

# Mr. Pita launches fleet of pita wagons

*Shelby Township-based chain bringing its full menu of items to area businesses.*

*By Dan Heaton Macomb Daily Business Editor*

The Shelby Township-based Mr. Pita chain is going mobile. It has launched a fleet of "pita wagons" to take its rolled sandwiches to businesses and events throughout the Detroit region. So far, the company has three of the pita wagons on the road, one each in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties. After Jan. 1, the chain plans to add three more of the trucks, which cost about \$45,000 each to equip.

"We believe we are the only restaurant chain to offer this unique service," said Frank Lombardo, founder and president of the 38-location chain. "We recognized that there was a demand for this type of service and our product was the perfect fit. Mr. Pita sandwiches are easily portable, very durable, and work extremely well with this concept."

Lunch wagons have been around since at least the dawn of the industrial age. What's new about the pita wagon concept, Lombardo said, is that it features all of the menu items one would expect to find at a Mr. Pita's restaurant, including hot and cold sandwiches and soups.

All of the items are priced the same as at a traditional restaurant location. The trucks generally visit businesses at a scheduled time, typically once a week. The truck is also available 24 hours per day and therefore can accommodate lunch break times for shift workers, Lombardo said, adding that some days the trucks are on the road from 9 a.m. one day to 3 a.m. the next day.

Betty Wiknich, a Macomb resident who works as a nurse at Great Lakes Cancer Management in Utica, said she and her colleagues enjoy the convenience of the Pita Wagon.

"We really look forward to the Pita Wagon and like the fact that we don't have to go out to get our lunch," Wiknich said.

Lombardo said he is constantly trying to think of new products and new ideas for the chain.

"We just just launched several new menu products, with a pita pizza and a quesadilla," he said. "I've been really focusing on the menu, tweaking the menu. Trying to give the franchise owners more tools to be successful."

One way Mr. Pita is marketing the wagon by encouraging employers to plan a special pita day at the office.

Lombardo foresees demand for the Pita Wagon at school sporting events, fundraisers and other special events.

"It is an ideal tool for booster clubs and other such fund-raising organizations," said Lombardo, adding that Mr. Pita donates \$1 per sandwich sold to the school or host organization.

Lombardo said he is in talks with possible franchise investors in other states. With the exception of two locations on the west side of Michigan, all of the chain's restaurants are in the greater Detroit region. Lombardo has been working for several years to move into other markets.

"We're talking to people in Tennessee, talking to Illinois," he said. "Who knows what the future holds."

About two years ago, the company was in discussions with Warren-based Big Boy about a possible partnership. Lombardo said while nothing came of those discussions at the time, the two restaurant chains are open to future ideas.

"We have an open mind about doing something with them down the road," Lombardo said.



Macomb Daily staff photo by David Dalton Nikki Renaud, far left, prepares to sell lunch from the pita wagon at the Metropolitan RE/Max office in Sterling Heights.