

By Marcus Hathcock
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Too tired to go grab some Mexican food? Does the thought of Thai food in the residence halls make you giddy? Pony Express Restaurant Delivery Service opened in 1997 for people like you. According to owner Harley Hurd, Pony Express is the only company of its kind in the Eugene area. Though it might be difficult for some restaurants to deliver their goods, Pony Express makes things easy by grabbing it to go for its customers.

Hurd is the new head of Pony Express. He bought it from the original owner about six months ago and has since put the company in a new direction. He's increasing the company's advertising presence, and he has added some new restaurants during his short reign.

There are 17 different restaurants from which customers can order and drivers must deliver. The list of diverse food offers something for everybody. Want a Bacon cheeseburger and onion rings? Joggers Bar & Grill delivers through Pony Express. How about some manicotti? Italian food comes direct from Napoli. Taste of India and Mekala's deliver cuisine from the Far East to your apartment or residence hall. Pony Express has a \$10 minimum purchase rule, and the delivery charge is \$3.50, no matter how much food you order from a particular restaurant. One could order from multiple restaurants on one order for an extra \$2 per restaurant.

The Pony Express operation exists in the second story of a large brown house at East 15th Avenue and Oak Street. A narrow staircase leads the employees to the top of what appears to be a normal house. The outer room of the office

Delivery — in style

Napoli, Mekala's and Schlotzsky's are among the restaurants included in the Pony Express delivery service

looks normal enough, with couches, tables and "The Simpsons" on television.

The back room isn't so domestic, though. A large map wallpapers one side of the room. Two employees stand around a computer and a CB-radio giving commands to drivers all over the Eugene area. The small office room hums with activity, not unlike a police dispatch center or a spy command center. For such a small space, it's amazing how much call volume the place seems to have.

At the center of the Pony Express operation is Hurd. His leadership style is a cross between a veteran newspaper man and a New York City cop. He's business-savvy, efficient and to the point, but not without a bit of sarcastic humor over the CB channel. Hurd acts as the central brain of Pony Express, coordinating the drivers around the city.

To get people the food they want, the employees of Pony Express follow a rigid sequence of events, like something out of the military.

First, a person calls in with an order. The customer service representative takes the order and print it out on a page. The call then goes out to the restaurant, and the driver is given directions to the "drop" site.

When a driver is ready for new assignments, he or she says "ready to write" over the CB. Hurd tells the driver which

restaurants to visit next, what to pick up and how much it will cost. Then he gives the driver the address where the order should be delivered, along with any special instructions, such as leaving the food on the porch.

The driver goes to the restaurant and typically enters through the restaurant's back door. He or she grabs the food and heads to the address.

"People sometimes think that because I deliver, I'm suddenly their errand boy."

James Franssen
contract drivers
Pony Express

Once the driver finds the residence, he or she says, "I'm at the drop," before delivering the goods. After the exchange of food for money, the driver gets back on the CB to say "clear." Then Hurd sends the driver out for another run around the city.

Bart Simpson's animated image kept me company in the office, as the pair in the command center appeared to be quite busy. The staff said business was up for a Thursday night. At 7:10 p.m., I was introduced to James Franssen, one of the contract drivers for Pony Express.

Franssen said he has been involved with Pony Express on and off since its creation.

"It's a good job. Good for the money here and there," Franssen said. "It offers more variety than pizza delivery!"

Franssen also spends his time developing computer education tools and hosting Web sites. One of the sites he hosts is the Pony Express site (www.ponyexpressdelivery.com).

At 7:12 p.m., we take off for the first delivery. Franssen delivers in style with his shiny black Honda del Sol. It was amazing to see how many thermal food bags could actually fit in the sports car's trunk.

We traveled all over Eugene for about two hours, going from house to restaurant to house. I discovered just how far these drivers have to go. The service delivers anywhere in the Eugene city limits, and sometimes even to Springfield or the airport. Sometimes the distance between the restaurants and the residences is substantial.

Franssen said Schlotzsky's Deli was the farthest restaurant, and typically people from the other side of town crave Schlotsky's.

He recalls times where he has been asked to run around too much. Customers have asked him to do other errands, and he politely declined.

"People sometimes think that because I deliver, I'm suddenly their errand boy," he said.

The job isn't without its scary times, either. Franssen has never been afraid of any of his customers,

but the dark streets he walks are sometimes scary. Franssen could remember only one experience with a customer who shook him up. He delivered to a rundown hotel where a man offered to pay a huge tip to the deliverer if Franssen would dine with him.

"The man was quite a bit drunk," Franssen said. The customer pulled out a handful of \$100 bills and dropped them on the floor.

"Then he asked me if I could find him a companion for the night," Franssen said. He declined and walked away with only a \$3 tip. It's all in the line of duty for a dedicated Pony Express driver.

Though Franssen has found his share of rude customers, he said people are generally happy with the service. And why not? Pony Express makes things easy.

If the details of Pony Express' inner workings don't entice you completely, then check out its Web site. At www.ponyexpressdelivery.com, there is an updated list of the restaurants available, complete with full menus and prices. Though residential neighborhoods are the prime customers of Pony Express, the company does deliver to residence halls and Greek houses. Pony Express can be contacted at 485-2090. Service stops at 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 9 p.m. on Sundays.

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