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PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS

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Catering to the needs of kosher travelers

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Yudi Weinbaum knows how hard it is for people who follow Jewish dietary law to get a good meal in Hawaii.

As newlyweds, Weinbaum and his wife, Estee, would travel to Honolulu to visit her family, but they were limited in what they could eat because there were no kosher restaurants and few kosher items available in local supermarkets.

"I used to come here and I always used to be very, very hungry," he said.

Weinbaum's business, Oahu Kosher, caters, literally, to kosher travelers who order prepared meals delivered to their hotels and to all who visit his Yudi's Deli on East Manoa Road.

Because the laws of kosher forbid pork, shellfish and the mixing of meat and dairy, people who keep kosher cannot eat in regular restaurants where preparation of all those foods is done in the same kitchen.

Weinbaum, 26, who trained as a chef with Sharrett Kosher Caterers in his native London, began cooking kosher meals after the couple returned to Hawaii in early summer of last year for the birth of their second child, son Yossi, who is now 14 months.

They decided to stay and make Hawaii home.

After posting an ad on a Web site run by Chabad of Hawaii saying, "Come get wonderful gourmet kosher food," within a few weeks Weinbaum had orders for 100 meals delivered to tourists seeking meals for Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath that begins at sundown on Fridays.

'Is there really a market?'

"People always told me, 'That's wonderful you want to start something in Hawaii, but is there really a market for it?'" he said.

Weinbaum paid \$100 to host his own Web site, where customers can choose fish, chicken, beef or pasta dishes from regular and Shabbat menus.

People on the Mainland began to call Weinbaum after searching the terms "Hawaii" and "kosher" on the Internet, saying, 'You can really get kosher food in Hawaii?! We're on the next flight.'

Weinbaum quickly saw that demand was going to be bigger than he had expected. He continued preparing meals for Jewish visitors throughout the summer, but then "put on the brakes" and began looking for a place where he could cook full time for his growing catering business.

Rabbi Itchel Krasnjansky, executive director of Chabad of Hawaii, encouraged Weinbaum to open a storefront as well, where people could walk in and order food.

Krasnjansky, who provides the rabbinical supervision for Weinbaum's deli and catering business, recalled one other kosher restaurant that was open in Waikiki about 16 years ago, but said there had been none since. A kosher store called Mazal's Kosherland that opened in 2004 near the intersection of King Street and Dillingham Boulevard is closed for renovations.



Tina Yuen, PBN

Yudi's Deli owner Yudi Weinbaum fills an order for customers Dovid Sandomire and his mother, Rus.

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"For those Jewish people who observe the laws of kosher, surely for vacation it's not inviting to go to a place with no restaurants," Krasnjansky said, adding that he does what he can to promote Weinbaum to keep a kosher deli in the Islands. "It's not only important for the tourists who come here, but for the local Jewish community here in Hawaii."

\$50,000 startup costs

Weinbaum financed his \$50,000 startup costs "through some wonderful people in the community." He found a space in the old Shell station on East Manoa Road, and shares storage, refrigeration and outdoor dining space with Boston's North End Pizza Bakery and It's a Beautiful Day Kafe.

He pays \$2,000 per month, utilities included, for his 300-square-foot space, which doubles as a kitchen and store. The food is shipped by a freight-forwarder from Los Angeles, where he buys from Western Kosher. He keeps costs down by doing the bulk of the work himself, hiring part-time workers only as needed.

Eventually he would like to split the two sides of the business -- the deli and catering --and "run the kitchen somewhere where the rent isn't so high" so that he could cater large events.

Another goal is to do more business directly with hotels. Some, including Halekulani, Kahala and Ritz-Carlton Kapalua, already have ordered meals from him for VIP kosher guests, he said.

Local businesses also use Weinbaum's kosher cooking for luncheons, and for visiting VIPs who cannot order off the menu at a restaurant.

The catering business for his original customers -- visitors to Oahu -- is still his bread and butter, although catering meals for local families during holidays such as Passover also is growing. A catered dinner for two runs about \$110, whereas he charges about \$10 each for his overstuffed meat sandwiches at the deli.

Catering also keeps him busy preparing anywhere from 10 to 60 meals during a week, including meals sent to the Neighbor Islands. For those, he cooks in the evening, freezes the meals overnight and then ships them packed in ice. Everything is double-wrapped with foil so that it can be reheated in the hotel ovens, which are not kosher. He also includes disposable utensils and plates, since hotel tableware is not considered kosher.

"I tested the waters on the tourist market and saw that was a good opportunity," he said. "With the tourist market I didn't take that much of a risk."

Physical presence

The local market was different. For that, he needed a physical storefront, and could not rely just on phone orders generated from the Web site. But without advertising -- not even a sign out front -- he did need to rely on word of mouth.

There is a sign ready that says "Yudi's Deli, New York Style Kosher Deli," but Weinbaum must wait for a permit before he can erect it near the street.

On a slow day, he sees about 40 customers, while on a busy day as many as 100 come to his shop.

He estimates that only 30 percent of the local clientele are Jewish. Many are transplanted New Yorkers, Chicagoans and Philadelphians who miss a good pastrami sandwich with a kosher dill pickle. Customers also can order salads, other types of sandwiches, wraps, knishes, hot dogs, hamburgers and french fries from the deli menu.

"It's been really something," Weinbaum said. "People are taking to us in a way that I hadn't anticipated."

Small-business Issue

Tapping into an untapped niche.

Strategies

- Take advantage of organization Web sites to target your customer base.

- Test concepts on the tourist market.
- Hire part-time workers only as needed.

jmagin@bizjournals.com | 955-8041

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