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Checker's popularity leads to more stores



Gail Gentry and her brother, Bill Nowak, are opening their second area Checker's Drive-In. The newest one is on Elmwood Avenue.

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By: James Fink

When siblings Gail Gentry and Bill Nowak moved back to Buffalo to open a series of Checker's Drive-Ins, they weren't quite sure what was in store.

While the restaurant chain has a national following, Checker's was largely unknown in Western New York, save for one outlet that Delaware North operates in the food court at Buffalo Niagara International Airport.

Gentry and Nowak were bringing in Checker's at a time when other fastfood chains, including Sonic and Popeye's, were making their local debut.

Last year they opened the first of what could be five area Checker's restaurants, this one on Union Road in Cheektowaga.

They say they have been pleasantly surprised at the response.

"It has been absolutely amazing," Gentry said. "What we are doing there is far, far above any of our expectations."

Nowak agreed.

"During the worst, coldest and snowy weeks in February, we had more traffic and customers than some of the other Checker's in Florida," he said.

The chain offers drive-through service only.

The Cheektowaga and North Buffalo locations don't have indoor seating, though both have outdoor patios. The owners said future locations may include some indoor seating.

They said Western New Yorkers favor the Big Buford and the Baconzilla, two of Checker's signature hamburgers.

With the Union Road site doing well, Gentry and Nowak turned their attention to location No. 2. It's on Elmwood Avenue in Buffalo, just south of WIVB-TV studios.

The restaurant is scheduled to open Oct. 20.

"We're expecting another great welcome," Nowak said.

Beyond that, the brother-sister team is negotiating for a third location in the Town of Tonawanda and a fourth somewhere near the Lackawanna/South Buffalo border.

After that, perhaps there will be an Amherst site.

"We'll probably take a breather at that point," Nowak said. "We'll see where we are at that point."

Under their franchise agreement with the Tampa-based Checker's Drive-In Restaurant Inc., they could develop as many as 10 locations in the region.

Based on their track record in Cheektowaga, they said they are getting a good feel for the market.

Burgers on the menu have sold well along with chicken sandwiches, chicken wings, hot dogs, ice cream desserts and milkshakes.

"People in Buffalo do love their ice cream," Gentry said.