



John Kretkowski of Dover Township owns the Sea Breeze Deli on Route 71 in Spring Lake Heights.  
(STAFF PHOTOS: STEVE SCHOLFIELD)

# FROM ALASKA TO NEW DELI



By DENNIS P. CARMODY  
ASSISTANT BUSINESS EDITOR

**SPRING LAKE HEIGHTS** — You think it's been cold lately? You don't know cold.

John Kretkowski knows cold. He knows what it's like to have your car engine die on a lonely road in the middle of the night in Alaska, and to bang on someone's door because you are worried you might freeze to death.

"They called the police,

and when the cop came, I jumped in the police car just to stay warm," he said. "You're out there in the middle of nowhere, and there's a lot of nowhere in Alaska."

Kretkowski survived the wilds of the Last Frontier. He gathered substantial savings from preparing food for workers maintaining the 800-mile-long Alaska Pipeline north of the Arctic Circle. And he used that money to create his dream, running the Sea Breeze Deli on Route 71 here.

Since taking over the business 12 years ago, he has tripled sales and expanded its catering services, even adding a 40-seat room for special events.

"I like the action," said Kretkowski, a 41-year-old Dover Township resident. "I hate when it gets quiet."

He's made it popular with customers such as Lois Wendt, who lives down the street and enjoys stopping by for a pork roll with cheese. "The service is always good," Wendt said. "They go out of their

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# Deli

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way to make it homey."

Kretkowski's story starts in New Jersey. After growing up in Bayonne, his mother married a soldier stationed at Fort Monmouth and he wound up moving to Eatontown. He was a student at Monmouth Regional High School in 1980 when his stepfather was transferred to Fairbanks, Alaska.

There he pursued his love of preparing food, taking cooking classes in school and working as a dishwasher in Army mess halls.

"Once I realized I wasn't going to play professional baseball, the second thing in my life was food," Kretkowski said.

He graduated high school and his mother and stepfather moved back to the Jersey Shore, but he and his twin brother, Joseph, decided to stay in Alaska.

John Kretkowski joined a culinary union and started working in food service for the 10,000 people working on the Alaska Pipeline in Prudhoe Bay, an Arctic Ocean community on Alaska's North Slope, 500 miles north of Fairbanks.

There, he routinely worked as many as 80 hours a week. Shifts would last for six weeks, followed by three weeks of vacation. No one lived there permanently; employers instead would fly the workers in and

out from their homes in the settled parts of Alaska.

The pipeline attracts people from all over the world, and Kretkowski learned cooking skills from people as far away as Thailand and China.

He was making fantastic money. It's not easy to find people willing to brave the North Slope, where temperatures drop to 80 degrees below zero, so the pay is very good. Soon after he started in 1984, at age 19, he was making \$2,000 a week. "It was kind of exciting to see those first checks," Kretkowski said.

It was an odd life. On a trip to Phoenix during one of his breaks, he found he enjoyed the area and bought a condominium there. His brother wound up staying in Arizona to attend college, while John kept working in Alaska. It was routine for him to spend a day traveling from the frozen north to the broiling south when he had time off.

"It was hard," he said, pointing out it was difficult to strike up personal relationships when he would be gone 36 weeks of the year. "It's definitely a single man's life. I'd never do it again."

**It's not easy to find people willing to brave the North, so the pay is very good.**

He met Tammy Lau on a trip to the Jersey Shore for a wedding. In 1992, they were married.

He continued to work in Alaska, but knew he couldn't keep that going forever, and finished the job in 1994, a week before his daughter was born.

Kretkowski knew many people who worked on the pipeline would blow their riches, but he saved. "We never knew when it was all going to end," he said. "I knew that if you saved your money, you didn't have to worry about finding a new job. You could buy a job."

That's what he did. With some of the \$150,000 in savings he had stashed away, Kretkowski and his brother-in-law, Chris Lau, purchased a deli in Spring Lake Heights.

They renamed the place Sea Breeze. Kretkowski started using his cooking talents to expand the menu to include new soups and other fare.

In time, Sea Breeze became a popular breakfast and lunch spot. His annual revenue has grown from \$200,000 to \$600,000.

In 1996, he bought the produce store next door. He sold produce himself for a while, but eventually found it wasn't a moneymaker and shut it down. Two years ago he spent \$25,000 to turn it into a catering room for parties that seats 40. In 2000, he bought out his partner to become the sole owner. Catering is about 20 percent of his revenue.



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Spring Lake Heights deli owner honed culinary skills in the Arctic wilds.

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