



Deldre Aitchison, a RE/MAX employee in Utica, buys a sandwich from Jennifer Berch, a catering truck driver for Mr. Pita. The Pita Wagon is a \$45,000 vehicle that makes pre-arranged stops on a weekly basis.

Mr. Pita driving up delivery wagon sales

Customers appreciate the convenience and menu provided by local restaurant chain.

Neal Haldane / Special to The Detroit News

SHELBY TOWNSHIP -- The truck rolls up and out come the roll-ups.

"We page everyone to let them know they're here, and they're running out the door," said Helga Roels, office manager at RE/MAX Metropolitan in Utica.

It's pita Tuesday at the real estate office and many of the 75 employees, and others in the building, are taking advantage of a visit by the Pita Wagon.

For the next 10 to 15 minutes, workers will select from a lineup of sandwiches, soups, snacks and beverages provided by the local Mr. Pita restaurant.

"The hot stuff is always nice and hot," said Roels, who said she is hooked on the Greek pizza from the truck. "They are always prompt, and everything is very good."

For the past year, select Mr. Pita locations have been selling their wares to Metro Detroit offices, businesses and factories from the Pita Wagon, a \$45,000 vehicle that makes prearranged stops on a weekly basis.

Right now, franchisees operate six of the wagons, and Mr. Pita President Frank Lombardo would like to see every franchise in the chain using one of the vehicles.

"One of the nice things about this is no other restaurant chain has gone out and brought their products to the consumers," said Lombardo, who founded the company in 1993 and has seen it grow to 38 locations.

"The idea is to go once a week so companies can have 'pita day.'" Franchises with the wagons have seen a 25 percent increase in sales, Lombardo said. "I like the idea," said Gregg Thomas of CFO Partners Inc, a Rochester Hills financial consulting firm for multiunit restaurant groups. "I think it's a great way to extend the brand to people who may not normally visit a Mr. Pita."

However, Thomas expects few other chains to follow Mr. Pita's lead and create a fleet of catering trucks. "It's not part of their normal operating procedure," he said. "It's a pretty dramatic change in doing business -- asking your manager to run the restaurant and a catering truck."

Along with the Pita Wagon, Mr. Pita has updated its menu to add hot sandwiches, and french fries made in oil without trans fats.

All the changes are designed to keep up with the sandwich segment of the restaurant industry, where annual sales are expected to increase 8 percent a year to reach \$25.4 billion in the United States by 2008, according to Technomic, a food industry consulting firm in Chicago. Mr. Pita is looking to expand outside the Detroit area by the end of the year.

Lombardo said he's talking to people in Tennessee and is considering Ohio and Illinois for future franchises.

Mr. Pita

Innovation: Pita Wagons

The vehicle: \$45,000 yellow and red catering trucks

Contents: Full line of sandwiches, soups, desserts, snacks and beverages

Number in operation: 6

Franchise locations: 38

Information: www.mrpita.com