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A NEWS BLOG

Blue wig, big success: Meet Bakesale Betty

By Mike Krumboltz | The Sideshow – Mon, Mar 11, 2013

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Alison Barakat, aka Bakesale Betty (Mike Krumboltz/Yahoo)

It's open only 15 hours a week. There's no sign. The tables are old ironing boards. Its only marketing tool is a blue wig. And the line to get in winds around the block. It's Bakesale Betty's, a hole-in-the-wall sandwich shop and one of Oakland's most popular restaurants.

"I feel like if you looked up 'Mom and Pop Business' in the dictionary, there'd be a picture of us," says Alison Barakat, better known as Bakesale Betty. Along with Michael Camp, husband and father to their three kids, the 30-something Barakat has built Betty's from farmers market weekend hobby to local institution.

She's easily spotted in the kitchen thanks to her bright blue wig. The wig, she says, is what helps transform her into Betty. "It was never intended to be a marketing tool," she says. It was just a way to spice things up when she went to the farmers markets back in the day. "The wig ended up being the best marketing tool I'll ever come up with in my whole life," she says. She estimates she's gone through 30-40 different wigs since she first started in 2004. "Working in the kitchen," she says, "they get beat up. I melted many while opening oven doors."

Though open only five days a week and three hours a day, Betty's is a full-time job (and then some) for Barakat. The Australian's charm and undisputed mastery of the fried chicken sandwich (the restaurant's star attraction) keep customers coming back. "We make about 600 sandwiches a day," she says. "More on Fridays and Saturdays."

There were nearly 100 customers lined up on a recent Saturday afternoon, patiently waiting to fork over their \$9.60 for a hefty sandwich, topped with slaw. Yahoo News spoke to three men who were eating at Betty's for the first time. Though the wait had them a tad testy, they weren't disappointed. "Definitely worth the wait. I bought two (sandwiches)," said Stephen Wu, in between bites. His friends echoed the sentiment.

To an expansion-minded business person, Betty's may look like a successful enterprise that could be much more. Just look at the line. Look at the hundreds of five-star reviews on Yelp. Everybody loves these sandwiches. Why not expand and let other people run the day-to-day operations, sit back and enjoy the good life?

To Barakat, this is the good life. "We (she and Camp) thought about delegating. ... But our business is our baby. You can turn it over to other people to do things. But there are certain things..." Barakat recalls an instance where a longtime customer felt she was shortchanged because one of the sandwiches she ordered was smaller than normal. "Even though I was in Australia, I called the woman and she gave us the opportunity to make it right. Which is great. People feel like we care, because Betty called."

It would seem to be in Barakat's best interest to guard that recipe with her life. Instead, she's surprisingly open with her secrets. The recipe has been published online ([here's a link](#)), mentioned in blogs and demonstrated on TV shows. "There's no secret to it," Barakat says. "The secret is you gotta buy good chicken. You gotta mess up your kitchen with frying. People said, 'You're crazy to give your recipe away.' But I love that people make it at home. One firefighter came in and said, 'Thanks for publishing the recipe. We make it all the time at the firehouse.'"



The line can stretch down the block (Mike Krumboltz/Yahoo!)

Clearly, she's dedicated. And she acknowledges that some may consider her a bit of a control freak. During her seventh month of pregnancy, after her doctor noticed she'd lost weight, Barakat had to agree to "cut down" to working 12-hour days. And while delivering her first child, she couldn't help but take a few business calls. Yes, *while delivering*.

Betty's success is, of course, due in large part to the cooking. But Barakat also got some help from the Women's Initiative, a program that helps low-income women start businesses in the Bay Area. The program taught her the basics of running a business, coming up with a plan, and following through. The program's tuition "is done on a sliding scale," she explains. Barakat says the program is particularly valuable to women in abusive relationships. "Women learn to start their own business and get out of those situations. They learn the tools to support themselves and their kids."

In turn, Barakat has helped pass along her own knowledge of business. After learning from Barakat, a former employee started her own bagel shop down the street. It's probably not a coincidence that Beauty's Bagel Shop has the same philosophy as Betty's—simple menu and great ingredients.

But don't think it's as simple as all that. Barakat went to culinary school. She's honed her craft for years and worked at Chez Panisse, one of the Bay Area's swankiest dinner spots. She does miss the variety that comes with cooking different things, "but every day, when people line up for that sandwich, it's just exciting. It's nice to see people happy and enjoying your food. And in that sense, I'm not sick of it. And besides, what else are we gonna do if we're not working the shop?" she asks with a laugh.

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