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Local Flavor:

Schwenksville Mom And Son Partner In Food Court Franchises

By Michelle Karas

LIMERICK- When the Philadelphia Premium Outlets opened in November Schwenksville natives Linda and Erik Dougherty unveiled three franchises. The local mom and son team opened Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen, Green Leaf's "Beyond Great Salads" and Bananas Smoothies & Frozen Yogurt in the food court. "Out of seven stores in the food court, we have three," Linda said.

Erik, 41, a 1984 Perkiomen Valley High School graduate, found three leases available in the newly opened, upscale retail center and decided to go for it. He previously worked as a chef in other local food establishments including the Perkiomen Bridge Hotel and Gypsy Rose in Collegeville. All the while he was gaining experience for when he could have a business of his own, Erik said.

His mom operated Linda Dougherty Beauty Salon in Schwenksville for 35 years and was looking for a new business opportunity. "I was inspired to own a business," he said. "I started out at 15 working in "back of the house" jobs because I wanted to know every aspect of the business. So, basically, I built my career up to ownership and we're not stopping here."

"I knew that when this situation presented itself, we had to do it," said Linda, who works from an office in her Gilbertsville home. Linda and Erik established two corporations in memory of Erik's late father. Joseph R. Dougherty: Dougherty's Original Culinary Service does business as Villa, and Java Joe Doc Enterprises does business as Bananas/Green Leaf's, Erik said.

The partners even considered taking on an additional business in the food court, but thought better of it, according to Linda. "We were asked to do a third spot, but I'm glad now that we didn't do that," Linda said. "That would've been too much."

Additionally, Karin M. (Nagy) Wilkinson, Erik's fiancé, is "a third of our partnership," according to Linda. A Boyertown native and Boyertown Area Senior High School graduate, Wilkinson brought years of experience in human resources to the Dougherty's franchises. Her title with Dougherty's Original Culinary Service is human resources director. Wilkinson's 22-year-old daughter, Ashley, is also part of the staff at Bananas.

Total employees at each business number about 20, including full- and part-timers, Wilkinson said. "It's actually going really, really well," Erik said of staffing at the two businesses. "We pretty much have it down to a system. Everything is flowing fine."

The concept with Green Leafs/Bananas — the salad and smoothies business — is "everything fresh, all the vegetables and fruit," Erik said. "I thought about how everyone is becoming more health conscious when I picked this one." Smoothie options (\$3.59 for a regular size) include Caribbean Berry and Cookies & Cream. Nonfat frozen yogurt is also on the menu for \$ 1.99 a cone.

Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen, which originated in New York City, also features "everything made fresh daily," Erik said. The concept "called to" Erik, who said he liked that the company offers a lot of support to its franchisees.

Erik's decision-making was helped by the fact that he really enjoyed the food and is able to add specials to the menu daily. "The recipes are really wonderful, and for me, being in the business for so many years, I'm usually very critical," he said.

Villa Pizza is New York-style thin crust, which is much different than most pizza styles in this area, according to Erik. He noted that Villa's Neapolitan pizzas are cut into six slices (\$2.89 each) rather than the usual eight. "It's a much bigger slice than people are used to getting," he said.

Paninis are the big sellers at Green Leafs — about 100 a day are sold, Erik said. On weekends, that number doubles. "On opening weekend, Saturday, we sold 283 paninis," he noted with pride. Panini (\$5.39 a piece) includes Erik's favorite — Chicken Margarita—and Pesto Caprese.

The two side-by-side businesses offer the best of both worlds for families out shopping together, Erik said. "We've got pizza for dad, salads and wraps for mom, and ice cream for the kids," he said. "I'm the only concept in here that has the salads, the Paninis and any type of dessert."

Despite the anticipated, immediate success the new outlet center, which features more than 100 upscale stores and has 30 more under construction to open this spring, business was kind of spotty to start, according to the Doughertys.

"I think a lot of the locals were scared of coming to the outlets at first, thinking it was going to be busy all the time. Thank goodness that's changed," said Linda, during on-site interviews on an extremely busy day after Christmas. "It's a big misnomer in the community that it's really overcrowded here at the outlets," Erik said.

Despite an inconsistent lunch and dinner crowd during the week, the Dougherty's two businesses seem to have taken off. Erik's goal is to be able to offer free delivery outside the outlets, within a certain radius, by March. Already the Dougherty's' businesses offer free delivery to other mall stores, he said.

Erik said he would also like to expand the menu at Villa to include veal dishes and chicken Marsala. "It kind of takes people by surprise to get this quality of food in a food court," Erik said.