

Tribe's convenience store brings in Native fare

New Grand Ronde Station eatery serving buffalo, elk, salmon burgers

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

"What we eat says a lot about our culture," says Chris Tinney (Eastern Cherokee), general manager of the Grand Ronde Food and Fuel Co., better known as Grand Ronde Station or the Tribal C-store.

Tinney was instrumental in the recent Tribal decision to end the Taco Time franchise relationship and strike out with a restaurant with "more of a local flavor."

"A few years into the franchise," Tinney says, "Tribal Council felt they wanted to take a hard look at it, and by the end of the five-year commitment, the decision to strike out on our own had pretty much been made."

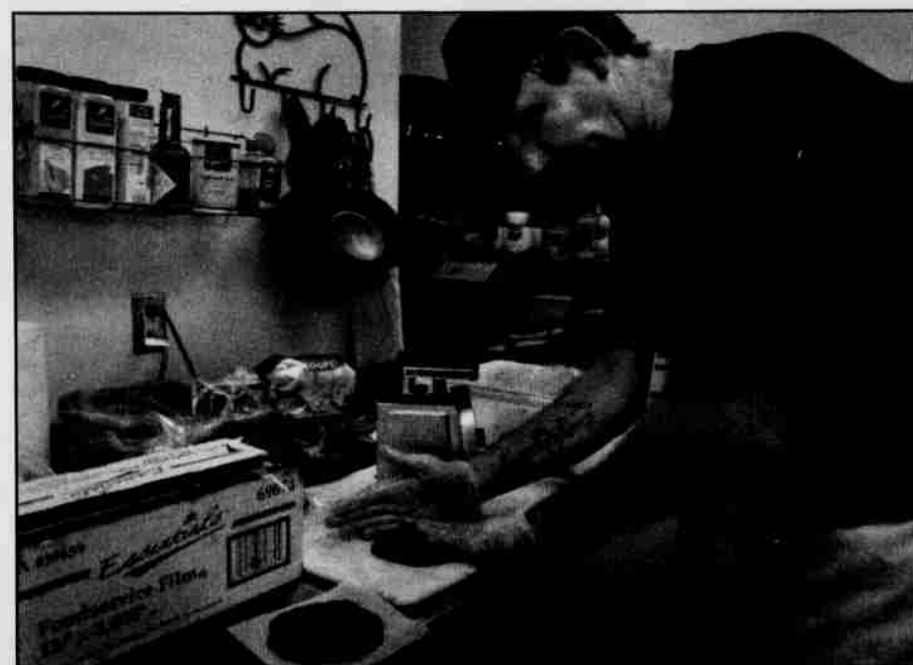
The name of the new eatery, Mòk Mòk Haws (pronounced Muk-Muk House and meaning, literally, Food House, in Chinook jargon), was selected from 100 entries in a contest won by Tribal member Kyoni Mercier, 11.

With the changeover beginning Dec. 15, it remains a work in progress.

Tribal Elder and former Tribal Council member Jan Reibach put up the wood covering for the counter and the fascia coming down from the ceiling.

Tribal member Bobby Mercier and other staff members from the Cultural Resources Department are developing Native designs to be painted on selected walls.

And Tribal member Billy Bobb,



Jim Givens, lead cook at Mòk Mòk Haws, shapes ground elk meat into a burger at the restaurant in Grand Ronde Station on Wednesday, Jan. 7.

Photos by Michelle Alaimo

with the sign painting company Coastal Sign, is working on the new outside signage.

"We wanted the appearance to reflect the community and its local flavor," says Tinney.

On a recent Tuesday, a buffalo burger with choice of cheese, basket of fries and all the peperoncinis one could eat was \$6.

On Wednesday, there was an elk burger basket. Same deal. Six bucks.

On Thursday, customers had a

choice between a salmon burger and the salmon dinner. The sandwich basket was \$6 and the dinner, with wild rice, vegetables and a small fry bread, was \$7. On Friday, the \$7 dinner was on special for \$6.

