

Restaurant scores big with 'give cabbies a lunch day'

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By Ann Belser, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Pam Panchak / Post-Gazette

Chenevert of Brentwood gets a free lunch from Morton's, Downtown, during the restaurants Taxi Cab Driver Appreciation Day yesterday.

Historically, curbside service along Liberty Avenue hasn't included chips and an apple.

But yesterday the staff at Morton's The Steakhouse provided drive-through service to the more than 100 cab drivers who stopped for a free bagged lunch.

Bill Ferron, the general manager of Morton's, at 625 Liberty, found it easy to hail a cab after work, even in the rain, as he waved silver-coated bags, each containing three mini filet mignon sandwiches served on Pepperidge Farm rolls -- complete with chips and an apple.

In a little more than an hour's time, the staff at Morton's handed out 140 lunches to drivers of cabs, limousines and airport shuttles. One off-duty driver pulled up in his own car and flashed his driver's identification.

Jitneys were not included in the appreciation, which kept the horn beeping to a minimum.

George McCary, 59, of Garfield, showed his appreciation of the Morton's staff by serenading them with Beethoven's "Für Elise," which he played on the portable keyboard he had propped up in the passenger's seat. Mr. McCary, a cab driver for 30 years, has been teaching himself piano as he waits for fares at the airport.

During his years as a cabbie, he said, "I've watched Pittsburgh grow from an industrial to a technological stage. Cab drivers see more of Pittsburgh than anyone else will ever see."

He noted that while police officers can eat for free any day, this free lunch from Morton's was a first for local cab drivers.

"They should do this once a month," he said. But then he said he didn't want the food usually available to the police: "We don't want no doughnuts."

It was easy for Morton's to get the word out to the cab drivers about the lunch -- all of the

local cabs are owned by the same company -- but jitneys would be harder to reach since they are not even legal.

While the lunch was nice, it was the Morton's dress code that put cabbie Al Schraepfer, 72, of Avalon, over the edge.

"Tuxedos!" he said after receiving his lunch in his Airport Express van. "Holy Pete!"

Mr. Ferron said he had his tuxedo cleaned for the occasion, but then, working at Morton's, tuxedos are everyday wear.

The restaurant, which normally does not serve lunch, had a line of cabs up the street when it "opened" yesterday at noon to show its appreciation for the drivers who bring the customers.

"It shows they care about the business we bring them," said a driver for Peoples Cab who would give his name as only Thomas. "When out-of-towners come, we're the first people they speak to."

He said he generally takes them to Morton's when they are looking for a steak.

Any of the cab drivers who wanted to compliment the chef could: Todd Weiss was on the sidewalk running lunch bags and bottled water to the cabs faster than a New York minute.

Matt Doherty, the local spokesman for Morton's, said the restaurant chain had given lunches to hackney drivers in other cities, most recently in Nashville, Tenn.; Miami; Louisville, Ky.; and Denver -- but not New York, the taxi capital of America.

New York has 13,000 medallion cabs and an untold number of gypsy cabs, their answer to our jitneys.

"If you did it in New York," Mr. Doherty said, "You'd need a lot more than 140 sandwiches."

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