

BUSINESS

The Original 'Tops' Itself with 60-Year Anniversary Special

By Christina Hamlett
The Outlook

The year was 1952. Princess Elizabeth of York became Queen Elizabeth II. American households with televisions were falling in love with a ditzzy red-head named Lucy. Kellogg's debuted a new cereal called Frosted Flakes. Gene Kelly was singin' in the rain.

For an enterprising young immigrant from a village in Greece, however, these headlining events likely dimmed in comparison to his quest to become a successful businessman, a story that his sons Chris and John Bicos never get tired of telling.

"Our father, Steve Bicos, came to America when he was 15 years old," Chris begins. "He had an uncle who lived in Peoria, Ill., and he worked in a restaurant his

uncle owned. A few years later, they decided to move west and, in 1952, they opened a coffee shop in Pasadena called Tops." The original venue, he points out, bounced around the San Gabriel Valley for the next couple of decades until laying down its permanent roots at 3838 East Colorado.

"He did all of the cooking himself, using recipes he had learned growing up as a kid. By the time he was 19, he bought his uncle out and was working day and night to run the business 24 hours. From the original concept, it morphed into a walk-up window in the 1960s in Alhambra - 'Tops Junior' - and in 1978 he opened up this location, added a drive-thru, and expanded the menu beyond the basics of burgers, pastrami and hot dogs."

Six decades, of course, is an envious lifespan for any business, but especially a restaurant. "Quality, honesty, consistency and good value at a fair price have been the trademarks of Tops from the very beginning," Chris explains. "Our father always believed in making as many menu items as possible from scratch. That's why we still make our own chili, cut our own French fries, bread our own onions and zucchini, make our own dressings. Anything we can do in-house, that's what we do. For our pastrami, for example, we actually roast the bones overnight to develop a flavorful stock. Most fast-food places just aren't going to take the time for that."

"He also made a point of always listening to his customers," adds John. "That really goes for how tastes and awareness of healthy eating habits have changed over the years and we've been able to adapt to that. As new trends come up - coupled



Photo by Christina Hamlett / OUTLOOK
John Bicos and Chris Bicos are selling the "Tops Special" — a cheeseburger with Tops' famous pastrami — for 60 cents this weekend to celebrate Tops' 60th anniversary.

with changes in manufacturing methods — we like to feel we're always on top of it."

Chris laughs in reminiscence that. "When I first came into the business, everyone used to cook with lard. We also used to heavily salt our fries. As we turned the corner into the '80s and '90s, people became more concerned about these issues and so we switched to canola oil and then to non-transfat."

"And don't forget salads," John quips. "Back when it all started, there was probably only one - or none! - on the menu but we have

eight now and they're among the most popular items people order."

Tops' breakfast burritos have, likewise, found a following with morning customers on their way to work. "We even have companies doing take-out orders of 50-100 for their employees."

So what's in the works for the 60th anniversary? "A big celebration!" John replies. "On Oct. 19 and 20, we're selling the Tops Special — a cheeseburger with our famous pastrami — for 60 cents. It's regularly \$6.29. We're also urging people to visit our Facebook page and share their favorite Tops memory with us. The top five will receive a \$60 gift card."

"There'll be some celebrations in-house, too," Chris interjects. "Anyone who comes in on those days will see some fun stuff."

He and his brother are unabashed in their appreciation of the support the community has given Tops over the years. "They've made our family part of their families, and I think it's nice for them to come in and see the familiar faces and feel the warmth of employees that have been with us for a long time. We really want to thank Pasadena for all its support."

Nor is it lost on the Bicos siblings that many of the customers who used to come in as kids and buy a shoebox full of fries for 10 cents are now returning with their grandchildren. "And making a whole new set of memories!" John predicts.

Tops opens at 6:30 a.m. every day and stays open until 11 p.m. during the week and until midnight on Fridays and Saturdays.

Visit www.theoriginaltops.com for more information.



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