

On Golden Palace egg rolls, 54 years in business



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Sometimes the orders are bound for an Ottawa hospital, where terminally ill customers want one last feed of egg rolls from the Golden Palace.

During the holiday season, the orders — up to 600 at a time — are prepared and shipped as far west as Victoria, B.C. and as down east as St. John's, Newfoundland.

Some order them on Christmas Eve and put them under the tree.

Today, on this sunny morning, there's a line 50 deep and the restaurant isn't open for another 45 minutes.

Golden Palace is celebrating 54 years in the business of open-ended egg rolls, which are half-price today.

So there's a lot to celebrate.

From bus drivers to NHL stars like Daniel Alfredsson — and, says Golden Palace manager Yuen-Ping Lee, “And the guy Ottawa doesn't like anymore, Heatley, he used to get them here too” — they all get their egg rolls at the small, tidy restaurant on Carling Avenue.

Sens management comes in, so does Jim Watson, when he's not busy in the mayor's chair or making rounds on the craft-fair circuit.

And whenever crooner Paul Anka is in town, he's there with a bodyguard. Pierre Trudeau, Joe Clark and Lester B. Pearson all had the craving.

"A lot of people with the big money and the big cars, they always come here," says 64-year-old Lee.

The last time I checked, it was a regular Friday and they had sold 300 egg rolls in the first 10 minutes of business. (Two orders from OC Transpo garages accounted for 211 of the early orders, and the first was picked up in an "Out of Service" bus.

The phenomenon begins at 4 a.m. when the Golden Palace "ladies," as the manager calls them, start making the egg rolls in the northwest corner of the restaurant kitchen. One is in her 70s; the youngest in her 50s. The women stand on wooden pallets and pack the wrappers, shipped in from Montreal, with fresh ingredients like celery, onions, bean sprouts and pork.

"There are one or two things that I won't reveal. I intentionally don't tell people because we don't want them to copy us," says Lee. He knows that his ladies know all the ingredients, but he's not worried they'll give up the secret, which is now almost 70 years old. "They are very loyal," he says.

"We don't buy the cheap meat and we have no microwave in the kitchen. We don't reheat our food. Everything we do is cooked fresh. And we have only one chef, so everything is consistent," says Lee.

In December, the ladies make 1,000 egg rolls each morning. The four women — some of whom have been doing this for 40 years, for four hours each morning (six hours in the holiday season) — hand squeeze each egg roll.

"There are no machines in our kitchen," declares chef Kim Wong, 75, whose father perfected the recipe in South China in 1940. "It's hard labour," says Lee.

The most difficult time of year for quality control is in the summer, when the cabbages are young and wet. Mature, dry cabbage heads are best, otherwise the flavour seeps out when the egg rolls are deep fried in lard. (There have been some bad days when they have had to throw out up to 100 egg rolls because, as Lee says, “the quality was not up to our standards.”)

The Golden Palace team wants to maintain their standard because of those last orders, the egg rolls bound for the dying. They have to be as good as they remembered them, Lee says.

“It’s not their last meal, and it’s a sad story, but they’re not going to live so long and they want them (egg rolls) before they die,” says Lee.

The egg rolls cost \$1.80 a piece before tax, and each order comes with homemade, preservative-free plum sauce. (The secret ingredient in the sauce is pumpkin.) They’ve been served up since 1940 at the restaurant’s first location on Albert Street. The Golden Palace has been on Carling Avenue since 1960, squeezed in between an optometrist and a kitchen and bath shop.

“We have fourth-generation customers. We know their grandfathers,” Lee says.

A few years ago, an Ottawa bartender on his way to visit family out west, walked through airport security with some of Golden Palace’s finest, only for a security man to ask him what was in the bag. He said egg rolls. The security man quickly asked: “GP?” The bartender said yes, and with that, he was on his way.

Today, for one day only, the egg rolls everyone’s talking about are half price.

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