

A regular stop for locals

Brandon Discount Beverage, Liquor and Tobacco



Store Manager Jay McLaren

A taste for maple comes with having Vermont in your DNA.

There's maple syrup, of course, maple frosted donuts, maple whiskey, maple liqueur and maple sugar candy, among many other ways this amber treat has been put to use. But walk into the Brandon Discount Beverage Liquor and Tobacco shop and you're likely to encounter one of the more unique ways maple has been included into something delicious: pizza.

"I make a maple base and it has ham, bacon and sausage on it," Store Manager Jay McLaren says of his creation. "And the ham I use is maple ham, so we've pretty much infused maple all the way through."

McLaren is part of the new team at Brandon Discount. Owner Muhammad Bilal and McLaren took over in March, and set about expanding and upgrading the 4,800-square-foot store. The duo removed walls, made electrical improvements, had plumbing work done and stripped three and one-half layers of tile from the floor. The result: A substantially different looking store that's bigger, offers more and has a welcoming, convenient feel.

BY BILL BURKE

"Customers love it," McLaren says. "They like being able to come in and get everything in one place at a decent price."

During the two-month renovation, during which the store stayed open, the new team also added ice cream and a deli — which is where the maple pizza can be had.

"I've cooked and worked in restaurants and I did deli work for 12 years," McLaren says of the expertise he brought to town.

"We have a lot of our own recipes. I make homemade oil vinegar, the maple base, a honey horseradish mayonaisse, and occasionally things like hot pepper cabbage that we use for hot Italian subs."

It's not all maple, however (well, aside from the Maple Magic sub). Bilal and McLaren have cooked up a menu with some recognizable offerings: the Conant Square (roast beef, Swiss, lettuce, pickles, green peppers and horseradish sauce) and the Brandon Heats Up (Buffalo chicken, three pepper Colby Jack, bacon, lettuce, ranch dressing and hot sauce).

What does McLaren reach for at lunchtime?

"I choose the Maple Magic, which is made with our own dressing," he says. "Or the pizza. It's

quick and easy to eat, which is important when there are only two employees and it gets busy."

When the store expanded, it also gave Bilal and McLaren the opportunity to increase the liquor agency. Step inside the front door — right across from the town park in Conant Square — and encounter the grocery. To the right are soda coolers and to the side, the deli. Directly across is a collection of beer coolers ("Our beer selection can be a little overwhelming — we have more than 130 different types," McLaren says) and next to that, the expanded liquor agency. Five aisles, with more behind the counter, are stocked with a wide range of spirits, including many Vermont-made products.

"We have two end-caps that are completely Vermont-themed," McLaren says. "We carry everything — Mad River Distillers, St. Johnsbury Distillery, Smugglers' Notch, WhistlePig, Green Mountain Organics, Metcalfe's from Vermont Distillers, Stonecutter Spirits — all of it."

The sheer variety of offerings, the extensive liquor selection, large beer coolers and the deli have led to Brandon Discount Beverage, Liquor and Tobacco becoming a regular stop for locals.

"We've got some everydayers who might stop by two to three times a day, which is

“If you need something, I'll get it for you. If we don't have it, I'll get it. We do our best to offer something for everybody that stops in.”

nice," McLaren says. "We value every customer, whether they spend ten cents or five grand. We've run stores in the past, I've run stores for 14 years, and what makes this one special is our attentiveness to our customers. If you need something, I'll get it for you. If we don't have it, I'll get it. We do our best to offer something for everybody that stops in." ▽

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Liquor and Tobacco**

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