

PEOPLE rise and dine



DOUGHBOY

IS A

BREAD WINNER

Local man, Mike Wilson, soothes your hunger.

story by **Matt Pitt** photos by **George Perina**

Next time you're in a restaurant, buttering an artisan loaf or nibbling a dinner roll, waiting for your entrée to arrive from the kitchen, take a moment to toast a man named Mike Wilson. No, Wilson isn't some fancy chef de cuisine. And he doesn't own a string of high-end restaurants on the Coast. But he's probably been responsible, at one point or another, for soothing your hunger.

What Wilson knows, distributes, and deals in is bread. For 35 years, he's started up his van, around the time most people turn in for the night. He drives south and west, a 6 x 12 trailer hitched behind him, headed for New Orleans. When he returns, well past the witching hour, he's carrying in tow roughly 3,000 pieces of the Crescent City's best bread. Over the next few hours, that bread will find its way into restaurants, grocery stores — and mouths — across Mississippi's Gulf Coast.

Wilson, whose nickname is doughboy, has been in this line of work since 1974. Six years before that he joined the service, moving here from upstate New York. After his military stint, he partnered with a Louisiana man who wanted to provide authentic, New Orleans-style French bread to Mississippi customers. Though the partner quit soon after, Wilson resolutely took the reins, and has run the business, Fresh Distributing Company, ever since. >>

Over the years, Wilson's client list has risen. He now claims a hundred accounts in Mississippi's three coastal counties. This includes longtime local favorites Lookout 49, Little Ray's, and Pirate's Cove. Wilson also counts the Beau Rivage, Island View, the Hollywood, and other casinos among his clientele.

During the trip down Highway 59 from Wilson's Stone County home, he thinks about where the daily bread from this trip will go. He also thinks about drumming up even more business. "I don't sit back and wait for customers," said Wilson. "I go out and get them."

To be sure, Wilson has lots of quiet time in which to contemplate and make plans. His helter-skelter schedule sounds both grueling and lonesome. During normal business hours, his administrative assistant compiles and calls in client orders. At night Wilson and another employee drive separate vans to New Orleans around 11 p.m.

By half past midnight, Wilson completes the journey's first leg.

He buys all his goods from two New Orleans bakeries, Leidenheimer's and Binder's. While the crusty French bread famous in Po-boys is his top seller, Wilson supplies a huge product list. That list includes sliced bread, dinner rolls, hamburger buns, breadsticks, pistolettes, and even king cakes.

Around four in the morning Wilson returns across Mississippi's state line. For the next eight hours he's in delivery mode: embarking on west-to-east rounds that begin in

Diamondhead, go through Gulfport, and end in Ocean Springs. Along the way his odometer skyrockets. "I drive 350 miles a day," Wilson estimated. "I change oil like most people refer." His vans tend to burn out within five years. He does own one '94 model boasting 620,000 miles, but it's a rarity. "By the time you get them paid for," he mused, "it's time to get a new one."

If Wilson's 12-to-18 hour days have taken a physical toll, he doesn't cop to it. "I do have Sundays and Wednesdays off," he explained. "Those are catch-up days." Though for a time, Wilson worried that Hurricane Katrina might force him into early retirement. For three months after the storm hit, Wilson was almost completely out of work. "I had no customers. I had no way to get the product. I was totally distraught," he recalled. Eventually his customers came back, and told him, to his pride and relief, that they needed him back, too.

So come back he did. And though bakeries do dot Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Wilson believes that none quite replicate the exemplary products he hauls back. Of course there's also a touch of mystique surrounding New Orleans's rolls and loaves.

"The bread my customers use is the same found on Bourbon Street, and at Commander's Palace," he noted approvingly. In all these years dealing with dough, Wilson's become a bit of a connoisseur himself. He can explain to skeptical customers why inconsistencies in French bread are par for the course. He can determine whether the bread he's enjoying at a restaurant has been baked in a pan or on a flat board. And he can tell when a particular loaf is lacking, too. "I may not know where it's come from," he said of such cases. "But I know it's not mine."

For more information go to: www.freshdistributing.com or call 228.297.ROLL.



MIKE WILSON loads up his van for the next delivery.