

# Pair make Blimpie restaurant dream fly

By TOM BAER  
STAFF WRITER

The sign — BLIMPIE in big yellow letters with red and green trim — stands out in the shopping mall in northern Farmington Hills.

Inside, the restaurant is splashed with more Blimpie colors right down to the green shirts and caps — emblazoned with the logo, of course — that owners Randy Alderman and Mike Klein are wearing as they hustle to get their submarine sandwich and salad shop ready to open.

Blimpie is new to the Detroit area, and Alderman and Klein are new to the field of restaurant management. The pair, fast friends since their high school days at Southfield-Lathrup, chucked careers in accounting to make their Blimpie dream fly.

Small business is risky business, especially in an area that seems to be saturated with gobble-and-go restaurants. And give that eatery a name — Blimpie — that might bring to mind something fat, slow and silly, and there's even more uncertainty.

But Alderman and Klein, calmly enthusiastic at all times, aren't afraid.

"Sure there's risk," said Klein, a 25-year-old Southfield resident. "There's risk in everything in life. But we just didn't want to look back 10 years from now and say, 'Hey, we should have tried that Blimpie thing.'"

And the name? "It might sound silly, but you remember it," he replied.

After Lathrup High, the two attended Michigan State University together. Both graduated in '89. Then they separated, Klein taking a job in southern California, Alderman going with an accounting firm in the Detroit area.

But it didn't take long for them to realize that the button-down world of accountancy with its numbers, ledgers and tax forms just wasn't for them.

"Accountants work hard at tax time," said Alderman, 24, of Farmington Hills, "but the rest of the time it's a monotonous job, 9 to 5 behind a desk. I just didn't want that."

So they got back together and

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Mike Klein

bought a Blimpie franchise — neither wants to say for how much — and now, one year and \$100,000 in start-up costs later, they're open for business in the Orchard Place Mall on Orchard Lake Road south of 14 Mile.

These days they deal with landlords; city bureaucracy; food vendors; employees (there are six at present); and customers, most of them satisfied, others cranky and difficult. Their work weeks soar to 85 or 90 hours. They say they love it.

They say they haven't had a day off since Blimpie opened in July. It's 9:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. six days a week, but "Sunday is an easy day . . . only 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.," Klein said.

There are no wives or children. Both are single and live with their parents.

The location isn't bad, they say, even though commerce sometimes takes a beating in the malls along the Farmington Hills stretch of Orchard Lake Road.

"It's pretty good," said Klein. "It's high traffic. It's set back from the road a little, kind of hard to see, and that's too bad."

Both hope things will improve after a renovation links the Orchard Place mall with the Hunter's Square shopping center to the north.

Blimpie is a Hoboken, N.J.-based chain that boasts of freshly-sliced meat and cheese and fresh baked bread. The company hopes to open up to 60 outlets in the Detroit area over the next five years, a recent press report said.

Company training for Alderman and Klein consisted of six days of classes in Atlanta and 80 hours as apprentices in Blimpies. Now



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Working friends: Randy Alderman (left) and Michael Klein, friends since high school, are together in their Blimpie franchise in Farmington Hills.

that they have their own store, there is a franchise fee of 6 percent of the gross sales every week.

"There's never a dull moment," said Alderman, who added that the high point so far has been an open house attended by their friends, families and well-wishers.

Klein's biggest business respon-

sibility? "Probably pleasing the customers," he said. "If they don't like it the first time, they're not going to come back."

Added Alderman: "When people tell me, 'This is the greatest sandwich I've ever had,' that makes it for me. I know I did the right thing."

Despite difficulties, you have to put on that happy business face for the customers, even troublesome ones, the young partners said.

"If you get mad, you can't let the customers know. Wait'll they leave and then . . . bang!" said Alderman, hitting an ice-making ma-

chine in the kitchen area.

Randy Alderman and Mike Klein were fast friends through high school and college. Will that friendship withstand the pressures of running a fast food business?

"So far it has," they said, almost in unison.

# School district moves ahead on building repair projects

By CASEY HANS  
STAFF WRITER

Bit by bit, the Farmington school district has upgraded its buildings.

This, despite the loss of a 1988 bond issue that would have allocated \$20 million for such projects and spread the debt over many years.

The district has, instead, used operating money to repair and replace roofs, added new windows to save energy costs, upgraded electrical to allow better technology use, put in new cabinetry for more efficient storage and approved renovations and building additions where necessary.

