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DECEMBER 2020




Doing more with...more
*Arielle and Mark Bittoni's
well-matched resourcefulness*

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Cover photo by Laurie Steiner-Halperin

Primo's takes over Stan's in Westwood

Serving donuts and discussions since 1956

BY ALINA GONZAQUE | PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRIMO'S DONUTS AND ERICA ALLEN

Ralph Primo Jr. was three years old when he asked his parents to stop the car at the donut shop that would end up shaping his life. “The Great Pretender” by the Platters was probably playing on AM radio that spring morning in 1956 as the car rolled past the fields of bean and corn that used to surround that shop on Sawtelle. The Primo family had made an offer on a house nearby, and when it wasn't accepted, Ralph Sr. and his wife, Celia, found no reason not to indulge their son his donut. They made small talk with the proprietor, discovering he intended to sell the lot for \$2,000. Ralph Sr. seized the sudden opportunity. At the end of their visit, the Primo family got back in the car not as homeowners, but as the new business owners of Primo's Donuts, already planning the success of the shop that would be etched in the history of the Westside for the next 64 years — and counting.

“My dad was a stickler for quality,” Ralph says. “He never tried to save money by cutting on ingredients. He would throw out entire batches if they didn't meet the standard he set.”

Ralph remembers his father telling the bakers to take their time and put love into the product. “He would get up early every morning to make sure the shop had the best presentation, but he always gave credit for its success to my mom.”

Celia was the face of the shop, described by her son as a people person whom everyone loved. “She was the one running the house,” Ralph says. “Customers still ask about her. She knew how to speak to people.” Now in their early 90s, Ralph's parents don't manage the shop anymore, but Ralph says they're still ambassadors who stop in from time to time.

Ralph took ownership of the shop about four years ago, and noticed sales had taken a tremendous jump inside of a week. “Suddenly we had younger clientele coming in and taking pictures, saying they saw Primo's on a Thrillist of the best donuts in the country,” he recalls. Unacquainted with most social media platforms, Ralph enlisted his son's help to maintain the momentum. “The business was always great,” Ralph says. “It was just a matter of reaching more people.” Primo's has since been featured in dozens of magazines, websites and local news and food channels.

“My brother and sister and I took our first jobs cleaning the shop and making donuts,” Ralph continues. “It never felt like work. And that's what I love about it now — talking to the customers, treating them with

respect and learning about their lives.” He adds that a mom-and-pop can engage the community in ways larger chains typically can't. Ralph Sr. developed a lifelong friendship with one of their first customers from the '50s. “He used to come in every day,” Ralph says. “He and my dad would talk shop, argue politics and try to solve the world's problems. Before this customer passed away, he brought in his daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter. Four generations enjoyed donuts in one day, it was like a family reunion. Both my folks were there.”

The community has shown its appreciation for that personal connection through social media, and its support of Primo's newest location, in the space of the former Stan's Donuts in Westwood. “Stan's opened around the same time,” Ralph says of the friendly rival. “We were all sad to see it close.” Primo's bought the location with the blessing of many of its patrons. “We've kept some of Stan's signature donuts,” Ralph says, noting that Primo's was quick to ask some of Stan's bakers to stay on. But expect new

items to the menu, including specialty coffee, baked goods and sandwiches. A couple of additions are sure to form long lines. “We'll have a glazed donut cut in half with ice cream in the middle,” Ralph says, and the donut that Primo's is best known for — the buttermilk bar — will likely be the key ingredient in a new milkshake.



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Overall, Ralph's goal with the new Westwood location is to bring back part of that small-town feel. "I was one of thousands of kids in Westwood seeing movies, buying records, and visiting bookstores every weekend," he recounts. "It was a beautiful environment. I'm hoping Primo's and some other independent businesses will be able to revive part of that."

According to Ralph, a donut shop is one of the best places around which to congregate. "People are so happy to get their donuts," he says with a laugh. "Maybe it reminds them of their childhood or they simply see it as an inexpensive way to have fun, but there's always a good vibe." Asked about crowd favorites, Ralph says the Chocolate Long John is a solid contender. "It's really fluffy, but it doesn't have too many air pockets," he says. "It's not too rich or overly sweet — it hits just that right spot. The chocolate is not too overpowering either. When it's cold in the morning and you're just waking up, it's fantastic."

