

AUGUST 27, 2010

Panera Bread debuts in Bedford Hills

By EVE MARX

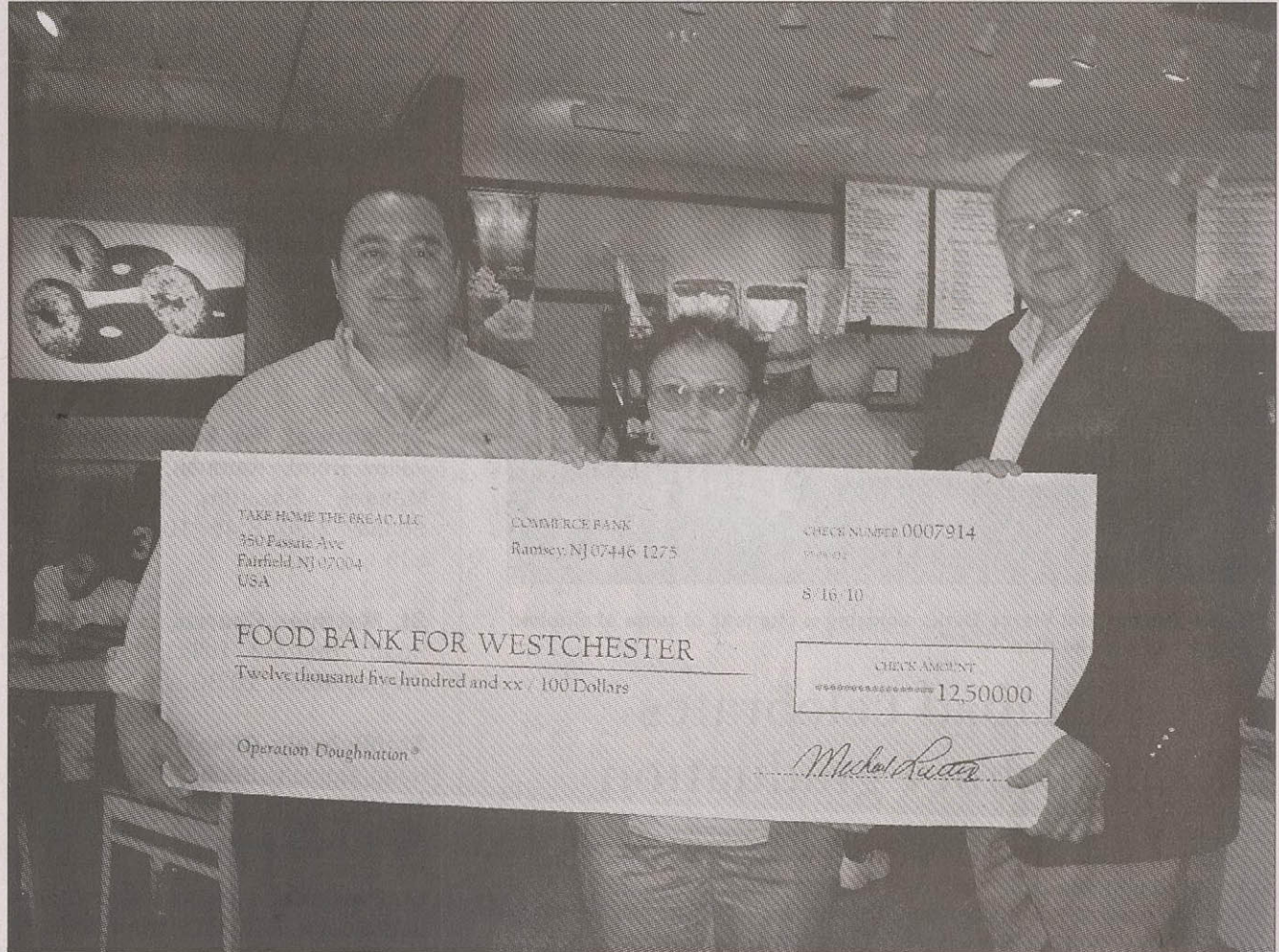
For those old enough to remember the early '80s, that was when a remarkable chain of bakeries opened across the major East Coast cities called Au Bon Pain. Featuring bagels and the newly hatched American obsession for croissants, Au Bon Pain was an instant success, lauded not only for its baked goods but for delicious soups, composed salads, sandwiches and coffee.

In 1993, Au Bon Pain expanded and bought up the St. Louis Bread Company, a chain of 20 bakery-cafes. In 1997 the original company split and divided, and half the company changed its name. Au Bon Pain exists, and is still going strong, but St. Louis Bread became known as Panera Bread, and went on to be recognized as a top performer in the food industry. There are now nearly 1,400 Panera Bread restaurants in the United States and Canada. Each Panera Bread is a franchise, individually owned and operated. Three partners, Don Harty, Tony Diaz and Lowell Farkas are the franchise holders of the store that just opened in Bedford Hills, and by all accounts, it became an instant home run from the first hour it opened.

