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2 Bite-Size Eateries Too Popular for Their Neighbors' Good

By SCOTT JAMES

It is the sandwich that ate the neighborhood.

Ike's Place, a tiny doorway eatery in San Francisco's Castro village, has become such a foodie sensation that it has reached the pinnacle of Bay Area success: protest.

With up to 1,200 customers on sunny weekend days, Ike's has faced a backlash from neighbors. The once-quiet block on 16th Street is fed up with patrons who wait up to two hours for their chance to taste what they believe is nirvana between two slices of bread. In response to complaints, Ike's reduced its hours starting this month — it closes at 7 p.m.

"The only time we're not busy is when we're not open," said Ike Shehadeh, the owner.

On one level, what has happened to Ike's is emblematic of local attitudes — it has often been said that San Francisco has never met a protest it didn't like. But Nimby over a sandwich could be a new low.

A deeper look reveals an evolving trend in the local restaurant scene in which select homegrown favorites have made the leap from mere phenomena into the realm of obsession, leading to swarms of foodies who sometimes disregard common manners to sate their cravings. Fueled by the Internet, the trend is also a citizen uprising that undermines the power of food-critic gatekeepers.

What pushed Ike's into this stratosphere is a combination of mouthful and myth. Those in line say, "It's the best sandwich I've ever eaten." The bread is baked to order, smothered in garlicky "dirty sauce," and the 183 different sandwiches — some secret and available only to insiders — have whimsical names like the Backstabber (chicken with Caesar dressing) and the Do You Smell What Barack Is Cooking (thinly sliced rib-eye), both \$7.97.

When Mr. Shehadeh, 31, opened in 2007, no one was buying his culinary view — he had zero customers his first day. Depressed from what appeared to be a devastating failure, he closed for a week.

After he reopened, customers trickled in, and soon Mr. Shehadeh heard a powerful

four-letter-word: [Yelp](#). Diners posted raves on Yelp, an online review site. Business doubled every few months, Ike's now employs 47, and on busy days a reservation is required — yes, for a sandwich.

On Yelp there are nearly 2,000 reviews with an average score of 4.5 stars out of a possible five, putting Ike's in the ranks of Gary Danko, a Michelin star winner — a remarkable feat that happened without the blessing of the vaunted local newspaper food critic.

That makes Ike's the people's choice, and this sense of ownership mixed with fervor has brought repercussions. On one recent Saturday afternoon, the crowd was so big that the sidewalk was impassable. Without tables or seating, customers commandeer neighbors' stoops and doorways. Masking tape on the sidewalk marks a feeble effort to prevent diners from blocking homes' entrances.

Ike's installed stanchions to manage the line, but, in the end, foodie entitlement could be managed in only one way: closing early so neighbors could get some peace and quiet.

There is a similar scene at Bi-Rite Creamery, an ice cream parlor near Dolores Park. With more than 2,200 Yelp reviews — many of them wild for the salted caramel flavor — the line stretches around the block, resulting in as many as 1,500 scoops a day.

"I'm amazed every single day," Kris Hoogerhyde, a co-owner, said of the popularity.

The creamery's crowd is well-behaved, but at night many patrons are loud as they wander over to the spirited dining in the Mission and forget that the area is residential. "We go out there every once in a while and ask people to be respectful of the neighbors," Ms. Hoogerhyde.

Bi-Rite is temporarily closed for an expansion that will allow some of the crowd to move inside, and when it reopens, there will be eight new stanchions to try to keep customers in line.

Alison Bing, a food writer and the author of Lonely Planet's "San Francisco Encounter," said Ike's and Bi-Rite Creamery "inspire a level of passion that is unprecedented." She credits Internet chatter, but also said that both places sold upscale comfort food, morsels of luxury at recession prices — for those willing to invest the time waiting in line.

"I would do it," Ms. Bing said.

Mr. Shehadeh is clearly touched by all the attention — the word "love" pops up repeatedly in his conversation. And he is in the midst of spreading that love around: He has opened an Ike's in Redwood Shores, and will soon have a third at [Stanford University](#).

Alert the swarm.

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