Just in time for the dog days of summer...

Retail Watch
Scanning the Storefronts
April 27, 2008

I will introduce myself later, but first let's get down to business.

It's official: this column has gone to the dogs.

Well, more like frankfurters.

When Hector Diaz noticed business at his hot dog cart on Hamilton Street in downtown Allentown took a hit from the bus stops on the strip moving a few blocks away to a new bus terminal, he set his eyes on a solution.

About two months ago, his answer was revealed. Diaz added a second hot dog cart to his fleet -- right near the entrance to the bus terminal on Seventh street. The stand mirrors the hot dog cart he started on Hamilton Street in 2006.

"Once LANTA opened down there I pursued a location there and luckily I was given the opportunity to move [a cart] there," he said.

With additional downtown foot traffic and the on-the-go eating lifestyle of today, hot dog carts add a big-city feel to an area and can be a lure, according to experts.

"People need on-the-go foods and that is why people are attracted to this kind of venue," said Diane Holtaway, associate director of Rutgers Food Innovation Center. "There is a bit of nostalgia in it too."
She added that the city folk from places like Philadelphia, New York and urban outskirts are used to hot dog carts.

Additionally, Holtaway said, carts provide a bit more than food.

"There is a whole entertainment experience with food and they are looking for more than just feeding their bellies, people want to have fun," she said.

Whether it's the flipping of the bun or ketchup or mustard oozing onto the hot dog, it's a theatrical event, no extra charge.

The carts have also added a flavor -- more like an aroma -- to the diverse food landscape of downtown Allentown. The strip looks similar to Broad Street in Philadelphia with its Spanish, Italian, Asian and other ethnic eateries.

Word about the the hot dog carts is obviously spreading.

There are four hot dog vendors downtown and two applications awaiting city approvals, according to a city spokesman.

As for Diaz, when he was searching for a business to bring downtown years ago, he honed in on something that would have him outdoors and add something different to the area.

Sure, hot dog carts are nothing different downtown. Gail Harrison, dubbed "Hot Dog Lady," can attest to that. Harrison's hot dog cart has straddled the sidewalk between the PNC Bank building and the courthouse on Hamilton Street for 17 years.

During that time she has seen hot dog vendors come and go.

"I think a lot people think it's not hard work, but it really is," Harrison said. "I think a lot of times people say they are going to buy a cart and it's going to be easy and I'm going to make a fortune. But it's hard work and it takes time, preparation, clean up and being dependable."

As for Diaz, he hopes passers-by from New York City and even Philadelphia will want a bite of nostalgia.

Sandwiched between Lehigh Carbon Community College's Donley Center and Hamilton Jean Fashion in the lively 700 block of Hamilton Street, last week Diaz stood under the yellow and blue umbrella with the famous "Sabrett" signature on his cart. The Sabrett frankfurter is a hot dog as New York City as The Empire State Building. Diaz said he has added some Big Apple flavor to an area historically dubbed Little Apple.

"I looked around and saw a lot businesses and restaurants and this came out in my mind," Diaz said. "This is not for the money, per se, but this is something I would like and enjoy."

Diaz said he can sell more than 200 hot dogs a day between the two stands. His stands are open six days a week, usually from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. He also has New York-style pretzels, sausages, and even knishes.

It's not Nathan's Famous hot dog stand at Coney Island, but Diaz's cart took me back in history for a moment. Fresh from the New York City metro area, I admit Diaz's idea worked. It evoked thoughts of the hot dog vendors that pepper city streets in Manhattan and the outer boroughs. In addition, the Sabrett hot dogs also gives a Big Apple brand to a region that seems, at least to me, lacking the particular variety in area supermarkets.
For now, Diaz said he's going to keep the menu simple. But he hinted about plans to expand his New York-style menu with other sandwiches and items.

While we're on Hamilton and food, let's keep going.

Co-owners Bill Brown and Doug Reed opened Pretzeltown Bakery, in the Gerry's New City Cafe at 645 Hamilton, about two weeks ago. The items are baked fresh on-site.

It's a sublet in Gerry's and operates Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., though the hours may be adjusted as needed.

Brown said the business is seeking to make a name for itself, and I witnessed that first-hand as a group of nearby office workers bee-lined to the counter to tout the menu items to their co-workers. Brown added there are plans to have a service window on Hamilton for more convenience.

Pretzeltown offers original and salted, as well as wheat twists for the health-conscious. For adventure-seekers, it also makes pretzels filled with ingredients such as pizza, jalapeño and apple pie, just to name a few. It also has funnel cake, cookies and churros.

In other news:

 Owners of The Curious Goods at the Bake Oven Inn called in last week to report that they opened their doors for business on April 12. The bakery is at the former Bake Oven Inn at 7705 Bake Oven Road in Germansville.

Co-owner Mark Muszynski said things are going pretty well so far.

"It has been good, it's a little slow right now and we have not advertised yet," he said. "We are still working out the kinks, but it's going well."

OK, now let's talk about me. You may have already noticed the picture and author name of this column changed this week. Stop adjusting your eyes, I am the new columnist.

This column has historically highlighted the openings and closing of businesses. While that's still the plan, I'm also looking to add already established quirky businesses and hidden gems to the list. I welcome all your leads and comments and in return I promise to provide a touch of my dry humor. One more thing about me, and don't hate me for it: I'm from New Jersey.

Retail Watch keeps track of new store, restaurant and bank development in the Lehigh Valley. Have a question about a retail construction project, a store opening or a chain you'd like to see come to the area? Call business reporter Tyrone Richardson at 610-820-6779, or e-mail retailwatch@mcall.com. Retail Watch appears every Sunday.

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