

Demand for quality food fuels new Wilsons business

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Dean Madill, food services manager with Wilson Fuels, poses for a photo at the new Peppereka restaurant that will open in Burnside Park on Friday. - Ryan Taplin - The Chronicle Herald

Dean Madill is out to dispel preconceived notions about gas station food, one compostable takeout container of dilled salmon at a time.

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Madill is the food service manager for Wilson Fuel Co. Ltd., and he looks after all the fuel company's food service offerings at 79 sites throughout Atlantic Canada.

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On Friday, he'll open Peppereka, a cafe at the corner of Wright Avenue and Burnside Drive in Burnside Park, and plans to quickly expand into catering and then a commissary that will supply the 20 Wilsons gas stops in Halifax-Dartmouth.

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"Once we build up the Peppereka brand a little bit and show people exactly what a quality food offering it is, then we'll start to push that particular brand out to our stations," Madill said. "We have to train the consumer that you can get a quality food product at a site that has gas pumps out front. And that's a challenge. In the southern states it's not, it's accepted, but in the northern states and in Atlantic Canada, it's not a premium offering."

Madill's background includes five years as the general manager of the Mic Mac Tavern. Before that he was the owner/operator of Mother Tucker's restaurant in downtown Halifax.

In the construction of Peppereka, the company spent \$270,000 on commercial kitchen equipment, including a tilting flat-top steam kettle that'll be used for soups, and it's paying a premium for the busy location right next to the new Princess Auto store.

"You'd be shocked at 6:00 in the morning, seeing the traffic go by here. We chose this site because of the visibility and because of the traffic flow," said Madill. "We wanted to be on this corner, we wanted to have that retail anchor, Princess Auto. We figured with that as an anchor, it would help us immensely in the downtimes you would normally see in the park."

Madill figures it'll be a few weeks before the new space produces its first product for all the gas stops, which will just be a basic sandwich but won't be

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labelled with the Pepperaka brand. That will come later. Right now, food at the gas stops is supplied by TRA.

"Not to be detrimental to the product coming from TRA, because it's a third-party supplier that's doing it, but it's your typical gas-filled Cryovac good for 21 days on the shelf type of sandwich. We don't want to be known for that," Madill said. "We have specifically designed that commissary menu to have, for lack of a better word, a blue-collar offering right through to a millennial offering. You'll be able to go in there and get a turkey provolone sandwich on a ciabatta and an egg salad sandwich on whole wheat. I'll have a number of take-home comfort foods, cabbage rolls, chilis, sweet-and-sour meatballs, there will be soups at the sites in the future."

When the Pepperaka cafe opens its doors on Friday morning, Madill expects breakfast to be almost as busy as lunch. He's hired 17 people so far and expects to top out at around 25.

"The food is multi-faceted and we go everywhere from a steel-cut oatmeal for breakfast, to a single-serve dilled salmon with rice in takeout containers ... in great packaging I found that's microwaveable, or you can put it in the oven, and it's fully compostable. I fell in love with it and it's the way the world is going now," he said. "I expect this to take off. People are starving for it here in Burnside, they're lining up at (quick service retailers) to get average food. I'm here to do big numbers."

The cafe includes a double kombucha tap, a coffee machine from Switzerland and a pizza oven that cooks a made to order pie in two minutes and ten seconds. There is some seating and there'll be a patio in the summer.

Even before opening its doors, Peppereka has been liked by more than 700 people on Facebook. Madill said his instructions from his bosses are to serve quality food.

"It's a fairly aggressive menu for a site that needs to be fast."

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