

Ernie's secret ingredient – 30 years of good employees

By Kathryn Reed

Plates of food barely leave the cook's hands before a waitress picks them up. Steam rises from the late morning breakfast order. Hot coffee is being poured to a crowd that doesn't care it's almost noon. Money is exchanged.

The waitress – Betsy Sommerfeldt; the coffee pourer – Judy Brusco; and the cashier – Paul Brusco are a formidable trio. Sommerfeldt has worked for Paul Brusco almost since the day he bought Ernie's Coffee Shop 30 years ago. The Bruscos have been married for the last 20 years.



Betsy
Sommerfeldt
has been
taking order
at Ernie's for
nearly 30
years.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

Longevity in the restaurant business is a rarity. Longevity in Tahoe seems even more rare. A packed house in a recession is impressive.

Drive by the South Lake Tahoe eatery that serves breakfast and lunch seven days a week from 6am-2pm and the parking lot off Emerald Bay Road is nearly always full.

Bruso credits his staff of 20 full-time workers for the success of Ernie's. (Students fill in on a part-time basis during the busy summer season.)

"Good employees create good service, create good food, create a good environment," Bruso said. "If you have a great staff, you are going to be OK. We treat people right and they treat us right."

Sommerfeldt has had job offers through the years, but has never seriously considered turning in her apron for another line of work.

She, like the other waitresses, has locals and tourists who come in specifically requesting to be seated in her section.

"It's kind of like a Cheers atmosphere where everyone knows your name," Sommerfeldt said.

Being a people person makes this line of work ideal for the 51-year-old. She says the interaction with customers is the best part of the job.

Sommerfeldt also has complimentary things to say about the Brusos. She likes that they are hands-on owners. She says their personalities balance each other out – with Paul being a type-A personality and Judy bringing a more calming influence.

The pay is good; hours are flexible – making for employees to be able to enjoy the Tahoe lifestyle. Tips are pooled, so co-workers make sure everyone is pulling their weight. Paid vacation and profit sharing are part of the deal.

Even though the Brusos seem to live at Ernie's, they have plenty of faith in the staff to be able to get away on a regular basis – which could be spending four weeks walking 500

miles across Spain or a month's vacation on the East Coast.

Ingredients of success

Besides the staff, Brusos credit being involved in the community as part of his success story.

"You need to be involved and concerned about what goes on in the community," Brusos said. "We believe in supporting locals, the kids, the schools. That's what makes a community."

Burger nights are one of the most popular fundraisers. Of the approximately 120 Ernie's has hosted for various groups, more than \$300,000 has been raised.

When it comes to the food, changes are continually made.

"We rarely take anything off. We add things based on customer requests or ideas from employees," Brusos explained.

Cassie Chandler, a trainer at Push Fitness, suggested meals infused with more protein. Some of her recipes have been incorporated into the daily mix. (See recipe below.)

"We don't like to tell people what to eat, but we like to have things available no matter what they want to eat," Brusos explained.

The Brusos have been eating a vegan diet for about nine months. But that doesn't mean meat, eggs and cheese are about to disappear. It just means more vegan options for diners.

Eve Hall doesn't change her order – it's always eggs over easy, hash browns and sausage.

"It's always consistently good," the longtime South Tahoe resident said of the food at Ernie's.

For Dave Anderson, he used to get the Mountain Man breakfast (6 link sausages or 6 slices of bacon or 4 country sausage patties or a slab o'ham, with 3 eggs, hash browns or home

fries, side of biscuit and country gravy). Now he's on a gluten free diet. But Ernie's can accommodate him so he's still a regular.

Times change

One of the biggest changes occurred seven years ago when the Brusos went from renting the building across the street to having a larger building constructed for Ernie's that they (and the bank) own.

Sommerfeldt said it was an adjustment to get used to the bigger layout and it being noisier, but says overall it is much better.

She said one of the other things to get used to was going to computers.

"I can't believe we added checks by hand all those years," Sommerfeldt said.

The Brusos don't intend to go anywhere anytime soon. Paul Bruso said they might be around for the 40th- and 50th-year celebrations as well.

Ernie's first opened in 1968. It had a few owners until the 30-year-old Bruso bought it in 1980.

"I like the name Ernie's better than calling Paul's," he said.

To celebrate their 30th anniversary, the entire menu will be half price Nov. 8-12. It's their way of saying thank you to the locals who keep them afloat in the off-season.

Ernie's Cassie Chandler-inspired Protein Pancakes

3 egg whites

1 T yogurt

1 T crushed pineapple

1 scoop vanilla protein powder

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cinnamon

$\frac{1}{2}$ C oatmeal

1 tsp coconut extract

1 T applesauce

Mix ingredients in blender until smooth.

Cook in pan with unrefined coconut oil.

Topping choices – agave, peanut butter, applesauce.

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