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Ritter's Frozen Custard may add more Volusia-Flagler locations

Ritter's dessert chain aims to add 10 Central Florida locations



By: Clayton Park
Monday, October 26, 2015

PORT ORANGE — A local couple who opened the first Ritter's Frozen Custard shop in Florida here 16 years ago have been tapped by the New York-based chain to recruit others to open up to 10 more locations in East/Central Florida over the next five to six years.

John Dame, who owns the Ritter's at 4629 S. Clyde Morris Blvd. in Port Orange with his wife, Renee, said they are in talks with a potential franchisee who is considering opening a frozen custard shop that will also serve hamburgers, hot dogs and other food items, in either Ormond Beach or Palm Coast.

"My wife and I have made a good living," Dame said of being a Ritter's franchisee as now also an area manager for the chain.

Dame worked in management for 25 years for a local McDonald's franchise operator before becoming a franchisee of Ritter's.

"I wanted to open my own business," he said, adding that he discovered Ritter's in the late 1990s while on a vacation trip to Indianapolis to visit his parents and a friend from the Air Force.

"My friend told me there's a new ice cream place in Greenwood (Indiana). We went at 9:30 on a Saturday when it was 30 degrees out and there were 10 people in each line," Dame said of the Ritter's

shop they visited. "I was impressed. What convinced me (to become a Ritter's franchisee) was the quality of the product."

Dame said he ordered a "turtle sundae made with chocolate" and found it creamier and smoother than regular ice cream.

Dame and his wife, who previously worked for the Social Security Administration, opened the first Ritter's in Florida on Aug. 20, 1999, 10 years after the chain began in Franklin, Indiana. Ritter's today has three locations in the Sunshine State. The others are in Clermont and Palm Harbor.

Ritter's is a subsidiary of New York-based Trufoods LLC, which also owns other chains including Wall Street Deli and Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips.

When Dame and his wife opened their shop, locals were unfamiliar with frozen custard. "People thought it was pudding," he recalled.

Today the Port Orange Ritter's, which employs 15, draws customers from as far south as Melbourne and as far north as Palm Coast, including many who are regulars, Dame said.

Jennifer Dunnett, a Port Orange resident who manages Beville Salon in Daytona Beach, is a regular customer who visits the Port Orange Ritter's at least once a week, sometimes when walking her dogs.

"I like the Glacier Vanilla (frozen custard) with Oreo cookies," Dunnett said, while ordering two Glaciers shortly before noon Monday — one for herself and one for a friend recovering from hip replacement surgery. "She requested a Glacier. That's why I'm here," she said.

Dunnett said she prefers frozen custard because "it doesn't bother my stomach like regular ice cream."

Dame said the Port Orange Ritter's benefits from being close to two high schools, two elementary schools and a city park.

The recent opening nearby of the area's first Culver's restaurant has helped increase public awareness of frozen custard desserts, which the Wisconsin-based chain also offers, Dame said, adding that he believes that ultimately benefits his business as well.

"They have the same (frozen custard) machines that we do. It's just the recipe that's different," he said, acknowledging he has sampled the competition.

"There's a taste difference," he said.