

BUSINESS

New Columbus bakery to bring artisanal bread to restaurants, farmers markets

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Jeff Benkel wants to bring his artisanal bread home to central Ohio.

He owns the Scottsdale-based Arizona Bread Co., which sells to restaurants in the Phoenix metropolitan area, and in a few months he'll open the Buckeye Bread Co. on the Southeast Side to provide the same service in Columbus.

On repeated trips to central Ohio, where Benkel was born, "I discovered that nobody in Columbus was doing what I do in Phoenix," Benkel said.

He plans to work with area restaurants to make custom breads to fit their needs.

"We're excited to be able to work with them and create signature items," he said. "If they can think it up, we can make it."

Buckeye Bread Co. products also will be available at farmer's markets and grocery stores.

Restaurateurs in central Ohio said they can find high-quality locally sourced bread, but it's expensive, and fewer options exist since the Lucky Cat Bakery in Granville closed its doors in December.

Brekkie Shack at Grandview Yard found a bakery in Cincinnati as a stop gap measure when Lucky Cat closed, co-owner Lisa Rusch said.

"We used Lucky Cat for our entire bread line, so it was a shock to us when they said they were going out of business," she said.

With a global pandemic and the economic downturn brought on by it, the closure came "at a hectic time" for Brekkie Shack, Rusch said, leaving them little time to find a replacement.

"I am positive that there are a lot of really nice bakeries around the area, we just don't know them yet," she said.

So Rusch was intrigued when she received a news release about the Buckeye Bread Co.

"The fact that they will deliver fresh bread every day of the week except Sunday was appealing," she said.

But most importantly, the bakery is within a few miles of Brekkie Shack, which means the freshest possible bread for the restaurant.

While Brekkie Shack doesn't have a contract with Buckeye Bread Co. yet, Rusch said she's looking forward to the opportunity to work with the bakery.

"Just as people are focusing on local restaurants, we want to focus on local bakeries," she said.

The Columbus metropolitan area is growing in population and adding restaurants at a rapid clip, Benkel said, providing the environment for a successful company to supply the ever-expanding dining scene with high-quality breads.

Benkel graduated from Ohio State University in 1986 and returns to Columbus annually for an Ohio State football game.

"Every time I would show up, we would go out for really good dinners, and every year there would be a whole new restaurant district," he said, adding that he was impressed by the rapid growth of the region's diverse restaurant industry.

"Look what they did with the Short North, German Village, Merion Village, Dublin, Worthington," Benkel said. "The growth was impossible to ignore."

On a trip to Columbus in October 2018, the Arizona businessman decided to question a handful of central Ohio restaurant managers about their bread needs, and he found there was unquestionably a market for artisan breads in the Columbus area.

So Benkel found a space on Alum Creek Drive for a bakery, which will not be open to the public.

The entrepreneur planned to open roughly a year ago, but the coronavirus pandemic threw a wrench in those plans.

"The inability to travel put a cramp in the ability to get things going," he said.

The pandemic also alters the product mix Buckeye Bread Co. will offer. Restaurant patrons who are still wary of in-person dining have turned to carryout and delivery services, which

means eateries need bread that can survive a 15- to 20-minute car ride without getting stale or soggy.

To solve for that issue, the bakery uses brioche buns that are denser and last longer, Benkel said.

“Brioche buns are not going to be a soggy mess because it took 30 minutes to get to you by delivery,” he said.

Workers started painting the interior of the building at 1501 Alum Creek Drive last week, and Benkel hopes construction will be finished by March 1 in time for an April 1 opening.

The Arizona man signed up Buckeye Bread Co. for several farmers markets and said restaurants already are reaching out to him.

“We’re really excited about the reaction we've gotten so far,” he said. “People are contacting us, and we really don't have a presence yet.”

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