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In-N-Out not living up to its name

By BOB POOL

MARCH 13, 2008
12 AM

TIMES STAFF WRITER



Their beef isn't with the burger.

Merchants near some Southern California In-N-Out Burger restaurants say their gripe is with growing traffic jams at drive-through lanes that are keeping customers from getting in and out of their stores.

Long lines of idling cars whose occupants are waiting for made-to-order double-doubles, fries and chocolate shakes sometimes spill into streets and block driveways and alleys, according to owners of adjacent businesses.

The traffic crunch has sent executives of the Irvine-based chain on a crash program to open new outlets to relieve pressure on existing In-N-Outs. The chain is also expanding its corps of young red-apron-clad workers with hand-held terminals outside to speed up drive-through lines.

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“We try really hard to be good neighbors and not block people’s driveways,” said Carl Van Fleet, In-N-Out Burger’s vice president of planning and development. “Long after stores were built we’ve gone back and spent heavily to improve our capacity and order-taking ability.”

Unlike most fast-food burger joints, In-N-Out doesn’t put its meat on the grill until customers place their order.

Fans of In-N-Out say that freshness is one of the draws of the drive-through.

But neighbors’ complaints are starting to pile up like the stack of beef patties and cheese slices on the famed In-N-Out “4x4” burger.



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“The drive-through line is so long some days that it blocks our parking lot in the rear of our store,” said Kitty Chu, manager of a Quizno’s Subs shop next to an In-N-Out on Topanga Canyon Boulevard in Canoga Park. “We’ve lost a lot of customers because they can’t get in. Our UPS driver can’t even make deliveries during the noon rush.”

The Canoga Park In-N-Out -- which opened last year in what had been a Krispy Kreme doughnut shop -- offers inside seating as well as drive-through service. The closest parking for dine-in patrons is in a small lot in front of Chu's shop, however.

A few miles away, at an In-N-Out in Woodland Hills, the drive-through line often spills out of the driveway and onto Ventura Boulevard. At busy times, waiting customers sometimes block the entrances to the 23-store Winnetka Square shopping center next door.

"They overflow into the street and into traffic-flow lanes," said Celso Acebal, a Pepsi driver making a delivery to the shopping center. "Those people are stubborn too. They won't move. They don't want to give up their spot in line."

Mike Curtis, an employee of the center's Wish Us Well medical supply shop has a front-row view of the congestion from his storefront window.

"It affects our customers. A lot of them are elderly and they get flustered when they can't pull in or they can't get out of the parking lot because the exit is blocked," Curtis said.

In-N-Out drive-through customers line their cars up the middle of a Blockbuster store's parking lot on Venice Boulevard in West Los Angeles.

"They don't affect our sales, but they affect our customers' attitude," said video rental cashier Sergio Flores. "They can't get in to park. If they are able to park, they may not be able to back out and leave."

He and his co-workers have seen the drive-through backup "so long that it takes 30 or 45 minutes to get through the line," Flores said.

The In-N-Out line sometimes overflows the video store's lot and continues for half a block along Venice Boulevard.

"I guess people really love to eat there," said Blockbuster customer Danielle Michail, a Culver City

homemaker. “But it is intimidating to everybody who wants to come here for a video. You can’t get in or out of a parking place here.”

One of those most angry about the drive-through line congestion is Arcadia bagel bakery owner Michael Goldstein. He has sicced police on drive-through motorists who block his parking lot entrance and threatened to sue In-N-Out for interference with his business.

“After 15 years of being nice I’m determined to end it,” Goldstein said of the lines of waiting cars that sometimes seal off both the entrance and exit to his Santa Anita Avenue parking lot.

In-N-Out officials have erected signs asking customers not to “block our neighbor’s driveways” and attempted to keep Goldstein’s entryway clear. “But then they get a new manager or district manager and it gets bad again,” he said.

Goldstein has demanded that Arcadia police ticket drive-through customers waiting next to the red-painted curb in front of his shop. “It’s illegal to stop next to a red curb,” he said.

Arcadia Police Lt. Paul Foley said several citations have been issued. But, he said, “we can’t write tickets because someone is sitting in their car waiting to turn into a driveway.”

City traffic engineers are now studying the lane-striping in the vicinity of the In-N-Out, Foley said. Pavement in front of Goldstein’s two driveways might be painted with “Do Not Block Driveway” markings, he said.

“I have to say In-N-Out has been very conscious of its neighbors,” Foley added. “I’ve seen In-N-Out employees policing Mr. Goldstein’s parking lot to pick up trash after they’ve closed. They try to address problems.”

In-N-Out’s Van Fleet said his company “truly hopes that all the businesses around us are successful.”

He denies that company drive-throughs have been built so customers have to line up on public

streets.

“We don’t design stores to have cars stack on the street. And we never did,” he said.

In 1986 the chain stopped building its signature two-lane burger stands that have no interior seating. But, he added, “the older locations are much more busy than they were 30 years ago.”

The Arcadia outlet opened about 25 years ago, Van Fleet said. The West Los Angeles restaurant is about 20 years old, and the Woodland Hills store is 32.

In-N-Out has been on a building binge, in part to relieve pressure on the older outlets. It now has 213 restaurants.

Newer In-N-Outs, such as those in Porter Ranch and Culver City, have long drive-through lanes.

In places such as West Los Angeles, however, finding the acre of developable land that new In-N-Outs need is difficult, Van Fleet said. That is why the former Krispy Kreme store in Canoga Park was turned into an In-N-Out last year.

“We knew the lines were getting long at Woodland Hills. We were trying for years to find a suitable location nearby. We’d love to have a bigger parking lot in Canoga Park, but there were no one-acre lots available.”

The Canoga Park outlet “has significantly knocked down” traffic flow at the Woodland Hills restaurant, he said.

Next in line, though, is a fix to the drive-through problem in Canoga Park, he said.

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