

Passion for panini



*A turkey panino made at La Petite France Cafe in Hyannis. **Cape Cod Times/Merrily Lunsford***

By PATRICK IAN CLARK
STAFF WRITER
August 15, 2007

In the world of sandwiches a line has been drawn - actually, a series of lines, grilled into the focaccia of a panino. Across the Cape, panini have become one of the predominant menu choices at area restaurants.

"The panini has a lot more panache than a typical sandwich," says Micah Power, owner of the Black Spot Cafe and Bar, a Hyannis restaurant that opened last week and is specializing in the heated sandwiches.

"The idea of a 'hot sandwich' has been going on for a couple of years now," says Allison Perlik, senior editor of Restaurants and Institutions magazine, a trade publication that addresses trends in the food industry.

But it wasn't until 2004 that Pam Cooney, owner of All Cape Cook's Supply in Hyannis, began hearing about panini from her customers. "Many times an idea (like the panini) gets its start because of a cooking show," Cooney says.

Panini originated in Italy, with the first recipe being recorded in the 16th century. It was largely labeled a peasant food, suitable only for farmers, builders and other laborers. Over time, the idea of a toasted sandwich pressed to meld cheeses, vegetables and meats gained acceptance in the

upper class. Now, the Italian sandwich's popularity in the United States is growing.

Ian Parent, owner of La Petite France Cafe in Hyannis, worked for Boar's Head Provisions Co. before taking over that restaurant in 2005. Visiting restaurants as a Boar's Head representative, he noticed that more and more of his customers were putting panini on their menus. "They just started popping up everywhere," he says.

On average, Cooney's store on Main Street sells one panini press every two weeks, at prices ranging from \$190 for a residential model to \$1,800 for a commercial one. Cheaper models are available but often lack the features consumers want, such as the ability to evenly grill a sandwich of any size.

Because of the expense of a press, some food and recipe Web sites recommend placing a brick wrapped in aluminum foil on top of the panino as it cooks in the frying pan. The weight is said to apply the appropriate pressure needed to meld the flavors.



Donald Indlis makes a turkey panino at La Petite France

No lines

The method is effective but lacks the ability to do one thing: "It's all about the lines," says Cooney, referring to the bread's golden-brown grill marks, the sandwich's signature trademark, made by an authentic panini press.

Even some frozen-food manufacturers have put panini on their selection of entrees. Lean Cuisine's panino comes with a slotted foil circle that, when microwaved, creates toasty stripes.

Harry Balzer, vice president of the NPD Group, a consumer marketing research organization, credits the rise of the panino's popularity to a cultural shift toward increasingly faster and fresher food.

"Making a sandwich at home is a declining art," Balzer says. The ease and convenience of quickly purchasing a sandwich with fresh ingredients outweighs the affordability of eating at home for many consumers.

"It's really about the role of sandwiches in our lives," Balzer says. "They are the most popular food choice at lunchtime, but many don't realize they are the No. 1 food eaten at dinnertime as well."

A study released by his company concluded that one out of nine meals in the U.S. includes some form of a sandwich, including panini.

- **Salami, provolone, roasted red peppers, extra virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar**
- **Turkey, bacon, avocado, lettuce, Swiss cheese**
- **Provolone, smoked Gouda, basil leaves, pesto**
- **Provolone, mortadella, coppa, dry salami, prosciutto, marinated cherry peppers**
- **Turkey, bacon, roasted red peppers, cheddar**
- **Roast beef, mozzarella, caramelized onions, tomatoes, horseradish, mayonnaise**
- **Pulled chicken, red onion, chopped basil, provolone, tomatoes, mayonnaise**
- **Plum tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, basil, prosciutto, olive tapenade**
- **Roasted ham, turkey breast, swiss cheese, cheddar cheese, tomatoes, lettuce**
- **Jerk chicken, red leaf lettuce,**

Demand for panini has caught the attention of restaurateurs, says



magazine editor Perlik. She cites surveys taken this year and last that showed about a quarter of restaurant operators planned to purchase a panini press in the near future.

Panera Bread, in Hyannis, which now has five panino choices on its menu, sells on average 33 of the sandwiches each day, says store manager Daniela Silva.

Ardeo restaurant, which has expanded to three locations since opening in 2001 in South Yarmouth, has always had panini

Donald Inglis holds a turkey panino, one of several varieties of panini offered at La Petite France Cafe in Hyannis.

on the menu. The sandwiches were immediately well received by customers.

"People always knew about (panini), but they couldn't ever get them," says Steven Frazier, head chef at the restaurant's Hyannis site.

"It's nice seeing the same faces every day," Parent says of the regulars to his cafe on Main Street in Hyannis. "But you have to be able to give them something different."