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New Menchie's frozen yogurt shop comes to Valleydale Marketplace in Indian Springs Village

By: Bob Carlton



Ana and Roberto Rodriguez are the franchisees of the new Menchie's yogurt bar that is opening Wednesday in the Valleydale Marketplace retail center in Indian Springs Village. It is the first Menchie's franchise in Alabama.

Back in their hometown of New Orleans, Ana and Roberto Rodriguez have driven 45 minutes across the Lake Pontchartrain bridge to take their 6- and 11-year-old kids to get their Menchie's fro-yo fix.

"The kids want to hang out there," Ana Rodriguez says. "If you go after school, there is a line to get in."

Now, the New Orleans couple is bringing one of the country's fastest-growing frozen yogurt chains to the Birmingham area, opening a Menchie's in the Valleydale Marketplace retail center on Valleydale Road in Indian Springs Village.

It is their first Menchie's franchise, as well as the first in Alabama, and the Rodriguezes have purchased the rights to open two more -- here or elsewhere. The Birmingham location opens today.

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"We are looking at other markets," Roberto Rodriguez says. "We haven't exclusively targeted other parts of the city, or even other cities. We are going to look at the best demographics and best opportunities when it comes to real estate.

The original Menchie's opened in Los Angeles in 2007, and as the self-serve, frozen-yogurt craze has spread around the country, the chain has grown to include nearly 70 locations in the U.S. and Canada.

Adam Caldwell, who co-founded the company with his wife, Danna, came up with the name Menchie's from the Yiddish word "mensch," which means "a person of integrity and honor."

Last year, Restaurant Business Magazine awarded Menchie's first place in its annual Future 50 list of the country's fastest-growing food franchises. The company has plans to open 100 more franchises this year.

The Rodriguezes are new to the retail food business -- he is an accountant, and she has worked as the executive director of a Louisiana tourism agency -- but they're not new to Birmingham, having lived here twice before.

Ten years ago, Roberto Rodriguez came here to buy and run Yellow Cab Co., which he owned for three years before moving back to New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, he came back to Birmingham to work as an accountant for the Southern Progress Corp.

Now back in New Orleans again, the Rodriguezes chose to open their first Menchie's franchise in Birmingham -- and specifically the Valleydale Road area -- because of its appealing demographics.

Tucked between highways U.S. 280 and U.S. 31 and located about a mile from Spain Park High School, the area is teeming with their target audience of schoolkids -- more than 11,000 within a three-mile radius, Roberto Rodriguez says.

The Rodriguezes have hired a manager to run their franchise here, but plan to keep frequent tabs on the business.

"New Orleans is my home now because I need a day job that pays the bills," Roberto Rodriguez says. "We didn't invest in Menchie's to buy a job. This is an investment for us."

Exclusive flavors

As at other frozen-yogurt franchises, Menchie's customers mix and match their choices of yogurt flavors and toppings at self-serve stations, and then weigh and pay by the ounce. The Menchie's here charges 45 cents an ounce, or \$4.50 for a 10-ounce serving.

Menchie's will keep 14 yogurt flavors in stock, out of a rotating supply of nearly 100 flavors, including regular, no-sugar-added, low-carb and dairy-free selections.

Some of the private-label flavors that are exclusive to Menchie's include Vanilla Snow, Red Velvet, Georgia Peach and Ana Rodriguez's favorite, Mounds.

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Customers also may choose from about 60 toppings, including cereals, candies, chocolates and fruits.

Menchie's also has its own line of kid-friendly merchandise -- including T-shirts, hoodies, watches, charm bracelets and dodgeballs -- all of which feature its swirly-headed cartoon icon "Menchie."

The dominant hues in the shop's color scheme is a bright lime and a faded burgundy -- or kiwi and raspberry, as Ana Rodriguez calls it.

"It's fun," she says. "You walk in here, and the colors are fun."

"Our whole thing is, welcome and stay a while," she adds. "And our motto is, 'We make you smile.'"

Celebrity sightings

In Los Angeles, as yogurt bars have become the hot spot to hang out, Menchie's is a favorite of such teen-friendly pop stars as Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez, Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift. Reports of their sightings are updated frequently on the Menchie's website, www.menchies.com.

Yogurt shops also have sprung up like mushrooms all over the Birmingham metro area in the past couple of years, including such franchises such as Red Mango, 32 Degrees, Tutti Frutti and Yogurt Mountain, among others.

But the Rodriguezes believe customers are hungry for more.

"In California, you have one across the street from the other," Ana Rodriguez says. "It's a great, healthy, alternative dessert."

Menchie's is in the former Quiznos location at 2675 Valleydale Road. The phone number is 874-6335.

Hours are 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

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