

One in a Vermillion

The Art of Success Series:

Mr. Smith's: worst-kept secret, best-made bread

By Sarah Wetzel
For the Plain Talk

Newcomers to Vermillion, SD might drive past the Ace Hardware at 812 Cottage Avenue and have no idea that a nationally-recognized gourmet bakery and sandwich shop operates inside the former Jones' Food Center.

"[Mr. Smith's] used to be part of our grocery store that was here in this location," said Bob Starr, general manager. "That was our deli at the time."

Little did anyone know, but one man would enter the doors of Jones' Food Center and change the fate of the deli forever.

"Mr. Smith's is actually named after Larry Smith who was a long-time baker of ours for many years who came from the Northeast," Starr said. "He and his wife, Betty, moved here to Vermillion. Betty is with the political science department at USD. Larry came walking in our doors and said 'Hey, I bake bread. Let me show you what I can do.' And he did and we were absolutely blown away."

Not only were locals blown away by the baking

guru, but so apparently was Oprah.

"It got to be so popular that he was featured in Oprah Magazine," Starr said. "Basically it became one of her favorite things. It just kind of took off from there."

Customers can still view the article written for 'Oprah Magazine' in 2002 which is framed and hung in the eating area of Mr. Smith's today.

"The best bread in the world is not in Paris," Amy Bloom of 'Oprah Magazine' wrote. "It's not in San Francisco, and it's not being made in some chic little bakery/art gallery in SoHo either. The best bread in the world is waiting for you right at the front of Jones' Food Center, 812 Cottage Avenue, in downtown Vermillion, South Dakota."

So what is the key to the bread's magic?

"We all have to make dinner, so you might as well make it a nice one," Smith is quoted on the store's website. "But you never - in our culture - have to make bread. So to choose that, it's an act of giving. An act of love, I think. Every loaf."

The love and giving certainly paid off and as the

popularity of Smith's bread grew, so did the menu.

"We did the bread and then we thought hey, these breads that Larry is making, they make fantastic sandwiches," Starr said. "We had a team get together and we created this menu and it's been hugely successful ever since."

This success is part of what carried Mr. Smith's through the remodel of the store as the grocery portion of the store prepared to close in 2012.

According to Starr, Jones' Food Center was open about 15 years before the company decided to expand the Ace Hardware portion of their store.

"Ultimately we decided to close the grocery store and move the hardware store over but we knew with the business that [Mr. Smith's] did, we had to keep that open somehow," Starr said. "So in looking at Target and some of those other places, you know merchandise stores, they operate with food service businesses. We thought we'll give this a try."

Since the expansion of the hardware store, Mr. Smith's has undergone a few changes including a major remodel about a year ago.

But there is one thing that has not changed.

"All of the breads that we use from this location



Tucked in the corner of Ace Hardware lies Mr. Smith's, a nationally-renowned bakery/cafe with an inspirational story.

SARAH WETZEL / FOR THE PLAIN TALK

were basically created by Larry Smith and these are the things that he did that caught the eye of Oprah Magazine," Starr said. "We bake these specialty breads from scratch. The breads take time, energy and passion."

It is more than just Smith's bread that makes him impressive.

"He has Parkinsons disease," Starr said. "He was diagnosed many years ago."

According to Starr, this could not keep Smith down.

"He has never once let this disease get the best of him," Starr said. "He is one of the most upbeat, one of the most inspirational gentlemen you'll ever meet.

The way he treated the disease was by working here and baking breads and kneading the dough. He was the reason we said, 'We're naming this operation after you.'

"You're the one that has been here. This is largely in honor of you and everything you've brought."

According to Starr, Smith still lives in the area but Parkinsons has not allowed him to work for a number of years.

"He has inspired so many people for so many years," Starr said. "He trained his people so well that they were able to carry on what he created."

So what does Mr. Smith's offer?

"It's unique," Starr said. "You can go to any major sandwich shop in town. We do something different."

Customers of Mr. Smith's have many options to choose from as they choose either signature sandwiches and soups or customize their order by making the sandwich hot or adding garnishes, meats, vegetables and sauces.

And, of course, choosing bread.

"You gotta hang your hat on something special and these breads are what basically do it," Starr said. "These are items you're not going to find at your local Subway or Jimmy Johns. These are items that people recognize. There's a big difference in what we offer and that's why they keep coming back."

Customers can also choose to have Mr. Smith's come to them.

According to Starr, the dine-in vs take-out is about half and half.

"People call ahead and place orders, people eat here, people call in and we deliver it to them," Starr said. "It's kind of however you're feeling that day."

Whatever it takes, we'll make it happen."

Once you find a favorite menu item, Starr says, you should switch it up.

"People come in and say my favorite is the Big Smith," he said. "Typically I'll get that on a Focaccia roll but I'll try it on this today. I'm going to try it hot, I'm going to try it cold. We allow people to try anything that they want."

The experience is apparently most of what keeps customers coming in, as there is no indication on the storefront that the building houses anything other than Ace Hardware and Wells Fargo.

"It's something that college kids come in, they experience, they tell others, others come in and they say oh my goodness you're not kidding," Starr said. "And let's be honest, the Oprah deal was something that really carried us. For many, many years we had people coming across the interstate saying 'Hey, here's the place they talked about in Oprah magazine. Let's go see what the fuss is all about,' and they come in and are blown away with what we offer."

According to Starr, quality is number one on Mr. Smith's priority list.

"We don't claim to be the cheapest out there but our quality is unmatched and that is why people keep coming back," he said. "It's one of those things that you get what you pay for. There's a lot of tender loving care that's put into these things. That's why people find us so interesting."

In a culture where everyone is concerned with 'what's next,' Starr said part of coming up with the next best thing is listening to the customers.

"Customers feel like they can give us suggestions and a lot of the time we'll try it and if it works, we'll offer them," he said. "That's something we've always been a fan of since day one."

"A lot of our regulars know us well enough and we know them well enough that they're always talking to us," Starr said. "We know them on first-name basis and they know us and it's a partnership that has worked for a long time."

Christmas Closure

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