As for the house Ralph Sr. and Celia applied for and didn't get, the donut shop took care of that, too. A year after opening, Ralph Sr. delivered a box of donuts to a customer who lived just a block away from the shop. On the way back, he saw a for sale sign on a house he may not have noticed otherwise — and he bought it. "Serendipity happens around the donut shop," Ralph says, pointing out that people stick around, sometimes for decades. "It really feels like family."

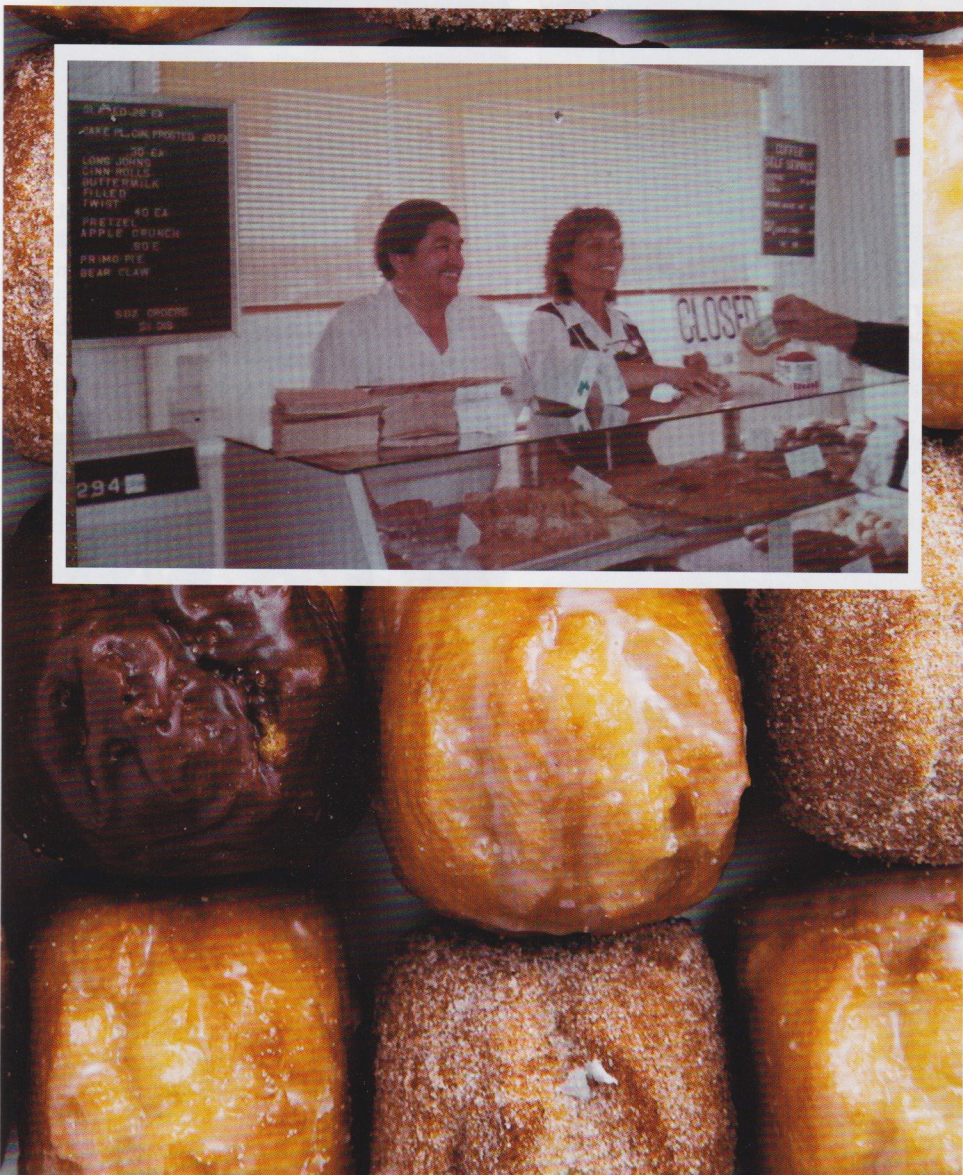


Photo by Erica Allen

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