

The tale of a chef from West Point, MS and a librarian from Birmingham, MI:

How City Bagel Café became City Bagel Café

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Joe Tkach, the chef, from West Point, MS and Mary Drazek, the librarian, from Birmingham, MI – how would they ever meet?

With a vision to open a fine dining restaurant in Columbus, MS, Joe began a daily 3 month search for the perfect location. Unfortunately for Columbus and fortunately for Starkville, he never found that perfect spot. In 1995, he set his eyes on a vacant lot which is now 511 University Dr, and the rest as we shall say is history.

However, this tale began much earlier than that. Joseph Tkach was born in West Point, MS. His father in the industry business; his mother a teacher. Joe has 1 brother and 2 sisters. He is a graduate of Mississippi State University and his first job was as a bartender. He landed his first “real job” out of college when he moved to Jackson, MS where he went from waiter to bar manager in just one year at Bennigan’s. And you might find Joe’s culinary drive an interesting one – he went to culinary school because of frustration in the kitchen. When a cook was out sick Joe felt totally lost. He didn’t know what to do and that’s why he ended up at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, CA. Good thing - - because little did he know that his best bud in cooking school would turn out to be his future brother in law.

Mary is from Birmingham, MI. Her mother was a nurse and her dad an orthopedic surgeon. She has four brothers and two sisters and Joe sat next to her brother, Mark in cooking school. We can thank him for introducing the couple on Halloween 22 years ago.

So now that that is out of the way, back to how City Bagel Café became City Bagel Café.

Initially lacking confidence that Starkville would support a fine dining restaurant, the couple began to brainstorm about what else they could do. They thought of bagels because nobody was doing that here and at that time bagels were “booming” everywhere else in the country. The couple was also unsure of whether or not Starkville would support a bagel shop, but they were confident that MS State would.

On August 22, 1996 City Bagel Café opened its doors. At that time the hours were Monday - Saturday 6:30am - 8 pm and the shop was closed on Sunday. Joe made a pizza in the kitchen one night for Nathan Munton out of bagel dough and Nathan declared right then that he would work a pizza night and those pizzas would be a huge hit. (Quite the understatement, right?!) Originally pizza night was only on Friday, but soon Mary and Joe extended it to Wednesday-Friday to accommodate a faithful team of community runners. However, during that time, the couple made a trip back to California and saw a bagel shop that closed at 2 pm everyday and they thought what a brilliant idea. And so there you have it, the current hours of operation for City Bagel Café are Saturday-Tuesday/6:30 am-2 pm, Wednesday-Thursday/6:30 am-8 pm and 6:30 am-9 pm on Friday.

While the everyday running of the business might seem effortless, this adventure was no small feat. At the time the couple thought of this idea they had 2 small children,

Julia 4 years old and Emma 6 months and they didn't really want a restaurant that would keep them busy all hours of the night. Mary initially worked at the Public Library, but they soon realized that the success of this business required dedication from both of them. The restaurant was a big undertaking that they needed to do together.

That dedication and team work has not gone unnoticed as City Bagel Café has been featured in many newspapers including the Commercial Dispatch, the Starkville Daily News, MS State's Reflector and most notably the November 1st issue of Southern Living magazine in 1999.

Many restaurants have come and gone since August 22, 1996, but yet City Bagel Café has survived. Mary and Joe attribute that to not only being a different restaurant but a different restaurant that serves breakfast because at that time only Starkville Café did the same. They also stress that they like to be there and are determined to keep the food consistent.

A true testament of that philosophy is told through the eyes of 4 of City Bagel's most loyal customers . . .

Personal interview

Dr. Walter J. Diehl
Interim Associate Dean for Research

Department of Biological Sciences
Mississippi State University

When and how did you first hear about a bagel shop opening in Starkville?

First, I don't know why, but most people I know simply refer to it as the Bagel Shop rather than City Bagel or City Bagel Café. I heard that a bagel shop was going in shortly after construction on the building began. I don't remember where or from whom I heard about it. I do know that I stopped by on the first day when they were giving bagels away and we been coming back ever since.

What were your initial thoughts about the potential for a bagel shop in Starkville?

Susie and I obviously were very pleased to have a bagel shop. We had moved here from Long Island where we had gotten used to very good fresh bagels, and we periodically would have cases of New York City bagels shipped to us in MS. We also stocked up at local bagel shops whenever we visited relatives in Clearwater, FL, or Nashville, TN, or whenever we went to Jackson, MS. By the time Joe & Mary opened their place we had been in the habit of going to the coffee shop on campus and having what were passed off as bagels there.

