Up Front

Keystone Cuisine

By Reid R. Frazier

Oram’s Donuts
Beaver Falls, Pa.

Oram’s Donuts, in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, is a pocket of airy sweetness in a town that could use a little sugar. The past 50 years have not been kind to Beaver Falls. The town’s main street, 7th Avenue, once offered shops that sold bread, paper, typewriters, fabric, and meat. Now many of these storefronts are empty. The rest are a confection of pawn shops, social service outposts, chain pharmacies, and fast-food joints. “You ask anyone, they’ll tell you, Beaver Falls was it,” says Kelly D’Eramo, 44, who grew up working the counter in her family’s stationary store on the street. “We sold a lot of wedding invitations. Back then, people didn’t have computers. We did imprinting for wedding invitations, setting the type by hand. We sold teaching supplies, bibles, party supplies.” That store closed in 1983, around the time the town’s largest employer, Babcock & Wilcox steel, began shutting down. “It just crushed men,” D’Eramo says. “That’s all men did all their lives. It took away their self esteem.”

D’Eramo works at Oram’s now, behind another 7th Avenue counter. She is one of the half-dozen or so ladies who will hand you a box full of wonderfully oversized donuts, coated and glazed and stuffed with diet-killing goodies.

The store celebrates its hometown, where it was started more than 70 years ago by William and Lillian Oram. A bank of framed, autographed 8x10s greets visitors near the entrance, portraying Beaver County celebrities (Joe Namath—of course!—but also Amber Mariano, who won *Survivor* a few years back as Amber Brkich). On top of the display cases, near the tin ceiling, are ancient...
mixers, bowls, and dough hooks the Orams accumulated over the years.

Oram’s is a kind of culinary (if the word can be applied to a donut shop) reminder of what the town used to be like—familiar, warm, and yes, bustling. The counter is busy on Friday or Saturday mornings, but there aren’t many dissatisfied customers to worry about. “We have a lot of people come into the store when they come back home to visit on vacation,” says Vickie George, who, along with her husband, Jon George, bought the shop in 1995. “They have fond memories. They’re in a good mood when they get here.”

“The store has a cult-like following,” says Jon George, who was a member of the Oram’s fan-base before buying the store. Customers have sent the store’s product to family and friends all over the world. One woman froze individual donuts in Ziploc bags and shipped them to her husband stationed in Iraq. “By the time they got there,” D’Eramo says, “they were still soft and fresh—the glaze was a little bit soaked in, but they said that made them taste better.”

The Orams’ shop flourished almost from the time the family arrived in Beaver Falls, bearing with them what the store’s official history calls “a secret donut recipe.” The Orams had a son and a daughter. They later took in a foster-son, Thomas Bradshaw, who began working at the store as a teenager. In 1960, Bradshaw took over the business. He ran the store until 1995, when he had to close because of illness. “It’s no business to be in for a diabetic,” says Bradshaw, who lost one leg and part of a foot to that disease.2

Exit Bradshaw, enter Jon George. He and Vickie were running a successful vending machine business. Jon, who’d grown up in nearby Chippewa, couldn’t resist the call of the donut shop. He approached Bradshaw about selling the store. “It took a couple calls and I sent a letter. After he received the letter he called me back,” Jon says.

Vickie wasn’t so thrilled, at least in the beginning. “I always said, I’m not getting up at 3 a.m.,” she says. “But guess what I’m doing now?” Vickie works the early shift. Jon works at night.

The Georges thought about opening up other locations, but feared the quality would suffer. They installed a few machines, to make life easier for the bakers, but changed little about the way the donuts are made. (Even Bradshaw, who turns 80 in November, guards the bakery’s “secret donut recipe” to this day. “Yeah, we don’t really talk about that,” Jon says.) They still use a World War II-era glazer—essentially a pump and spray hose attached to a tub filled with milky glaze. The store’s speciality—a cinnamon roll the size of an Olympic discus—is the same as when D’Eramo was a 12-year-old girl working at her family’s stationary store.

“I remember coming up to Oram’s when Mr. Bradshaw was working here,” D’Eramo says. “My dad would always say ‘Get the donuts at Oram’s. Hurry up before they sold out.'”

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1 All interviews in this article were conducted by the author between March 31 and May 5, 2008.
2 http://www.orams.com/history.htm and http://www.orams.com/more_history.htm