



July 5, 2007 | This Week News | Circulation: 316,661

Breaking bread

Panera celebrates 10 years in the local market

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It's 10 years later and there's still no loafing around for Jeff Rains.

Rains, of Clintonville, is president of Breads of the World, the local franchisee of Panera Bread, the quick-casual restaurant that is celebrating a decade in the local market.

There are 20 stores in central Ohio, and Breads of the World must build 10 more by 2010.

If that sounds ambitious, it is — and it isn't, Rains said.

"If you think about where we're not, there's still a lot to do," he said. Panera has no presence in outlying areas such as Marysville, Newark, Delaware or Lancaster, nor is there one located in downtown Columbus, the Arena District or German Village.

"There's more to do than you would think," he said.

On Friday, the company celebrated its decade-long presence in Columbus by handing out free baguettes at three of its original stores — the first, at 875 Bethel Road in the Orientangy Plaza, and at the Martin Road and Mall at Tuttle Crossing locations, both in the Dublin area.

"It's not this trendy thing that goes out of style," the West Side native said of his restaurants. "Panera, since I've been involved with it, has been built around quality and it's built around trust. So when we bring out something new, I think people trust us to have the right quality."

Breads of the World has fran-

Quick facts

- Opened first store in June 1997 on Bethel Road.
- Operates 69 stores in Ohio, Kentucky and Colorado.
- Has 20 stores in Columbus, 10 more planned in central Ohio.
- Employs about 833 central Ohio residents.

chising rights in Ohio, Kentucky and Colorado. It had 69 stores total and also will expand in those other markets, Rains said.

Chris Boring, president of Boulevard Strategies, a Columbus-based retail consulting firm, said the local franchisees have done a good job with site selection and execution of the product.

"I think that Panera bread was a pioneer in the fast-casual concept," he said. "And they came out at the right time when the market was ready for something between a fast-food and full-service sit-down restaurant."

Another plus for the chain has been its menu: There's something for everybody, from breakfast to dinner, Boring said.

"It just makes the operation more efficient," he said.

The company was founded in 1987 in St. Louis by Ken Rosenthal. It started out as the St. Louis Bread Co., which still exists in its native city and surrounding area. The names of the other stores were changed in 1999. There are now more than 1,000 locations across

the country.

Rains was working for Rosenthal in the operations side of the business before starting the Breads of the World franchise. Rosenthal later sold St. Louis Bread Co. and became Rains' partner, along with four others. Rains, 52, is the only one who lives in Columbus.

Rosenthal, current chairman of Breads of the World, said consistency has been a benchmark of Panera.

"The concept today is very similar to what we did when we started," he said. "There were very few changes in what we were doing. It's slightly different but the basics of the business are exactly the same."

While Rains would not divulge the annual sales of the entire franchise, he said each store grosses in the \$2-million range annually. Store sizes vary, but the prototype is 4,200 square feet, with lots of wood, bright lighting, and seating for 115.

The place has always known which side of its bread is buttered. Rains said he'll stack his product against anyone.

"It's the best bread in America, some of the best in the world," he said, noting that none of the dough is ever frozen. "I think people who haven't been to Panera underestimate us."

Part of Panera's charm, he said, is that it's comfy, casual and has a modest price point. Average checks are \$7.44. It's also constantly evolving to meet the dining needs of the public.

It offers free Wi-Fi and is the largest provider of wireless inter-



Breads of the World owner Jeff Rains shows some pastries in the first Columbus area Panera Bread on Bethel Road. The Panera Bread Franchisee Breads of the World LLC is celebrating their 10th anniversary.

net in the world, according to Rains. The basic layout is the same — bread, pastries, salads and sandwiches — but more of each has been added over the years. Soups have been a successful addition to the roster, Rains said. Six different soups are offered daily and flatbread pizzas have been added to the menu. Beverages have changed, too. Items such as iced

coffee, a strawberry smoothie and iced lemonade have been added.

"I think some of that was leading edge and some of that was letting someone else take the lead," he said.

Even though there are plenty of casual, quick-serve restaurants, both Rosenthal and Rains feel Panera is unique.

"Frankly, nobody else is doing

what we're doing because it's difficult because of the fresh bakery," Rosenthal said.

"I don't think we have a direct competitor," Rains said. "But I think anybody out there who is serving high-quality food quickly is competition. I don't think it's the fast food guys. I don't think it's the traditional casual dining restaurant."

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