

Chatt Chow Down

THE SEARCH FOR EXTRAORDINARY DINING

BY LAUREN NETTLES

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FOOD ENTHUSIAST

Food enthusiast Lauren has eaten in 12 countries and hopes to continue sampling tasty treats around the globe. In the meantime, she's thrilled to thoroughly test all Chattanooga cuisine that crosses her path.

Julie Darling Donuts

Julie and
K e n t
D a v i s ,

the owners of Julie Darling Donuts, have had their business open for six years as of Feb. 12. They are located on Frazier Avenue in Chattanooga's Northshore district. This area has become increasingly popular, and for an area where stores are frequently coming and going, Julie Darling's prolonged presence is an impressive feat.


It was an unseasonably warm February day when I wandered into Julie Darling Donuts for the first time. I could smell the aroma of baking donuts the second I stepped out of my car. Despite moving to Chattanooga in 2009 and being a lifelong, avid donut lover, I somehow had never been there before.

When I was young, I loved the idea of owning a

bakery. Baking has always been one of my favorite things; I find all the careful measurements and timing very calming. I wasn't even put off by the idea of how early bakeries usually open - the idea of watching the sun rise while being surrounded by the smell of baking pastries sounded like a dream come true.

So as I walked into Julie Darling on this sunny day, I was instantly reminded of my own bakery daydreams. The bright pink and blue paint and adorable 50s decor are beyond charming and the many cozy areas to enjoy your treats are inviting - as is, of course, the smell of fresh baked donuts.

Before giving in to my urge to press my face up against the case of donuts, I spoke to General Manager Scott Smith about Julie Darling rather spontaneous beginnings. "[Kent Davis] approached me one day and said, 'I need a manager. I'm opening up a donut shop.' I said, 'You're crazy! I don't know anything about donuts.' He said, 'Me neither! We'll learn together,'" says Smith.



Smith had retired from US Pipe when Davis approached him about Julie Darling. “Going from molten iron to donuts, it changes your life,” he says. Smith found no similarities between his old job and his new one. “It was a learning experience. We bought the equipment off the internet, didn’t know how it worked or if it worked. We’ve learned everything by trial and error,” he says. Despite Smith and Davis having no experience, the business got off the ground quickly and continues to thrive.

Passion and persistence are incredibly important aspects to pushing a plan past a thought into reality. Davis had the empty building on Frazier Avenue for some time before getting the donut shop in. “[Davis] was wanting to [open] it for about a year and a half and just said ‘I’m putting a donut shop in,’” says Smith. Davis turned an empty building into something the community would love, renewing an otherwise blank spot on what is becoming an incredibly popular area of the city.

Running a bakery is no easy task, even one as beloved as Julie Darling. The shop is a popular place of employment for college students who tend to leave after graduating, so keeping employees is a challenge. The hours can also be taxing - Smith says he usually arrives between 3:30 and 4 a.m. to begin baking, a process which is ongoing from when he unlocks the door until they close that evening.

The secret to their success? “It’s really not a secret,” says Smith. It’s trial and error and dedication to finding out what your customers want. “We got three or four different donuts, walked out on the street, gave them away and said, ‘How do you like this?’” he says.

After mastering their customers’ desires for the basics - glazed, blueberry cake and chocolate - Julie Darling went wild from there. Gourmet donuts started with a pancakes and bacon variety, then Oreo and now there are 16 different flavors. Apple pie, key lime, strawberry, coconut, banana pudding and the ever-captivating pancakes and bacon

donuts are made every day.

Smith’s personal favorites are banana pudding, coconut cream pie and sour cream cake. I made a note of this for future visits, resisting the urge to order one of each donut and instead going with a classic jelly donut.

I was feeling nostalgic for my days in London, where I wrote my dissertation mostly fueled by these delicious treats, so I went for a strawberry jelly filled donut. It was perfectly made - the jelly didn’t leak out into the cake at all, keeping it from getting soggy, which is an ever-present danger of filled pastries gone wrong.

As I licked my fingers and headed out to the sunny day beyond the glass doors, I remembered Smith’s final thoughts on how working with donuts changed the way he sees the world: “It makes it a sweeter place.” Indeed it does.

VISIT JULIE DARLING DONUTS AT
121 Frazier Avenue
Monday-Thursday 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Friday-Saturday 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

“It makes it a sweeter place.”