

The overwhelming smell of fried dough hits, and it's like walking into a excellent dream. Everyone in the room is laughing. No one takes anyone else too seriously. There is talk of Assassin's Creed and enough flour to recreate the cover of an Al Pacino movie. To-do lists written on white paper bags hang on the wall with Scotch tape.

It all surrounds the reason everyone is here: the racks and racks of tomorrow's donuts in the middle of the room.

Hundreds of pounds of dough become hundreds of donuts every night to be sold to hundreds of customers at Fox's Donut Den. The back room is where it all happens.

The dough travels from the mixer to the table to the fryer to the racks and finally out into the store. The leftover dough goes to be mixed in with the next day's batch.

Every night there is more dough to be mixed and molded and fried.

The room is packed with second shift hard at work making tomorrow's batch. Kneading, rolling, forming, frying, icing and glazing. After all is complete, the finished product is added to one of the racks.

Harold Graves is standing out of everyone's way. Waiting. He is soon to be hard at work as he has been nearly daily for 40 years.

Making donuts is his 9-to-5. But not Dolly Parton's 9-to-5.

9 p.m. to 5 a.m. He works third shift.

Kneading, rolling, forming, frying, icing, glazing.

"Harold has been the backbone of the store since 1978," said Ted Fox — the owner's son.

"Well I don't know about the backbone," Graves responds humbly.

Fox stands beside Graves every night. The two of them make up third shift.

"I've been doing this since birth, and I still can't keep up with Harold," Fox said. "Forty plus years and he hasn't messed up a single donut."

They won't get in each other's way. They know exactly where the other is going to be before he even starts walking like a well choreographed dance. They know how to work together. For Fox's whole life, he has been working with Graves.

"He taught me how to do this."

But before Fox and Graves begin their night, they wait on second shift to finish its donuts. And as he waits, Graves constantly tells stories.

In the middle of one story, one of the guys working second shift — Mark Smith — is talking about the art of making donuts.

"The thing about this job is it's a workout," he said pointing at the top of his finger. "You work out this muscle right here. If only anyone was into that."

This is what is constantly going on in the back of Fox's Donut Den. Swapping stories and jokes.

Graves is quick to laugh so he chuckles at Smith's joke and quickly goes back to telling his story.

"I started here by mopping the floors. But I started hanging out with the cooks in the back and gradually moved back here," he said as he started preparing things for his shift.

There is never a moment of silence. As soon as conversation lulls, Graves starts a new story. One about the time the store got robbed, or the time he saw smoke and called the fire department to save the day.

"I'm still waiting on my million dollars," he said.

Conversation calms down and he comes up with a new topic.

"Hopefully, I'll retire in two years. Then I'll be working for my wife," Graves said.

But for now anyway, he is here at the Donut Den.

Smith and the rest of the earlier crew finish their donuts as the clock creeps toward 11. The room begins to clear until two are left.

It's time for Graves and Fox to take action.

Kneading, rolling, forming, frying, icing, glazing.

This is the side of the Donut Den the customers never see. The side that provides the donuts that have been enjoyed by Nashvillians for decades.

The personality of the shop lives in the back with Fox and Graves while the rest of Nashville is resting for the next day.

As soon as Graves stops waiting and starts working, the stories cease. It's time for business now. And time for Fox to do the talking.

Many nights are spent listening to reruns of Art Bell's "Coast to Coast AM." A radio show about paranormal activity and conspiracy theories.

There is a new host now but the bakers only listen to the original, Fox said.

"At midnight we start getting down to the truth," he said, albeit, sarcastically.

They listen to this show in particular because they can still concentrate on their job. The talk of alien races and faked moon landings won't distract them from the reason they are here.

Kneading, rolling, forming, frying, icing, glazing.

Art Bell is good for background noise and laughs.

Fox wasn't lying. As the hour draws to a close he asked: "Harold, you feel like Art Bell tonight?"

Graves laughs and, of course, agrees to listen. But he doesn't take his eyes or mind off the donuts. He works quickly and delicately as if he has been doing it — well — for 40 years.

The rambling of Art Bell begins and Fox remembers regulars from over the years since Graves first taught him how to bake. He recalls a zen painter who used to talk about the philosophy of donuts. Something about donuts being like a river, he said failing to remember more details.

He transitions to the other lessons and philosophies the donuts hide and Graves speaks up for the first time since he agreed to Art Bell.

"It is more complicated than you would think. Don't know if that's even a lesson or not," he said.

Fox rolls with it and adds to Grave's wisdom. Donuts are more complicated, and more important than people think.

"Donuts are how people save money. It is recession food. When business is supposed to be down, it isn't," he said.

He is the one who makes those cheap rings that help people during tough times. That's why they stay up all night every night. A donut is more than a circle of fried dough.

It is more than kneading, rolling, forming, frying, icing and glazing.

"You make donuts. You just make people happy. We are healing a lot of broken hearts out there," Fox said.

Written by: Harrison Baldwin