

A New York Dog Makes Its Hollywood Debut



Customers lined up at the Los Angeles Papaya King, the first to open outside New York.

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HOLLYWOOD — It is tucked in a storefront a block from the Walk of Fame, walking distance from the annual Academy Awards ceremonies, and steps from the hubbub of tourists, hucksters and celebrity hunters that is Hollywood: a Papaya King hot dog stand, in all its garish yellow and orange glory, selling hot dogs imported straight from the Bronx.

This symbol of New York landed last week in the heart of Hollywood, with a cluster of balloons and a cheeky billboard campaign that includes an off-color joke about a casting couch. (Another Papaya billboard reads: “We’re 100 percent natural. But we think we’ll fit in L.A. just fine.”)

Not only is the first time in its 80-year history that Papaya King has looked west of the Hudson, it has also chosen as its first target a city that might be as crazy and competitive about food — and hot dogs — as New York. Indeed, even at 1:10 a.m. on Monday, a long line of people was spotted at Pink’s Hot Dogs on La Brea Avenue, waiting patiently for one of this city’s more celebrated hot dogs.

Does Los Angeles really need this New York interloper?

“That is so funny. I was just about to tweet that there’s already a line out the door there,” Evan Kleiman, a Los Angeles restaurateur, cookbook author and host of a food show on public radio, wrote in response to an e-mail Friday morning about the new dog on the block.

Papaya King is hardly the first New York restaurant that has tried to expand here. What is a little

unsettling to people proud and protective of this city's gastronomic accomplishments is that this is the latest incursion by a fast-food franchise from the other side of the country. Five Guys, ever expanding, was already taking a run at Southern California, where the famous In-N-Out Burger was founded.

If the first week is any judge, Papaya King is on to something here: people were lined up Wilcox Avenue to place an order on Friday, though they seem as much drawn by the New York mien of the brand as by what they tasted.

"I only know about this place from 'Seinfeld,' some episode of 'Seinfeld,'" said Todd Smailes, 36, a graphic designer, who lives up the street, and was eating a hot dog with two friends on the sidewalk. "That's the only reason I heard of it."

Crumpling up a napkin, Mr. Smailes said he preferred Pink's. "This doesn't blow me out of the water," he said. His sidewalk lunch companion, Chris Melkonian, proclaimed that he preferred pricier fare at Dodger Stadium. "Average," he said.

Still, for Papaya King owners — who have two shops in New York now that the famous Greenwich Village is closed — the draw is understandable. Los Angeles consumes more hot dogs than any city in the country, followed by New York, according to the latest statistics from the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council. "Los Angeles has perfect hot dog weather, year-round," said Seth Cohen, a principal with Papaya King.

The location is near a slew of late-night clubs, and it plans to stay open until 3 a.m. to accommodate the buzzing clubgoers who spill out onto the streets. As it is, many of those people traditionally end their night (or begin their morning) by heading for food trucks that offer digestion-challenging bacon-wrapped dogs, known as Danger Dogs.

And Los Angeles, like New York, is always on the hunt for the next new thing, and there has always been something of a fascination with New York here. "Anything imported from New York, it's going to have that hipster vibe," Ms. Kleiman said. "In L.A., there's always room for a visible, iconic place that has a lot of expatriate attachment to it."

Papaya King teamed up with a restaurant and luxury developer, SBE, to open the shop here and, in the year to come, in other locations across the West. Sam Nazarian, the founder of the company, said he was not worried about the homegrown competition, saying the Papaya dog — not to mention the signature Papaya Drink, made with fresh papaya juice — would more than hold its own with the Western audience.

"Pink's is a fast-food stand — it has everything and anything," he said. "For us, it's literally all about the hot dog." Mr. Nazarian said he liked and respected Pink's, but "L.A., I think, is looking for something new."

That said, Ms. Kleiman, a native of Los Angeles, said that she had eaten a Papaya hot dog only once while on an East Coast visit. "Will I go out of my way to go there?" she said. "No. I am a Let's Be Frank kind of girl, and I live close to them."