And with all that, it costs nothing extra that Tribal member Belinda Mercier or community member Jeffry Martinez, both on staff, drop by your table to ask how everything is.

"It's better than Taco Time," Mercier says. "You can come out and talk to people."

And because the place is no longer paying franchise fees of \$3,000 to \$5,000 a month, they can keep the prices low, Tinney says, and invest it in community and Tribal members who are among the facilities' 12 employees.

"That's how we look at it," Tinney says. "It's not just for profit."

Another difference between the franchise and the new concept: "We're able to offer more professional level positions. With Taco Time, all the positions were entry level," Tinney says. Now, Mòk Mòk Haws hires cooks and prep cooks.

Take co-head cook Jim Givens, who has been in the food business since he was 14.

"I cooked with old ladies serving the railroaders," Givens says. "They taught me a lot of scratch cooking." He cooked at the Haines (Oregon) Steak House. He owned his own restaurant in North Powder, Ore. He's a pro and it shows.

Or take Tribal member, co-head cook and restaurant supervisor Steve Holmes, and husband to assistant manager Margaret Holmes (Cherokee).

A man of many talents, "Steve was instrumental in the organization and execution of our remodel," Tinney says, "and was the front line supervisor in getting the cleaning and painting done. He has also worked closely with Jim in menu development. Right now, his mission is training newly hired prep cook and Tribal member Kenneth

Martin."

Tinney also is working with staff on customer service skills, along with order accuracy and timeliness. "This is more of a free flowing mom-and-pop-type atmosphere," he says.

Some aspects of customer service just come naturally, however. On one recent afternoon, a blind man came in from the Yamhill County bus, and staffer Dean Baker went right up to him, even before he entered the back door. Pretty soon, he had taken the man's arm and was leading him through the store.

Another afternoon, Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte and community veteran Carl Lambert sat for an hour enjoying chicken fried steaks, which were the special of the day. Lambert said he was recently out of the hospital after undergoing heart surgery.

Conversation traveled all over until Tinney stopped by and LaBonte said, "When are we going to get doughnuts and coffee for breakfast around here?"

"We want to create an atmosphere like Carl and Gene were saying," says Tinney. "If they want doughnuts and coffee, we want them to have it, and sit around and BS for an hour. We want this to be a hometown place. I know that there are others that provide that

in the area, but we deserve a market share of that business as well."

"It's like family," says Margaret Holmes. "We treat our customers like family, and a lot of them are. The most important thing is we want them to come back and bring friends."

Holmes credits Tribal Council's support for the smooth switchover.

"Oh yes," she says, "they've been so good to us."

"Across the board," Tinney says, "they put a lot of confidence in us to spearhead the change on our own."

Tribal members Jan Reibach Jr. and Ann Lewis came in and admitted to being "addicted" to the buffalo burgers. Reibach is Tribal Lands Manager and Lewis is realty specialist for the Tribe.

Talking about Friday's special, Tribal member and veteran Steve Rife said, "If you're Catholic, Friday is fish day, but if you're Indian, every day is fish day."

"The thing I like about the place," says Reibach Jr., "is that (Tinney's) not a desk manager. One time I come in, he's stocking shelves, then he's in the back cooking, then he's greeting



Tribal member and Mòk Mòk Haws Supervisor Steve Holmes places a buffalo burger on a bun while preparing orders.

customers. It's really cool, man."

In addition to current fare, Tinney says that it won't be long before Mòk Mòk Haws is serving buffalo and deer steaks along with elk medallions.

All these Native choices are lower

in fat and cholesterol than cow meat, Tinney says, but the real draw is culture.

"What we wanted for the restaurant was the opportunity to really make it with a local flavor," he says. ■



Jeffrey Martinez, a prep cook at Mòk Mòk Haws, cleans tables at the restaurant in Grand Ronde Station.

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