

Going beyond hot dogs, pizza and nachos: Catering to snack bar customers keeps them coming back

By *Connie Evener*

Paradise Skate in Antioch, Calif., and Skateland in Fargo, N.D., are 1800 miles apart. Although their operations are quite different, there are similarities. Hot dogs, pizza and nachos are the top menu items at both facilities.

To find out what else is being served at these two successful snack bars, how their customers have responded to new menu items, and how their owner/managers keep those cash registers ka-chinging, The Rink-sider spoke with Paradise Skate's Jeff Warrenburg and Skateland's Bruce Engbrecht.

Warrenburg bought Paradise Skate in 2008. Two years later it was named "Business of the Year" by the Antioch Chamber of Commerce. In addition to its public sessions, the rink does more than 500 birthday parties a year and sponsors a roller derby team, the Undead Bettys, who train there five times a week.

Engbrecht started at Skateland's skate counter while he was still in high school, became assistant manager, then manager. He bought the business from Frank Cernik in 1994. These days he sees 500 to 600 skaters on a typical Saturday night. Skateland does a brisk business in birthday and school parties, with most of its customers ranging in age from 8 to thirteen.

Skateland doesn't have a grill, so Engbrecht tries to concentrate on menu items that are quick and easy. In addition to the hot dogs, pizza, and nachos, Engbrecht's customers love big pretzels, and lately, they're ordering mini donuts and chocolate chip cookies.

When his Sysco distributor suggested the donuts and cookies, Engbrecht was skeptical. "We weren't sure we could do them quickly and efficiently and not have a lot of waste," he said, "but they seem to be working out really well." The mini donuts are precooked and frozen, he explained. "We put them in the microwave for ten seconds to warm them up, then put a little cinnamon and sugar in the bag and mix it up. We put five in a bag for \$1.50. The kids really like them."

As for the chocolate chip cookies, they're a sensation. "They (Sysco) gave us a little oven, so we can actually bake the cookies right here," explained Engbrecht. "When you bake those chocolate chip cookies, the rink smells wonderful. And they sell like hotcakes!"

Just last year Warrenburg got his license to sell beer and wine at Paradise Skate. As far as he knows, it's the only skating center in California to have one. Warrenburg first kicked the idea around with his customers to gauge how they'd respond. Rather than objecting to beer and wine on the menu, they were all for it, saying they'd be happier watching their kids skate, or waiting while they attended a

birthday party, if they could have an adult beverage.

"I was nervous at first, because you think beer and skating, or beer and kids, just don't go together," said Warrenburg,



A young customer enjoys nachos at Paradise Skate in Antioch, Calif.

"but Chuck E. Cheese does it, bowling alleys, too. So I looked into it." Warrenburg wanted to find out how it had worked for other skating facilities, so he contacted several rinks on the east coast. Only one reported a single negative incident, and that was over five years of operation.

"It's like anything else. You've got to monitor it. And I have. And it's been great," Warrenburg said. He's had no negative incidents, issues or comments. His prices are high, with a beer going for \$5.00, and the Wine Margaritas the moms love for \$6.00. "We set our prices above normal so people don't try to come here and get drunk and skate," he said, noting that the short (2 1/2 hour) length of his sessions also tends to

discourage potential problems.

In order to obtain the license, Warrenburg had to add dinners to his menu, and that, too, has worked well. While the kids still prefer hot dogs, corn dogs, pizza

and nachos (of course!) or chicken nuggets, burritos, and Frito Bowls, their parents frequently order Tri-tip Steak Dinners or Sandwiches, Philly Cheese Steak Sandwiches, or chili. Paradise Skate's snack bar just added French Fries to the menu, and they've really taken off – with both kids and adults.

Bagel dogs, however, don't sell. "I thought they'd be a hit with the kids," said Warrenburg, "but nobody buys them."

Engbrecht has tried some losers, too. When he saw the hot dog-shaped hamburgers with cheese filling that could be cooked on his rotisserie, "I thought wow! That's it right there – a way we can sell hamburgers," said Engbrecht. And while he liked them so much "I ate way too many of

them," he admitted, his customers pretty much ignored them.

Engbrecht hopes his customers get nourishing and well-balanced meals at home. But when they come to Skateland, he said, they're looking for tasty treats and snacks. He has yet to see customers who prefer celery to chocolate chip cookies.

Warrenburg sees the same attitude at Paradise Skate. For kids whose parents frown on sodas, he offers juice boxes. But generally people don't seem to want healthier selections. When he put salads on his menu, they tanked completely. Nobody wanted salad. "When you go to a carnival or a fair, you want that big old hand-dipped corn dog. I don't think people come to the skating rink for healthy food. They want the excuse to have a hot dog or French fries," he said.

Each snack bar offers occasional specials. At Skateland, Engbrecht sometimes runs a Nacho Night, dropping the price from \$2.50 to \$1.75. "But for the most part," he said, "we don't do much in the way of promotions with food."

Warrenburg runs in-house specials, based on what he has on hand, that he posts on his menu board in the snack bar. "What really works for me is when we do Dollar Day on Thursdays: \$1.00 hot dog, \$1.00 soda, \$1.00 popcorn," he said. "We've gotten really busy on Thursdays."

"The snack bar is a very, very important part of my business," said Warrenburg. "Having a good staff and good customer service is important. And up-selling - we have our staff say, 'Do you want a soda with that hot dog?' or 'Do you want cotton candy with that hot dog and soda?'"

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