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N. Ky. Man Brings Spice To Community

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Ike Akroush and his wife Amal own the Newport Gold Star Chili location, and can be found working there nearly every day. (Megan Graves)

It's not often a restaurant can feel like home.

Yet this is exactly what the Gold Star Chili restaurant in Newport, Ky., is to many people. And it's all thanks to Ike Akroush's passion for good food, friendly service and community involvement.

Ike and his wife Amal own the Newport Gold Star Chili location, and can be found working there nearly every day. This is a place where everybody knows your name – or certainly wants to.

“The public. It's the best part of the job. I love people. I know 80 percent of my customers by name,” said Ike with a smile.

And he's not kidding. Almost immediately after he finished his sentence, a car pulled up in the drive-thru and a “Hello, Ike!” rang out. Ike returned the greeting

and looked at me. “That’s the bankers,” he said.

Plaques and trophies line the walls, tokens of appreciation from thankful community groups such as the Ft. Thomas Police Department and the Highlands High School football team.

Whether it’s donating 1,000 cheese coney dogs or offering a 50-percent discount for the police and fire departments, Ike demonstrates his love for the community.

His zest for life is so contagious that he has even become the face of the chili company’s new commercials.

The Beginnings of a Legend—



It was in Lexington that Ike created his signature 6-way, taking the 5-way one step further by adding chopped hot dogs on top. (Megan Graves)

Ike moved to the U.S. from Jordan in 1972. He came to the Cincinnati area in 1974 and began his now 34-year tenure with Gold Star Chili working at the Commissary in 1975.

The Commissary is where Gold Star’s famous chili is made locally every day for its 95 locations. Almost 15,000 pounds of chili are produced each day. It is unique for a restaurant to produce and serve its food in the same location.

Ike confessed that he has never learned the secret blend of chili spices. “No one knows the secret.”

After two years, Ike went on to open his first restaurant in Lexington, where he enjoyed serving the college students affordable meals. It was in Lexington that Ike created his signature 6-way, taking the 5-way one step further by adding chopped hot dogs on top.

After Lexington, he was located in Madeira, Ohio. While he was waiting to be placed in Madeira, he worked one year for the Skyline Corporation in 1993. “I had

to come back," he said. "Gold Star was my family."

Finally in '96, Ike and Amal opened the current Newport location.

Creating Traditions—



Ike tells his employees: "You have to like what you are doing," he says. "This is what I tell my employees – if you don't like what you are doing, change to something else because you will never make it." (Megan Graves)

Ike has created many community traditions in Newport. He donates Gold Star Chili products to support local schools like Newport Central Catholic and Highlands high schools.

He was honored last year during a football game at Highlands, where he received a plaque and got to come out on the field. "There were cameras everywhere," he said. "And when I was walking back, everyone was saying 'Hi, Ike! Hey!' It looked like I know everyone."

Another plaque that he is very proud of, expresses appreciation for organizing the "Win for Quinn" golf outing. For an event to raise money for a local Fort Thomas boy who was battling cancer, the plaque features Quinn's sweet picture, and is treasured by Ike.

Ike regularly donates dinner for the local police department, and the members of the local police and fire departments enjoy using their discount to come eat at the restaurant.

"Once time, there was 16 SWAT team members here," remembered Ike. "It was the safest place to be."

Ike has also passed on the Gold Star Chili tradition to his two children. His son Mike owns the Bethel, Ohio, location; his daughter Dina and her husband Jerry Kuhrey own the Franklin, Ohio, location.

The Secrets of Success—



It's people like Ike who not only keep this tradition alive, but also create new ones to bring a community together. (Megan Graves)

Ike's passion for his job is evident.

"You have to like what you are doing," he says. "This is what I tell my employees – if you don't like what you are doing, change to something else because you will never make it."

He is committed to excellent customer service, a key to success he said. "You have to make them feel good. Make them feel at home, feel welcome."

Ike and Amal work together as a team.

"We've never had an argument," he said proudly. "When we enter the store, there's one boss... Once we leave, we're husband and wife, and then well, you know."

"I have never worked for someone else. Since I was 21 I have owned my own business."

And his advice for entrepreneurs: "You must work hard. If you're not ready to stay on top of it, don't do it."

According to Ike, success is achieved by the simple expectations of your customers.

"Service, cleanness, food are all important. People visit. Word travels."

A Local Favorite—

Gold Star Chili markets itself as "The flavor of Cincinnati," a local favorite as

beloved as the Bengals.

Charlie Howard, marketing director at Gold Star Chili said, “Greater Cincinnati has many unique traditions, and none is more important than the tradition of eating Cincinnati-style chili.”

And it’s people like Ike who not only keep this tradition alive, but also create new ones to bring a community together.

In an age where isolation comes easily and bad business occurs regularly, Ike offers the example of a committed community member who runs a good business and loves doing it.

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