



Covelli Enterprises opens 2000th Panera Bread

Panera bread

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WARREN

In Elyria today, Sam Covelli will open his 271st Panera Bread location for Covelli Enterprises.

What's more, he has the additional honor of opening the 2,000th location for Panera Bread.

Sitting in his Ohio State University-themed room at his headquarters, Covelli thinks back to when the Warren-based company first got into the Panera brand.

“If it wasn't for the people in this [Mahoning] Valley, we wouldn't be where we are today,” he said. “That's why we are here. We aren't moving our headquarters. We really are fortunate to be able to have the amount of stores we have and still be at home.”

Covelli Enterprises was started in 1959 by Sam's father, the late Albert Covelli.

Albert was running a successful produce company in Wisconsin, and one of his main customers was Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's fast-food restaurants. When he saw how many potatoes McDonald's was using, he decided to join the fast-food industry, which led him to Ohio.

“He saw this concept and decided to go with it,” Sam Covelli said.

Covelli Enterprises went on to own 50 McDonald's restaurants in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Panera's history goes back to 1981 when the restaurant, Au Bon Pain Co. Inc., was founded by Louis Kane and Rob Shaich. After the company prospered during the 1980s and 1990s, Au Bon Pain purchased Saint Louis Bread Co., a chain of 20 bakery-cafes located in the St. Louis area. The chain later took on the name of Panera Bread in 1997 and the potential success for the brand was realized.

Also in 1997, the father-and-son team, Albert and Sam Covelli, decided to get out of the McDonald's franchise and moved on to Panera Bread because of the trend developing for healthier food options and

because the company was running out of territory for new McDonald's locations.

"We thought the food was outstanding," Covelli said of Panera. "We had a lot of experience in the restaurant business. We ran with it."

The first Covelli-operated Panera Bread opened in the Shops at Boardman Park.

In 1999, the 100th Panera was opened in Warren by Covelli Enterprises.

Growth continued at both Panera and Covelli in the 21st century.

Between 2001 and 2002, Covelli opened 32 stores in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Covelli Enterprises is now the largest franchisee of Panera Bread with bakery-cafes in Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Florida and Toronto, Canada.

The company has also been a leading philanthropic organization. In 2015, Covelli Enterprises donated more than \$26 million to nonprofit organizations.

Across the company, there are about 25,000 employees, with 2,000 working in the Valley.

"It's been an exciting journey," Covelli said.

In addition to the Panera cafes, Covelli also operates five O'Charley's restaurants and nine Dairy Queen stores.

"They have been great long-term partners," said Chuck Chapman, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Panera Bread, of Covelli Enterprises. "They are fantastic operators. They are very community oriented."

Covelli remembers telling Panera his company would break all the records with bigger restaurants, more products and more people to help the customers.

"Every year we broke another record," Covelli said.

The focus for the company remained in having clean restaurants, great food and employees with a smile.

Not too long ago, Covelli was in one of his restaurants and witnessed firsthand how well his focus works.

"A customer came up and said, 'Every time I come in here the place is spotless, and I love the food,'" Covelli recalled.

Those types of comments make him feel great because he is so customer-driven.

"They will tell you what they want," he says. "It always gets back to the customer."

His father was always proud of the company he built with his son.

"He said, 'You are taking this to another level,'" Covelli said.

Covelli is flattered to open the 2,000th Panera.

Today, there are bakery-cafes in 46 states and in Canada operating under the Panera Bread, Saint Louis Bread Co. or Paradise Bakery & Cafe names.

Systemwide, bakery-cafe sales were nearly \$5 billion in 2015. Total reported revenues by Panera were \$2.7 billion in 2015.

Panera Bread will continue its growth by offering food that tastes good and is good for you, and following the model of one customer, one cafe at a time, Chapman said.

Covelli Enterprises follows that model.

“They are operating the brand really, really well,” Chapman said. “They are very good operators. The communities embrace them and they embrace [the communities].”

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