

"Didn't know enough" to say NO

ANTON HEIMPEL BOUGHT AT THE CROSSROADS At age 23, Anton Heimpel was at the crossroads of his young life, although he admits today that he was probably too young to appreciate the importance of his decision.

By Paul Knowles / Photography By Bryn Gladding & Greg Fess

That was the moment when well-known Elmira entrepreneur Don Brox offered Heimpel the chance to buy the "At The Crossroads Family Restaurant", the popular eatery located just south of Elmira, literally at the main crossroads of Highways 85 and 86.

Today, 13 years later, he laughs about his decision. "I didn't know enough to be frightened, back then," he says. So on July 1, 1996, he bought the business without a qualm.

To say he "didn't know enough" might be a stretch. Anton Heimpel was only 23, but he had already worked in the food business since he was 13 years old, mostly for Don Brox. "I'm a food guy," he says.

He started when he was just a kid, washing dishes at the late, lamented Brox's Olde Town Village in Elmira. He worked at that establishment even after Brox sold it, leaving only when the once-thriving business went out of business.

By that time, Don Brox had moved on, and had taken on At The Crossroads, which was originally founded by the Christian Horizons organization to provide a place of employment and training for the developmentally challenged. Even today, Heimpel occasionally has coffee with the Christian Horizons CEO, and employs in his kitchen, a number of young people and adults with exceptional needs.

Ironically, he also employs the now-retired Don Brox, who takes care of the gardens at the Crossroads, as well as performing a few other duties.

Anton Heimpel



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When Olde Town Village went out of business, Brox immediately recruited Heimpel; within a few years, the young protegee had purchased the place, and he has never looked back.

“At The Crossroads” has become a regional landmark. The restaurant seats over 300 people; the larger complex also includes “The Mercantile” gift shop, and this year will see a third business, a quilt store. Each of these enterprises is separately owned; the entire complex is the property of a holding company, in which Heimpel is a partner.

The Mercantile opened in 2001, and Heimpel believes that was very good for business, across the board, since it transformed his locale into “a destination.”

That trend continues; he points to busloads of visitors who shop in St. Jacobs but travel the few kilometers north for a meal before resuming their shopping.

His sole business concern is the restaurant, and his involvement is hands-on in every department. He admits, gratefully, that his time commitment has been reduced, over the years – he now works 45 or 50 hours a week, compared to the 80-hour-weeks he put in when he first bought the Crossroads. But Heimpel is involved in every aspect of his business – he often staffs the front desk, he serves coffee, he talks to the customers. He enjoys all the roles that come with the

job, from accounting to taste-testing new recipes. “There are so many different things to do in a restaurant,” he says.

Those recipes, by the way, will be authentic Waterloo County fare. Asked how many chefs he employs, his answer reveals a lot about his establishment. “We don’t use chefs,” he says. “We have cooks.”

Those cooks “are primarily Mennonite girls from the area who know how to cook and love cooking.” They come to work bringing with them their family recipes – the kind made famous in Edna Staebler’s “Food that Really Schmecks” books. Heimpel laughs that “if it’s something they’ll take to the church pot luck, it’s going to go over pretty well.”

Heimpel is one of those fortunate people who have found the life they love early on. He has never lived anywhere except Elmira (where he now shares a home with his wife, Julie, and their three sons Sean, 7, Erik, 6 and Lucas, aged 3). And he has never had a job outside a restaurant. “I started as a dishwasher,” he says, “and did everything from salad bar to prep to seating to cash... everything.”

He has no plans to change his profession; the only plans are for growth (the addition of the quilt shop to the complex will also create the opportunity for each business to have a separate entrance, although all three will be open to each other in the interior).

Heimpel knows that growing a business takes patience and time. He says that the path from local restaurant to becoming a destination “has been a long process.”

