



BENJI'S BAGELS, A FAMILY AFFAIR



"I wanted a bagel shop that always had fresh, hot bagels all day. Like the shops in Astoria, Queens, NYC. I wanted a bagel shop for everyone."

—Niko Bendaj

Niko and Becca Bendaj were meant to start a bagel shop. Kismet had them from the beginning when Niko, from Albania on a lottery visa, and Becca, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, met at Salinas, a restaurant in New York City. She spied on him waiting tables and that was it. Fast forward 10 years to 2020 when the couple relocated to Nashville.

Becca launched Last Call Hospitality and set up shop getting to know the restaurant scene here. Niko worked at JPMorgan Chase and later at Wells Fargo. The weekends, however, were all about food, family... and bagels.

Niko always loved to be in the kitchen, but when he met Becca, that love flourished even more. What makes Niko's bagels so good, he'll say, is love.

After some cajoling from Niko, they took the dive and started plans for their own bagel shop. But not before they had Benji, now 4, and Stela, now 1. Family is first and they needed to figure out how to balance two youngsters with a new business. Enter Niko's mom, who, while not proficient in English, is proficient in kids. She moved down from New York and took care of Stela while the couple worked day and night beginning the business.

Starting a restaurant in Nashville is daring and... expensive. Niko's best friend suggested the location on Robertson Avenue, home to new apartments and a budding community. Before they even opened their doors, folks were stopping by and calling. On Jan. 4, they opened with a bang, selling out every single bagel (400, to be exact) for a week straight.

But you can expect more than hand-rolled, kettle-boiled bagels at Benji's. The couple makes their own schmears (complete with homemade chili crunch, an oil made with jalapeños, onions, garlic and spices), cookies, muffins and tahini-baked granola. Our favorites are The Albanian, or feta, arugula, prosciutto, a fried egg and olive cream cheese on a bagel, and The Stela, which is a bagel topped with yummy white fish salad, arugula and cucumber.

Benji's is currently open from 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on the weekdays and 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on the weekends. While that seems harrowing for a young family, they are excited to be a part of such a supportive community.

Benji's Bagel & Coffee House

6108 Robertson Ave. | Charlotte Park
benjisbagel.com | @benjisbagel