Bright, clean and family friendly, Panera's menu is simple but good. "We're committed to giving you fresh, great-tasting food you can trust," Mr. Farkas said in an on-site interview. "We only use high-quality ingredients and antibiotic-free chicken, whole grain bread, and select, organic produce and 0 grams artificial trans fat." Additionally, all the coffee is sourced through one plantation in Costa Rica, and many of the offerings are gluten free. The company was one of the first to offer calorie counts on everything on the menu, which makes sticking to a diet a little easier (although try resisting the ciabatta breakfast sandwiches, even if they are 550 calories).

Tom Gumpel is the bakery chef at Panera Bedford Hills. He is a former dean of baking at the Culinary Institute of America. He's the guy responsible for Panera's delectable selection of baked goods, which includes two different kinds of bagels, including sweet onion and poppyseed, jalapeno and cheddar, Asiago cheese, French toast, chocolate chip, blueberry and cinnamon crunch. The bakery also offers scones, sweet rolls, brownies, blondies, muffins, cookies and coffee cake. Panera is famous for its breads, which include three-seed, three-cheese, ciabatta, whole grain, sourdough, French baguette, tomato basil, focaccia, cinnamon raisin and honey wheat.

Don Kish, also a former CIA dean, is responsible for creating the recipes for everything else, including the soups, salads and sandwiches, and



EVE MARX PHOTO

Tony Diaz and Lowell Farkas of Panera present a check to "Operation Doughnation" of the Food Bank for Westchester.

paninis and hot breakfasts. The soup schedule changes daily, but six are on offer including French onion, chicken noodle, New England clam chowder, broccoli cheddar, cream of chicken with wild rice, garden veg with pesto, black bean and chicken tortilla. A cool lunch idea is "You Pick Two," from a cup of soup, a half portion of salad, or half sandwich. I had the broccoli cheddar soup with a lobster salad sandwich, and it was great.

Speaking of sandwiches, check out the Napa Almond Chicken Salad or the Chipotle Chicken or Asiago Roast Beef. Paninis come in five versions: turkey artichoke sounded pretty good to me. At noon on a recent Monday, people were having salads; Asian Sesame Chicken, Chopped Chicken Cobb, BBQ Chopped Chicken, Greek Salad, and Chicken Caesar. Mr. Diaz said his current favorite thing on the menu is the strawberry, poppyseed and chicken salad, which at 280 calories for a full-size portion, is quite slimming, at least until you reward your good behavior with a round of the bakery's killer chocolate chip cookies, so perfectly thin and

buttery and crisp you may be tempted to lie and pretend you baked them yourself.

The season for fruit smoothies and frozen nonalcoholic drinks is coming to an end, but there's still plenty of time to savor a low-fat black cherry smoothie or frozen mango or frozen mocha or frozen caramel or low-fat mango or strawberry. From the espresso bar, sample a latte or a cappuccino or hot chocolate or a latte of Chai tea. "This is our twelfth store," Mr. Farkas said.

Their store in Scarsdale in the Midway Shopping Center has been open for three years. Mr. Farkas and Mr. Diaz have been in the restaurant business a long time. Between them they've opened and owned Arby's, Pizza Huts, Burger Kings, Victoria Station (a steak and seafood chain, not to be confused with Victoria's Secret) and Horn & Hardart. All three partners are heavily involved with the Panera Bread corporation, serving as vice chairmen of food, marketing and other corporate-type things. "Panera Bread was voted best by Health magazine," Mr. Farkas said. "The BBQ

Chicken Salad was voted the best salad in Connecticut by Smart Shopper magazine." The chain also got a best in customer service by J.D.Power, a consumer ranking group. Mr. Farkas said he has no problem racking up awards because "it's more fun riding a racehorse than kicking a mule," he joked.

Panera is child friendly and has a signature kids menu featuring mac and cheese, grilled cheese, PB&J and a kid's deli sandwich with a choice of smoked ham, smoked turkey or roast beef. "We welcome community groups," Mr. Diaz said. "Bring your book group, your mommy and me group, whatever group that needs a place to meet." You may come in for the pleasing service, the good food, and the warm, reminiscent of Tuscany décor, but remember the company mission, which is, "A loaf of bread in every arm." Stone-milled rye would be a good place to start.

Panera Bread is located in the Shop-Rite shopping center at 719 North Bedford Road. Store hours are weekdays from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sundays 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. The phone number is 666-2434; fax 666-2451. Absolutely fax ahead. "We'll have your order waiting for you," Mr. Farkas said.

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