But a successful one. He can point to diners who come every week or every month from communities such as St. Catharines and Port Dover. A survey done two years ago showed that 75% of customers who responded came from more than 30 km away. That demonstrates that drawing power of At the Crossroads, although Heimpel also notes that the regular diners – and there are plenty of those – would only have filled out the survey once, despite repeated visits.

He acknowledges with gratitude all the locals who eat at his restaurant. He says that, at breakfast time especially, he’s likely to know two-thirds of the people at the tables. And on Sundays, he laughs, he can tell the order in which services finished at the local churches, by who arrives for Sunday brunch, first. “We have a very strong local following,” he says.

It’s not surprising that the area church folk patronize “At the Crossroads.” The restaurant has never had a liquor license, and it was a non-smoking environment from the beginning, long before provincial law dictated it.

Heimpel is proud to bill his establishment as a “family restaurant”, with the motto “where friends meet friends.” But he adds

that his clientele represent “a very broad base”, including people who stop on their way to a central Ontario cottage or resort; and snowmobilers whose trail runs right beside the restaurant.

He says his restaurant serves 700 to 800 people on a typical Sunday, “well over 1,000” on a Saturday.

At the Crossroads is open six days a week – Tuesday through Saturday, from 8 am to 8 pm, and Sundays, from 11 am to 7 pm and reverses a common retail trend – he’s open on Mondays if it is a holiday.

He sees his location, just north of the popular tourist destination of St. Jacobs, as a blessing. “It’s a nice advantage, with some healthy competition.”

At the Crossroads offers a full breakfast, lunch and dinner menu – which the owner admits 90% of his customers ignore. Why? That’s the percentage that chooses the very popular buffet. The dinner buffet – two soups, a bread table, an extensive salad bar, four main meats, pasta, vegetables, pizza and desserts including “10 kinds of pie” – costs only \$16.49, not including beverages.

Actually, there are several buffets available, depending on date and time – the Saturday breakfast buffet (\$9.29), the lunch buffet (\$11.49), Sunday brunch (\$16.49) and kids’ buffets, including the lunch and dinner

offerings at \$1 per year of age.

All of these options – and the price points – make for satisfied customers. And that pleases Anton Heimpel. “I enjoy the people. I like it when they’re happy and enjoying their time.” He appreciates the relationships he has developed with regular customers. “It’s a nice rapport you build up with people... I try to kibitz with the customers.” Heimpel laughs. “And, I like food.” He confesses that “I have a chicken parmesan dinner at least once a week... that’s one of my favourites.” Of course, when he starts listing his favourites, he covers just about the entire menu, and most of the buffet table.

In short, he says, “Our food is really good.” How good? The quality created a demand for bulk take-out orders, so that while Heimpel doesn’t cater, he does supply bulk salads for large events (he points to one customer who takes 800 pounds of salad for a corporate barbecue), and this year is adding sandwich trays to the take-out menu.

“We don’t do catering, but we’ll do bulk for pick-up. We sell whole pies and salads by the pound, and this year, sandwich and veggie trays.”

That’s all part of customer service, he says, and also part of his cautious but consistent growth strategy. He says that his restaurant

is feeling the economic crunch – although that is somewhat mitigated by his price levels. None the less, he says, customers are cutting back on items such as beverages. The downturn in the economy “makes it a little tougher.”

Like most in the food business, Heimpel says his number one challenge is staffing. He employs about 100 full- and part-time staff members, and keeping a full roster is sometimes difficult, as staff members move on to out-of-town education, or are recruited by other food service establishments.

He is immensely loyal to his staff – he does not lay off; “we try and share around the hours. For everybody to keep their jobs, everybody has to share.”

Heimpel has always been a customer of Flanagan Foodservice, but several years ago, he says he “gave them a chance to be our main supplier... and I have been very happy with them.”

It would seem that, at the Crossroads, there is a fair amount of happiness to go around – satisfied customers, staffers who are immune from lay-offs, and an owner who plans to be in the biz for a long time to come. “I really enjoy it,” says Anton Heimpel, a veteran of the trade at the advanced age of 35. **S**