



FOOD > RESTAURANTS



In buying Philly Bagels, the owner of Schmear It makes himself whole

Schmear It has bought out Philly Bagels — a major change for both the buyer (taking over a bakery) and the seller (a new, laid-back life on a farm in Cape May).



An everything bagel by Philly Bagels, 613 S. Third St., on Nov. 8, 2020.

Michael Klein / Staff

by Michael Klein

Published Sep. 27, 2023, 9:24 a.m. ET

A decade ago when [David Fine started his Schmear It bagel shop](#) out of a van on the Penn campus, he bought his bagels wholesale from [Philly Bagels](#), Aaron Wagner's family-owned bakery in Queen Village.

Last week, Fine bought Philly Bagels from Wagner.

Fine, 33, said he would gradually merge the branding of Philly Bagels and [Schmear It](#) as he learns the baking side of the business. Schmear It's shtick, based on creative spreads (or schmears), had been exclusively retail.

In addition to his two Schmear It shops, catering business, and the van (now used for private events), Fine has taken over Philly Bagels' bakery and flagship store on Third Street near Bainbridge as well as its five satellite shops in Center City and South Philadelphia.

Schmear It will maintain its mission of donating a cut of sales to local nonprofits.

"This completes Schmear It's concept and vision," Fine said. "For the first 10 years, we focused on three pillars — customer service, social impact, and a unique 'exschmearience,' but there was always a hole, pardon the pun."



David Fine of Schmear It bagels with his son.

Courtesy of David Fine

For Wagner, 40, the sale of the business founded in 1996 by his father, Michael, means a wholesale life change. He, his wife, Julie, and son have moved to Cape May, where they plan to do permaculture organic farming and open a small bagel cafe. They're expecting a second child next year.

Wagner has left a big part of himself in Queen Village. "I'd been there my whole life, since I can remember," said Wagner, whose family has been in the bagel industry for five generations. "I was helping my grandparents, before school and after school, when I was in middle school and high school, and then my dad opened the shop off South Street." He grew up in Cherry Hill but lived above the shop for many years.

Wagner traveled a bit after college but took over for his father about 10 years ago.

Michael Wagner now lives on a farm in Pennsylvania. There's also still a Wagner in the bagel business. Aaron Wagner's sister, Lesley, owns the Bagel Spot in Cherry Hill, founded by their grandparents, Miriam and Norman Fleischman.



Aaron Wagner (right) with his father, Michael, his wife, Julie, and baby Jordan. Michael Wagner opened Philly Bagels in 1996, and Aaron had run it for 10 years.

Courtesy of Aaron Wagner

Wagner said the stress of the pandemic had caught up to him. "I only had a couple of options, and one of the options was selling the business," he said.

“Thank God for Dave, because I had a relationship with him. I couldn’t find, or even think of, someone better than him to take the reins and making it better.”

Wagner and Fine settled the transaction on the morning of Sept. 21 and met with the staff that afternoon. “It was very emotional,” Wagner said. “A lot of my staff was crying and I could barely get through the first sentence. Then I got more composed and was able to verbalize the transition and how this was needed for the business.”

On Sunday from his new home, Wagner reflected on the change. “It’s been my whole life, but I feel a lot lighter,” he said. “I feel relief. My family dynamic was all consumed with the business and to not have that and to take a step back and actually reestablish a relationship with my family outside of business is something that I’m looking forward to.”



Michael Klein [✉](#) [🐦](#) [📷](#)

I cover the food and restaurant scene, including businesses and the people.
