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New sandwich joint rolls into Iowa City

Marc Torres isn't just blowing smoke when he says there's a buzz about Iowa City's newest sandwich shop.

By Tuesday afternoon, the first day Cheba Hut "Toasted" Subs had opened for business, a steady stream of college-aged customers jonesing for some midday munchies was filing through the door at 314 E. Burlington St.

For the marijuana-themed restaurant chain, known in college towns for sandwiches like the Majic Mushroom, the Chronic and the Afghani, the Iowa City location will be its first east of Colorado and 14th overall.

"I can't believe how much buzz is going around town," said Torres, a franchise consultant who was in Iowa City this week to train employees. "Everybody is stoked."

Cheba Hut bills itself as the nation's only counter-culture restaurant franchise, where "the only thing fried is the occasional customer," as its website puts it. The bulk of its locations are in Colorado and Arizona near university campuses.

"Our doors are open to everybody, but obviously we wouldn't put one up in a suburb," Torres said.

Operationally, Cheba Hut appears to be a sandwich shop in the traditional mold. A line of workers builds subs to order — be it nug, pinner or blunt sizes — with fresh ingredients. There's a vegetarian menu, soups and salads.

But with Kool-Aid on tap, hemp brownies at the counter, reggae music thumping, and cannabis-themed artwork on the walls, no one will be confusing it with a Subway.

The restaurant's owners commissioned a University of Iowa art student to paint several murals, which are still works in progress. On one wall, the American Gothic couple is shown holding a pipe alongside the father's pitchfork; on another, Bob Marley and Janis Joplin's

likenesses are in the works.

Deb Wedemeier of Cedar Rapids, her husband, Kent, and family friend Dave Timmons of Iowa City are co-owners of the new location. Deb Wedemeier said Cheba Hut is "a wonderful fit for Iowa City."

"We want the customers to have fun, we want our employees have fun and we want to have fun," Wedemeier said. "We're a legitimate business. We want to be a part of the community and we're excited we could give 15 or 16 people jobs."

The owners spent nearly five months renovating what was formerly a tattoo parlor after searching for a suitable location for nearly as long. They also spent months scouring the region for the perfect marketing vehicle, finally finding a 40-year-old Volkswagen van they've painted bright green and that will be making appearances at local events, like Hawkeye football tailgates.

Wedemeier acknowledges that some could find Cheba Hut's theme objectionable, but she said it's all done tongue-and-cheek and in good fun. She and her husband took a road trip to check out a Cheba Hut in Colorado last year before investing in a franchise, and came away impressed.

"It doesn't matter what the premise is, if the food isn't good and the customer service isn't good," she said. "What we found is the food was great and the customer service was awesome."

Phil Kelly, 23, was among the customers grabbing to-go orders Tuesday at restaurant.

"I came in to check out the place and see what it's like," Kelly said. And his restaurant review? "It's awesome."