What is your favorite item on the menu?

My favorite items on the menu are the chicken salad and the coffee (best in town). The sesame bagels are certainly my favorite as well, but I have had to cut down on them to lower my carbohydrate intake. I only eat them twice a week now rather than every day.

Why do you think City Bagel Café has been so successful?

The bagel shop has been a success because it provides high quality food at a very reasonable price, and it has attracted a consistent base of very interesting patrons. We have met several of our very good friends simply because we were all eating at the Bagel Shop at the same time and sooner or later we introduced ourselves to each other. The Bagel Shop is one of the few places in town that can accommodate groups of people of various sizes. It has a very informal, unstructured and relaxed atmosphere. Mary and Joe are excellent people persons and even though we did not know them before the Bagel Shop opened they have become very good friends as well.

Personal interview

Dr. Ronald Altig
Professor Emeritus

Department of Biological Sciences
Mississippi State University

When and how did you first hear about a bagel shop opening in Starkville?

You know, I was just thinking about that and I don't really know the answer. I guess you could say happenstance. I eat every meal out and this new restaurant had just opened. I went in and found it a good place to go back to, so now I go every day.

What is your favorite item on the menu?

Of course, you know I love the brownie, but the alfredo pasta with sweet peas and shrimp are my night time staples. And I actually eat the pizza quite a bit as well.

Why do you think City Bagel Café has been so successful?

You will find very unique items on the menu and very accommodating hours. Mary and Joe have a unique ability to interact with their customers. Quite often they will be sitting at the table with me and will greet customers by name. They have either seen them enough or befriended them and not only know their name but what their order will be.

If you had to describe Mary and Joe in one word or sentence, what would it be?

Laughable, open and friendly

Personal interview

Mrs. Debbie Keenan

Family Friend

Starkville, MS

When and how did you first hear about a bagel shop opening in Starkville?

I moved here from Wyoming and all I found was Southern fat, fried, greasy food. And I thought the South was gross. I heard about this so called bagel shop from Sally Tipton.

What were your initial thoughts about the success of a bagel shop in Starkville?

When I first heard about it, I said, "Bagels in MS? I don't think so. It will never make it." I thought to myself I'm probably going to walk in to this place and they'll be serving freaking fried, catfish flavored bagels with a side of hush puppies. But to my surprise I walked in and thought holy crap, this place belongs in CO, not MS.

What is your favorite item on the menu?

The chicken Caesar wrap is in a close tie with the energy bars AND the asiago cheese bagel with egg, mushroom and American cheese AND the tuna melt AND the chicken melt AND the fettucini alfredo with chicken and sweet peas with NO NUTMEG (only get it if Joe is cooking ☺) AND Italian rolls AND peas on everything!

Why do you think City Bagel Café has been so successful?

I immediately felt at home here. I thought well this place doesn't fit in here and I certainly don't fit in, so I thought I should eat here and tell everyone else to eat here too. This restaurant is unique to this area and people bond in this restaurant. I love Mary and Joe and I think the rest of their patrons do too. You can come here and feel like you're coming home. You meet people in this restaurant that you would have never met otherwise and now they are some of your closest friends - like Ron Altig, the frog man.

If you had to describe Mary and Joe in one word or sentence, what would it be?

Joe - intense (even though people don't think that)

Mary - best friend (but I must admit that I didn't like her at first ☺)

Personal interview

Mrs. Sally Tipton

Family Friend

Starkville, MS

When and how did you first hear about a bagel shop opening in Starkville?

I heard about it through church because you know more Episcopalians attend City Bagel on Friday night than church on Sunday.

What were you initial thoughts about the success of a bagel shop in Starkville?

I was very surprised and thought it will never make it, but because of the university it will survive. Why you ask? Because the people aren't from here.

What is your favorite item on the menu?

Hands down the shrimp spaghatteni is my absolute, but the tuna melt is a close second.

Why do you think City Bagel Café has been so successful?

The atmosphere and the clientele are outstanding. It's very homey. You know, kinda like CHEERS - - everybody knows your name.

If you had to describe Mary and Joe in one word or sentence, what would it be?

Mary - cool!

Joe - turtles (he loves animals)

City Bagel Café - relaxed

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