

Bennett Compagno
A Profile by Tony Seton

If there isn't a word in Italian for *mensch*, what should one call Bennett Compagno; an extraordinary presence with a strong face and gently penetrating eyes? Born and raised in Monterey, part of a large extended family, he has long been a fixture at the Market and Deli that bears his name, on Prescott Street across from the Taylor Street Gate at the Defense Language Institute.

"My dad bought this place in '66. I would go to school, get on the bus, be dropped off down the street, and come and help my father." Bennett was seven years old. What was his work? "Sweeping and eating." He took over when the elder Compagno passed in 1997.

What has changed since the place opened? "People using credit cards was new. The military putting the gates up. That meant fewer people going through the base were stopping in for food. And it meant less military. More tourists. A lot more vegetarians. A lot more people are allergic to gluten, so we have the gluten-free breads and stuff, and we do lettuce wraps."

The deli has been recognized in local surveys as having some of the best sandwiches – the half-sized are ridiculously large – on The Peninsula. The opinion is underscored by the large number of regular customers. The clientele breaks down to about 80% military, the rest are either neighborhood people, or faithful customers who drive out there every week or month just to say hello to Bennett, and get something to eat. And people who are hungry when they drive up the hill.

The military decor is appropriate for his customers. There are unit flags and the name plates of officers who served at DLI and then moved on; many come back to visit and they stop in to say hello to Bennett. There are also the two pieces of the tail rotor of a helicopter, air plane models hanging from the ceiling, and a slew of G.I. Joe dolls for sale.

What also attracts the DLI students is the fact that Compagno's has an amazing assortment of beers. "I try to get specialty beers that nobody else carries. They teach Turkish up there. They teach Arabic up there. They teach Russian up there. So I try, when I do ordering, to keep that in mind. And then I tell them that if they buy the Russian beer they'll speak better Russian."

He also has a number of soda lines that are popular back East but almost impossible to find in California. Have you ever heard of the Faygo brand from Detroit? It's a favorite with the heavy metal band, Insane Clown Posse, such that they spray their fans with Faygo's Red Pop soda. There's also Sprecher gourmet soda from Wisconsin. And Bennett says a couple drove down here from Pittsburg to buy a six-pack of Dang



Butterscotch Root Beer.

I asked him how have the military people changed over the years. "I think they're smarter. They're all learning a language. It's hard. I think they're brilliant." He picks up some words in various languages from his customers. "Most of them are bad words. That's what I ask them to teach me. "

As if he didn't have enough on his proverbial plate, in addition to being the owner and seven-day-a-week manager, Bennett also does catering. Alone? "My Mom comes and helps me."

What is most significant about his business? "Meeting people. Hundreds come through every day. They're all different. That's my favorite thing... meeting people, a lot of good people. Their attitudes are awesome when they come in here."

His aunt tells what she calls her favorite "Bennett" story. It occurred when she asked a career officer where in the world he had been stationed. The man answered "Oh everywhere, you name it. Kuwait, Afghanistan, Saudi, Germany, the Far East...everywhere. But, wherever I go, even in the farthest outpost, when they find out I've been in Monterey they'll ask, 'Do you know Bennett?'"

The reach goes both ways. Invariably when he's out of town, on vacation or at a convention, someone will ask him, "Hey, is my sandwich ready?"

The market is open seven days a week, "And yes, I'm here every day." When he's not at the market, he's often out on errands, or having dinner with friends or playing poker. Does he enjoy working every day? "I do." Over Thanksgiving he took a four-day vacation, his longest in six years, to visit his sister in Nevada.

Those who know him describe Bennett as a man with a big heart, and it's often on display. Unlike many people so described, he doesn't take a long time to warm up to people. "I can tell if someone is a good person. They just give that aura." Does he find that with a lot of people? Not everybody, of course, but most.

Bennett lives in Monterey.