Since 1987 — about the time the district made building maintenance a priority — the district has spent more than \$30 million to upgrade its buildings, according to figures in the district's master plan. That includes \$7 million in bond money approved by voters to build Hillside Elementary; the rest was taken from operating or capital funds.

Many of the more recent changes were proposed in a September 1990 facilities task force report, which contained an aggressive recommendation that \$10.35 million be spent over two years.

That was scaled down due to budget constraints, but several large projects were approved including:

- The \$950,000 project at Eagle Elementary which is nearly complete.
- A total of \$876,000 in new cabinetry for seven elementary schools.
- About \$1.4 million for electrical and other upgrades for North Farmington High School.
- The ongoing renovation and



Don Cowan

addition at Power Middle School which is being done in two phases and will cost about \$4 million.

Don Cowan, director of building and student services for the district, recalls his days as an elementary building principal in the 1960s when a dozen buckets caught water leaking through the roof.

"We're just getting caught up on years of neglecting our buildings," he said. "Thank God we did it. We still have a long way to go — especially in the high schools."

The district's three high schools will be the next area of focus, as the bubble of student growth moves through the middle school and into the upper grades.

Cowan said school administrators will likely meet with the board before budget time in 1993 to discuss future projects, how they fit into a 10-year master plan for capi-

tal projects, and just what the district can afford. There are also concerns with overcrowding at Beechview and Larkshire elementary schools.

Although the district has earmarked 1.25 mills — about \$3.3 million — of its operating millage for a building and site fund, Cowan believes state cuts may force the district's hand in future years. "Our days of having available monies in the general fund . . . are over," he said. "These things will probably be done with a future bond issue."

"It will be contingent on what the community will allow us to do," he added. "We want to do it in a frugal manner and in an appropriate way."

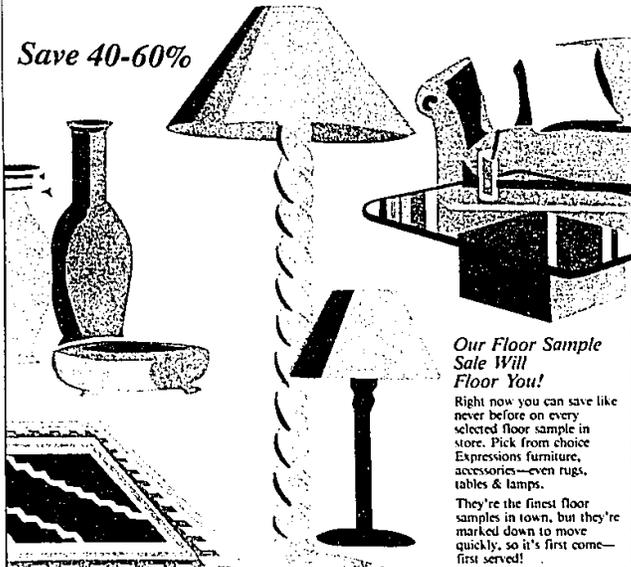
Cowan responds to criticism that schools have less students with the same number of rooms, by saying that the world, and education has "changed drastically." The district now has things like resource rooms, computer rooms, telecommunications studios and a smaller pupil-to-teacher ratio. All have "reduced the capacity greatly," he said.

The district also needs to be concerned in the coming year about the federal Americans With Disabilities Act, which could cause the district to change its capital plans, depending on the impact of the act. An audit is being conducted now to determine what the district might have to do, Cowan said.

The recent years of focusing on capital improvements in the district have brought most buildings to a workable maintenance level, Cowan added. "I think we've done an outstanding job. Even if we have a strong austerity budget . . . we could cut back and still be presentable."

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## Seminar hosts award-winning authors

Two award-winning writers will speak at the 31st Annual Writers' Conference Oct. 9-10 at Oakland University.

Friday's keynote is James K. Morrow, whose novel "Wine of Violence" (1981) was cited by the

American Book Review as "the best SF novel published in English during the last ten years." Morrow will speak at the 6-10 p.m. dinner reception Friday at Meadow Brook Hall.

The 12:45 p.m. Saturday luncheon program speaker is Sue Hazri-

son, from the Upper Peninsula, whose first novel "Mother Earth Father Sky" was chosen one of 1991's best books for young adults.

This year, 25 professional writers, editors and agents will critique manuscripts and poetry.