he's turning his attention towards delivering those flavors elsewhere. While he can still be found at his Can-

ton location chatting with every customer that comes through, he's putting a lot of work into making sure that franchising works out.

"After four years, we were able to finally get the proper federal documents that you need to sell franchises. It's a big deal to do that," Knepper said. "It was very expensive, but we were able to put it together. Because of our reviews and the brand being strong and hard-working employees, we were able to get our first franchise sold and underway."

He's been putting in that hard work for years — not only in building his brand, but in trying things out. Just a few years ago, Knepper licensed out his brand to someone in Atlanta to test things out. That business operates under the name Atlanta Philly Italian Pasta and Subs.

"He's doing very well. He's off the charts," Knepper said.

He's also signed a franchise in Atlanta — giving him two restaurants in the Big Peach soon.

The Canton location is open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 12:30 to 6 p.m. on Sundays. They encourage call-in orders, particularly in the evenings.

Knepper did have one last piece of advice for anyone digging into his subs.

"The best way is to make a mess," Knepper said. "Just bite into it. You'll really enjoy it more that way."



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TAKE-OUT ONLY — While the Philly Italian Pasta and Subs franchises are take out only, Canton's original location has seating available for those who want to sit around and chat while eating their meal.



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THREE MEATS — The Philly Italian Pasta and Subs meatball features beef, pork and veal, creating a powerful flavor combination.