

Texas Boutique Exemplifies Small Town Fellowship

Barker Street Gourmet Dog Bakery and Boutique makes a mark on its community.

By Jennifer Blanchard

Jay Kirsch and his partner, Frank Ciaccio, began selling their gourmet dog bakery treats at a farmer's market in The Woodlands, Texas, just to see if there was a demand for them in the area. Turns out, it was a niche that hadn't been tapped.

"We got really lucky," says Kirsch, a retired high school teacher. "We test-marketed the treats at the farmer's market to gauge if this area would like them and it went great."

When the last day of the market came, customers approached the booth to ask if they would still be able to buy the treats. That's when the guys knew The Woodlands was the perfect place to open their second gourmet dog bakery (the first, which they have since sold, was in Alexandria, Va).

"When we first moved here [to Texas], we had no intention of opening another store," Ciaccio says. "But the treats did so well, we thought, why not?"

Next came the hard part: finding an exact location.

A Bakery is Born

"We wanted to be near a vet and we wanted to be in The Woodlands-area," Kirsch says.

"We also wanted a place that people could drive by, like a strip mall, and a place where there was a commercial kitchen [for making the treats]," says Ciaccio, a retired federal government employee.

Kirsch and Ciaccio found all this and more in a space that used to be a sushi bar. The store opened Dec. 1, 2006.

"The bones for the store design were here," Kirsch says. "We wanted the focus to be the bakery case, which is why it's in the middle of the store with lighting to draw attention."

The main goal Kirsch and Ciaccio had in mind when decorating was making the store look and feel like a customer's home.

"The dark colors and dark wood make the boutique more upscale and high-end," Kirsch says.

Along with the high-end look, they had carpet installed.

"People ask 'why did you put a carpet in here?'" Ciaccio says. "We did it because we wanted it to feel more like a home. The carpet has a non-absorbent backing, and was designed for hospitals and nursing homes. Liquids pool and don't absorb so if a dog pees on it, it's easy to clean up."

To help the store have a boutique feel to it, Kirsch says they only display one of each item, and they have a variety of items from which to choose.

"Most of our fixtures have storage, which helps with not having to display everything at once," he says. "And when we buy things for the store, we won't carry every size in everything. So we might have five T-shirts to choose from with one of the shirts in sizes small, medium and large, and another shirt we'll have in medium, large and extra large."

"And a lot of our vendors deal with small boutiques," Ciaccio says. "So the vendors will work with us, and we won't have to place as large an order."

Buying for Barker Street

One of the most difficult parts of owning a store is choosing what to sell.

"It was a difficult thing [for us]," Ciaccio says. "In our other store, we got a lot of bigger dogs, but what we have found in Texas, especially in The Woodlands, is that people have small dogs."

"So we started with products that we use and things we heard of," Kirsch says. "We wanted the boutique to be upscale with lots of price points. And we listen to what our customers want. They asked for coats and boots, so that's what we brought in."

"We are constantly evaluating what we sell," Ciaccio continues. "A store has to be fresh, so we change products with the seasons, but still maintain the boutique feel."

One aspect of what Barker Street sells really differentiates them from the competition.

“We sell the work of local artisans,” Ciaccio says. “We have a designer who makes iron beds, a local jewelry artist, a painter and an artist who makes dog car hitch covers.”

“It works out for all of us,” Kirsch says. “Since we offer commissions, it’s less money coming out of our pocket, the artists have an opportunity to display their work [in the store] and we’re the only place you can find them.”

Kirsch says boutique shoppers like the independent “mom-and-pop” store. One difference between smaller shops and most big-box stores is that dogs are allowed in the store. But there are many other reasons customers like boutique shops.

“People like that we’re not a chain,” Ciaccio says. “We’re also able to be more creative. We make up our own recipes and get ideas of what to make from our customers.”

Ciaccio and Kirsch come up with all their own recipes for treats. And as a way of testing out new items, they make up samples to give out to their customers.

“I found two recipes for cat treats, made them and gave them out to customers to see if their cats like it,” Kirsch says. “What I found was cats hated it, but dogs really loved the tuna treats. So now we make dog treats with tuna.”

Kirsch loves his job because he says it’s “exciting to have someone buy something I made.”

Making It Look Good

When it comes to displaying all that Barker Street has to offer, Kirsch says he mainly displays based on looking at other places, including stores where he likes to shop, to find what’s appealing to him.

“It had been raining a lot lately, so all the dog mannequins had rain slickers on,” he says. “We were trying to appeal to what our customer’s dogs are dealing with. Displays need to be visually appealing and draw attention to them.”

Ciaccio says if things aren’t selling after a couple weeks, they move the items to another part of the store or reorganize the display.

“We try to be seasonal,” he says. “So we made Fourth of July flag treats and treats in the shape of baseballs for the summer. We also made Easter treats and football helmet treats in Superbowl team colors.”

Give a Little Bit

And what would a pet store be if it didn’t give back to its community?

“When you adopt a dog at the Montgomery County dog shelter, you get a coupon for a free half-pound of dog treats from our store,” Kirsch says.

Barker Street has also sponsored The Woodlands Dog Park Club rescue and will be soon participating in a “Happy Bark Day” party (in conjunction with the WDPC), to have a birthday party for rescue dogs whose owners don’t know the animals’ actual dates of birth.

And for Barker Street, Ciaccio and Kirsch are also looking to host an in-store “Yappy Hour” and are working to set up the event.

“We haven’t really had any in-store events yet,” Kirsch says. “We did delay our grand opening until January [2007] and had a 10-percent-off-everything-in-the-store-sale. We sent out invites to vets, kennels and other dog-themed businesses. It was a great opportunity to bring in sales [after the holidays] and to get our name out there to people with dogs and people who work with dogs.”

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