

Fit to Be Fried in Vineyard Doughnut War

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Special to The Washington Post
Thursday, July 8, 2004; Page C01

OAK BLUFFS, Mass. -- Lured by a sweet smell floating above the salt air of Martha's Vineyard, they gravitate to the corner of a cluttered parking lot in the dark of night. Hunger guides them, but so does the excitement of knowing the secret passageway -- past the dumpster and to the left of the pile of cardboard.

It's a summertime tradition known around here simply as the "Back Door Donuts." For close to 20 years, doughnut lovers have indulged in the ritual -- lining up at the back door of a bakery in downtown Oak Bluffs for apple fritters and cinnamon buns fresh from the Fryolator.

Some travel 15 miles from the other side of the island for this treat. They are a young crowd, queuing up six or seven deep, twenty-somethings and teenagers with a bad case of the munchies.

"These Boston cremes are so good -- they're warm still," said 25-year-old Emily Leighton, licking the chocolate and cream from her fingers a few weeks ago as she stood in the lot with a trio of Scottish friends. "We love to come here late at night."

On a busy night at the height of summer, Martha's Vineyard Gourmet Cafe & Bakery could sell 150 doughnuts and fritters, almost all of them around 1 a.m., when bars let out.

But an outbreak of politics threatens the tradition. After receiving dozens of letters from one neighbor complaining about noise and sanitation, Oak Bluffs selectmen voted three weeks ago to put a Cinderella leash on the late-night doughnut trade, forcing the bakery to abide by the town's 12:30 a.m. closing time for restaurants and ordering an end to back-door sales.

The move set off a powder keg of protest. More than a thousand people have signed a petition. Letters to the editor of the weekly paper have called for the return of the back-door doughnuts. "Outrageous! The gentrification and homogenization of the Vineyard has taken one of the nastiest turns yet. No more back door doughnuts?" wrote one Michael Ball of Chilmark. Even a Vineyard Gazette editorial has spoken out for them.

When selectmen convened their first meeting after issuing the edict, a doughnut debate erupted.

The complaining neighbor, a 76-year-old retired lawyer named Joe Vera, took the floor and quickly moved his rhetoric beyond car doors and loud voices keeping him and his wife awake nights. He blamed the back-door fried dough habit for American young people's obesity problem. He argued that the doughnuts were tantamount to fast food, anathema on an island that successfully fought to keep McDonald's from moving in.

"We should not be encouraging teens to gather for this," he declared. The movie director and screenwriter Peter Farrelly, who lives most of the year on the island, stood up and sided with the doughnuts. "I've been just sick about this all weekend," he began. "I've been going there for 15 years."

He picked up steam: "The world is at war. We're talking about doughnuts."

Selectmen had already cautioned Farrelly to direct his comments to the board, but he stared directly at the bakery owners, Janice Casey and Rita Brown, and said: "They're *about* Martha's Vineyard, about everything that's *right* about this place."

Farrelly then likened town leadership to Barney Fife on a power trip, recalling an "Andy Griffith Show" episode when Barney starts arresting townspeople for jaywalking. "That's what this is like," he boomed.

"Please," he begged selectmen, "keep Martha's Vineyard weird."

The doughnut debate continued, with various people speaking pro and con. Then Farrelly spoke up again without being recognized by the board chairman. The police chief warned him to quiet down. Finally, as selectmen deliberated, Farrelly stood and said, "I'd like time to speak again."

Selectmen were in no mood and told Farrelly to leave the meeting. Outside, Farrelly fumed. "One word and that's it," he grouched.

Back in the meeting, Brown and Casey, who have owned the bakery for three years, said they picked up where the previous owners had left off, keeping a light burning at the back door through the wee hours.

"This has taken on a life of its own beyond us," Brown told the selectmen. "We hold this tradition in our hands and try to keep it for the next generation."

But town leaders held the line. The 12:30 closing time was enforced. A week later, the town's Board of Health heard from Vera, and decided it, too, should slam shut the

back-door operation, citing the potential for contaminants such as moths to enter the kitchen.

"This just isn't the way things are done -- every business sells from the front door," said Health Board member Linda Marinelli at a meeting last week. "I understand tradition, but the Board of Health isn't dealing with tradition."

From the island citizenry, Vera appears to be the sole drumbeat against the doughnuts. "It's important to note that we've received regular correspondence from one person," says Selectman Greg Coogan, "but we haven't heard a groundswell from dozens of people."

Coogan, the only selectman of the five to rise to the defense of the doughnuts, argues that the late-night sales are part of the summer landscape.

"There's a culture there," says Coogan, a fifth-grade math teacher. "For a lot of kids, it is something special we will be taking away from them. It's a place to congregate for teens."

Initially, even Oak Bluffs Police Chief Erik Blake questioned the urgency. "At 1 o'clock at night, police have more to think about than whether people are eating doughnuts in a parking lot," he told selectmen.

Meanwhile, at the bakery, the owners have obeyed the orders. Maria Cardoso, back-door clerk and bakery supervisor, laments the loss. Happy customers meant hefty tips: Some nights, her jar held close to \$200. But to Cardoso, the operation is about more than money: "After midnight, people are drunk and need to get food. This is the only place to get it."

The owners are appealing the Board of Health decision at a hearing scheduled for noon today. Their argument is that other takeout joints in town deal right out of the kitchen, too.

They talk about opening up the front door as a stopgap, but they believe it's the back door that lends cachet. "It's a special thing people do," says Casey. "Back-door donuts: Get 'em while they're hot," proclaim the bakery's T-shirts.

That's how the fans like it. Just ask Gil Paterson, a 19-year-old from New London, Conn.: "I would never come to the front door."