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THE VANCOUVER SUN

A TOUCH OF JAPAN IN RICHMOND



Ayumi Nakao holds the popular vanilla cream puffs from cream-puff chain Beard Papa.

GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Record-breaking start for cream-puff vendor

TRENDS | It was love at first bite for some Beard Papa customers at new Richmond shop

BY JOANNE LEE-YOUNG
VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouver resident Maria Yong got her first taste of a Beard Papa cream puff last year when she was on vacation in Shanghai. She was instantly hooked after stumbling across the chain along the city's neon-lit and people-packed Nanjing Road.

Forget steamed dumplings and stir-

fried noodles. For the rest of her trip, it was fist-sized choux pastry shells filled with custard.

"One in the morning and one at night," every day, for the week's stay, she said, describing in detail how she popped out of her Le Meridien hotel room for the twice-daily run.

On a following trip to New York, she cursed herself for forgetting to track down Beard Papa there. "How could I forget to Google it?" Later, however, she



online

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made up for the miss while in London by dragging her cousin to the store for a fix. Now, Yong can get a Beard Papa without getting on a plane. "Where there is a Beard Papa, I go there. I drove from West Van," she said on Tuesday afternoon at Aberdeen Centre in Richmond.

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C4 THE VANCOUVER SUN, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2007

BUSINESS

Asian mall welcomed Beard Papa franchise a month ago

From C1

The Asian mall welcomed the Beard Papa chain about a month ago, and even though the company's head executives in Japan originally thought the Vancouver market was too small to support a store, Richmond has broken all its North American records for first-month sales, including those for New York and Los Angeles.

So far, the Richmond Beard Papa has consistently cracked about \$6,000 a day in sales since it opened in mid-October, according to Thomas Fung, the Vancouver businessman who heads the Chinese-language media group Fairchild and developed Aberdeen Centre.

Fung is responsible for bringing Beard Papa to Richmond under a franchise agreement with the company's office in New York. First, however, he had to get a green light from its very top dealmakers in Japan, where there are some 200 Beard Papa locations.

"They are expanding so quickly in Asia, with many locations in China, and also across the U.S.," said Fung. "Relatively speaking, they thought Canada and Vancouver were too small. At first, they said no."

Fung travelled to Australia and Hong Kong to taste his first Beard Papa puffs after hearing his son in New York rave about the store there. When Japan said no, he persevered, translating his pitch into Japanese and inviting executives from there to spend half a day with him in Richmond.

He told them that "even though the population in Vancouver is small among



MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

Tiger Peng, 4, eagerly takes a box of Beard Papa cream puffs from Ayumi Nakao at the bakery's new Aberdeen Centre shop in Richmond on Wednesday.

major cities, your product is well-recognized among Asian [consumers]. We have Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese. They are all here."

"Quite frankly, we have been very surprised" by the response in Vancouver, said Craig Takiguchi, who oversees Beard Papa's North American operations from New York. "But as we approached opening day, it became clear that [the opening could happen] with Mr. Fung's media resources and contacts. Plus, there are a lot of expats from Asia in Vancouver who know our brand.

They are definitely the facilitators for getting the word out there."

These aficionados have been lining up for as long as two hours to get their hands onto the fresh little puffs. Others are tasting them for the first time in Richmond, but have been going back every few days.

In the very first weeks, the store even set a maximum allotment. "We wanted everyone to get a chance to try them, so each customer was only allowed to buy six at a time," said Norman Ng, the store's manager. Since then, the restric-

tion has been relaxed and customers are allowed to buy two dozen at a time.

Judy Wang rushes down the mall escalator after securing her 24 puffs. She has already been to this Beard Papa five or six times in as many weeks.

"My kids really like them," said the Mandarin-speaking mother of two.

Teresa Lau is another mom devoted to lining up at Beard Papa for her kids. Her 22-year-old twins gobble them up, she said, laughing that, thankfully, one is an athletic badminton player. On one Sunday, she lined up for almost an hour to buy a dozen. By the following Tuesday, she was back again.

"It's best to come in the morning on a weekday. On Saturday and Sunday, there are too many people," said Lau.

Fellow queue-standers agree on some basic tactics. Cream puff production starts at 2 a.m. each night, so for a minimal wait, the best time of day is in the morning. By mid-afternoon, that overnight supply is exhausted and the stall has to rely on what it can produce on the fly. The pinch is that there are only two ovens where the half choux pastry-half pie crust shells are baked. They are only able to push out 144 shells every 35 minutes.

On Friday, Saturday and Sunday afternoons, this halting production pace means that some customers are waiting for a really long time to get their puffs. A Concord Security guard at Aberdeen Centre pointed out that Beard Papa is the only food court stall where the line-up is being snaked around rope stanchions to keep it from spilling onto the third-floor escalator.

This reporter only waited 15 minutes at 11:45 a.m. on a weekday morning to get her three puffs, but Evelyn Ko spends many weekend hours at Aberdeen Centre, hanging out with family and pushing her one-year-old son around in a stroller, and has seen it much worse. "Sometimes they put out a sign that says, 'From this point, the wait is two hours.' That's why we decided to line up on a weekday morning. I can't do that [long wait] with a baby," said Ko.

The store in Richmond is already doing well enough for Fung to say that in the next year, seven more locations will launch in B.C., Alberta and Ontario. Some will be run by Fung's Fairchild Group, while others will be offered to franchise operators, said Fung, adding that discussions were underway and deals will be inked soon.

Meanwhile, back in the lineup, Yong is still waiting to try her first B.C.-baked Beard Papa. She is psyching herself up. "If they are really good, I'll drive here more often," she said.

With her background as a Beard Papa consumer who has tasted the puffs on three continents, she agreed to doing an impromptu taste test. After examining the size of the puff, "Hmm, smaller than in Shanghai," Yong takes a bite. Her verdict: "Not even close. In Shanghai, you can see the black vanilla dots. That's what makes it, the vanilla," she said authoritatively. "I would come back, but maybe not as often."

Beside her, a friend, Rose Kim, agreed and is already thinking of her next Beard Papa hop to Tokyo next month.

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