

Christina Lopez

Texas French Bread

Texas French Bread reopens with outdoor garden after January fire

12/5/2022

Budget Line

Austin bakery Texas French Bread burned down during a fire in January of 2022 and reopened a small garden to bring back the business.

Interviewed Sources

- Aaron Spicker, sophomore biomedical engineering major, Texas French Bread customer before the fire, interviewed over Zoom
 - Phone: 713-397-5417
 - Email: apspicker@utexas.edu
 - Dates contacted: 11/20/2022 phone/text, 11/25/2022 zoom interview
 - We discussed why he would visit Texas French Bread and what he enjoyed about Texas French Bread. He gave descriptions of what the bakery looked like before the fire and the atmosphere. We also discussed how he felt when he heard about the fire and about the bakery's future.
- Ally Galipp, junior PR major, Texas French Bread customer
 - Phone: 713-315-7516
 - Email: agalipp@utexas.edu
 - Dates contacted: 11/27/2022 phone/text, 12/1/2022 zoom interview
 - We discussed why she would visit Texas French Bread before the fire and how she felt when she heard about the fire. She gave descriptions of what the bakery's atmosphere was like and what she liked most about the bakery. We also discussed what she hopes to see from the company and her opinions on the new garden/food truck.
- Murph Willcott, Texas French Bread owner
 - Email: info@texasfrenchbread.com
 - Phone: 512-563-9048
 - Dates contacted: 11/27/2022, 11/29/2022, 11/30/2022, 12/2/2022, 12/5/2022 phone interview
 - We discussed his emotions and thought process during the fire in January and what he did in response. We talked about what he missed about the bakery and what has been the most challenging about rebuilding. We discussed the future of the bakery; the garden, wholesale, delivering goods and a new physical bakery. We also talked about the support he's gotten from the community and how he feels about that.

Background sources/websites used:

- Texas French Bread Website
 - <https://texasfrenchbread.com/>

Here's are the attempts I made and criteria I used to diversify my sources:

I tried to get the experiences of Texas French Bread staff. I wanted to know their experience from before the fire, during the fire, after the fire and what they are currently doing. I also tried to get in touch with the owner, Murph Willcott, to gain his perspective as the owner of the family business and how it affected their family. I also got experiences from Texas French Bread customers. I interviewed a customer that went to the bakery before the fire and I interviewed a frequent customer before and after the fire. I wanted to gain their input on their connection to the bakery as a consumer that may not know the ins and outs of the bakery and their plans to rebuild. I reached out to friends that might have friends that are/were customers of Texas French Bread and got in contact with them.

While reporting this story, this is how I worked to enhance my credibility

To enhance my credibility, I told the employees that I was a journalism student and wanted to tell their story and understand their experience so readers can get a better understanding of what they are going through. I reached out to them and went to their garden multiple times so they would be aware of who I am and meet me personally. I also told customers that I was a journalism student working on this story and wanted to gain insight on their perspective as a customer.

On the corner of Rio Grande and West 29th street stands the grim sight of a roofless, burned brick building with boarded-up windows surrounded by a chain link fence.

But past its parking lot is a silver Airstream with a small table full of pastries. Cinnamon sugar croissants, blueberry muffins and cheese danishes are proudly showcased on the table, offering customers a sense of what that building once was.

A large pergola wrapped in vines shades picnic tables next to the airstream trailer. There, you'll find customers sipping on coffee, reading books and playing with their dogs. Next to the tables, the building's original bright red doors remain open near a red, white and blue sign.

This is the new Texas French Bread.

On Monday Jan. 24, 2022, the bakery suffered a 'total loss' after a mechanical failure caused the building to catch fire. The family-owned business lost everything to the fire: equipment, baked goods and a building home to decades worth of memories. After their worst nightmare, the bakery reopened its garden to customers on Nov. 15 and hopes to come back better than before.

In 1981, Judy Willcott opened the business and moved to the Rio Grande location in 1986. The nearly century-old building was originally home to Shipwash's Grocery and then Rome Inn music venue. Murph Willcott bought the company from his family 15 years ago and is now starting over.

On that Monday night in January, he received a call that his bakery was on fire. Luckily, no one was in the building and the fire department was already at the scene. Willcott lived a block away and could see the fire from his balcony. He said he knew things would be different, but was unsure about the extent of the damage.

"By the next day, we saw that the whole building had burned and we were looking at a long road to recover, if indeed we ever were going to," Willcott said.

Ally Galipp, a public relations junior at UT, first visited the bakery during her sophomore year. She went to the bakery once or twice a week to study and hang out with friends. She said her favorite thing about the bakery was the aesthetic and "could hang out there all day."

She first heard about the fire from her roommate and said she was shocked and upset.

"I was so sad. It was just like one of those bad dreams," Galipp said.

Aaron Spicker, a biomedical engineering sophomore at UT, would visit the bakery with his parents when they came into town. He said he chose Texas French Bread over other restaurants in the area because it had character and he enjoyed the atmosphere.

“It was a go-to place for a lot of people,” Spicker said. “The owners really did not deserve that and it just sucks that it happened.”

What Willcott misses most about losing the bakery is the people.

“Whether it's customers or our work community, those folks were kind of an extended family,” Willcott said. “And it's been challenging to have been separated abruptly.”

Two days after the fire, loyal customers and community members set up a GoFundMe page and raised over \$200,000 for the bakery. Willcott said they used that money and government funds as severance pay and to cover health insurance costs for the employees.

“We were able to retain and continue to employ a core group of high skill and management folks who have made it possible for us to reopen this fall,” Willcott said.

Years before the fire, Willcott had rented the property behind the bakery's parking lot as additional seating area. They lost access to the lot in 2021 but bought the property after the fire. They decided to use the space to reopen the business.

The bakery did not only receive help from the community but from other local businesses, as well.

“We were also fortunate that Aaron and Stacy Franklin, our friends who own Franklin Barbecue, happened to have an airstream trailer sitting around that was decked out as a food trailer and they weren't using it,” Willcott said.

Without a building, Willcott had to find new ways to keep producing their baked goods. Willcott said he had to “reinvent” their systems and rebuild their kitchen at an offsite commercial kitchen, PrepATX.

Although the bakery opened the garden, Willcott said he is trying to find ways to “rehabilitate” the bakery's original property.

“We own that property, and we feel like its location can't really be duplicated,” Willcott said.

Willcott said he is happy to see people coming back to the bakery and supporting the business through all of its changes.

“One of the great things about getting open again is that we've gotten to revive some sense of community,” Willcott said.

Galipp said she feels like a lot of locals love and care for the bakery and want to see it thrive. She said she believes the fire united the Texas French Bread community and helped create a “strong backbone” for rebuilding.

"Everything will obviously not be back to the way it was but I think they'll be up and running and doing really, really well," Galipp said.

Spicker said he is impressed with the bakery's efforts to rebuild and how they "didn't give up." He said he thinks the owners deserve to "get some good fortune their way."

"It might just be a little bakery, but it means a lot to a lot of people," Spicker said. "So I'm glad they're persevering through everything."

For the time being, Willcott is taking it one day at a time. With the holiday season around the corner, the business worked on new ways to make revenue and keep the business afloat.

"We're mailing out our cookie tins that are handmade holiday cookies," Willcott said. "We've never offered to do those as a mailout service before and so we're trying to think about this as a little bit more of an ecommerce opportunity."

Willcott said his focus is on the garden, the trailer and believes it is a good starting point for recovery.

"I think (the garden is) going to be very well supported," Willcott said. "And I think we're going to be able to make a go of it by doing that."