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INSIGHT FOR RESTAURANT EXECUTIVES

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**Friendly's generates
buzz among teens
and young adults.**

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**Data points help
ensure food safety
at Cracker Barrel.**

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Late to the Table

**Buffets Inc. is cutting costs
and updating concepts
to jump-start sales. **PAGE 44****

R. Michael Andrews, CEO, Buffets Inc.

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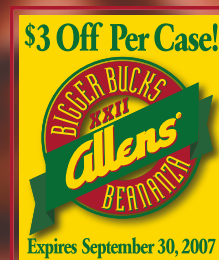
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Julia Stewart
works to keep
IHOP's turnaround
spirit alive.

STRETCH Goals



By Mary Boltz Chapman

IHOP Chairman and CEO Julia Stewart has been lauded for bringing the almost 50-year-old family-dining chain back to life. But what happens next? Stewart, who appeared on *Chain Leader's* cover in April 1999, when she was president of Applebee's, discussed maintaining franchisee relationships, improving customer service and more in an interview with *Chain Leader*.

How do you nurture the franchisee relationship?

Boy, very carefully. And I do think at the core of that, the most important piece is communication. So it is constantly interacting and talking to the franchisees, making certain they understand your vision, they understand where you want to take the brand, they're supportive, there's collaboration, there's buy-in—I think that's an ongoing process. I don't think you ever stop that. They're doing a lot of the heavy lifting. We're certainly doing the strategic part, but they're doing the execution day in and day out. So it's making sure they feel comfortable.

Do they sometimes do that “what have you done for me lately?”

Oh, I think there's always—and I actually kind of like the challenge. I find it more intellectually stimulating to have people say to you, “What are you doing for me today? You know, that was yesterday, this is today. What are you doing?”

And I think it's—and I'm sure it sounds corny—but there's an honor and a privilege to say they're taking their hard-earned money, in many cases a great deal of money, and investing it in you, management, to say, “OK, we believe in you. We believe in what you're going to do next. You know, we'll go with you.”

When you did your 2007 guidance, you said that there was some work on operations, specifically service. What does that look like?

Well I think one of the things that came out—we're always talking to the guests, and one of the things we asked the guests last year was, tell us what would make you come more often. And they talked about relevancy and advertising. But when you really dig deep, some consumers have said to us, “I would come more often if your service wasn't just efficient, it was more hospitable.”

Now that's a bit of an interpretation from our consumer insights group, but really what that says is, we have an opportunity to make our service better and to exceed guests' expectations both at IHOP and within the category. Some of what we're reading into is recognizing people don't expect a lot from family dining, and we're going to exceed those expectations with the work we're doing in service as good as our pancakes.

In family dining, is growth a market-share game, or is it a building-average-checks game?

I would argue for us to continue to grow and expand, it's not just competing in family dining, it is looking at the independents and what I call the edges. And the edges is fast food and fast casual and casual dining.

I would argue that the lines have blurred. In the old days we used to talk about competing within your category. I don't think that's good enough anymore. I think there's a lot of crossover on the edges. It's not just family dining anymore. That was the easy part. That was really much easier for us. Now it's thinking about how to keep our brand relevant to the consumers and all those different day-parts and crossover work. ■

The Chain Leader Cover Society is made up of the executives who have appeared on the cover since the magazine's debut in August 1996. This occasional feature updates readers on a Cover Society member.

on the web: For more about Stewart's plans for stretching the concept with customer permission, download a transcript or view the extended interview at www.chainleader.com.



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Vol. 12, No. 9/September 2007



■ cover story

Late to the Table 44

CEO Mike Andrews plans to jump-start sales at Buffets Inc. by boosting margins and taking advantage of synergies across the three brands: HomeTown Buffet, Old Country Buffet and Ryan's Grill Buffet & Bakery. He is introducing display cooking, adding new products, franchising HomeTown and cleaning up neglected Ryan's units.

By David Farkas

■ marketing

Age Appropriate 23

To attract teens and young adults, Friendly's developed an interactive promotional campaign that asked customers to submit videos and photos that represented the way they felt about Friendly's. Guests voted for their favorites, and weekly winners received prizes such as video iPods and Apple shopping sprees.

By Margaret Littman

■ toque of the town

Brand Extension 26

As Einstein Bros. Bagels moves into greater growth mode, Senior Director of Research and Development Chad Thompson is trying to drive afternoon traffic with new sandwiches, salads and frozen drinks. Executives credit the additions with healthy comp-store-sales increases.

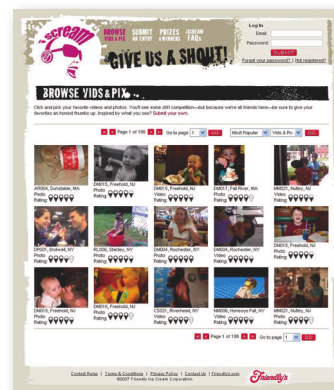
By Monica Rogers

■ road trip

Northern Exposure 36

Phil Roberts, CEO of Parasole Restaurant Holdings and creator of concepts such as Buca di Beppo, The Oceanaire Seafood Room and Salut, takes *Chain Leader* on a tour of Minneapolis, where the restaurant scene is growing more sophisticated.

By Lisa Bertagnoli





Data Points 50

By Mary Boltz Chapman

A photograph of several pizzas in wooden trays, garnished with tomatoes and peppers, displayed on a counter. The image is tilted and has a white border, suggesting it's a page from a photo album or a magazine spread.

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Ideal food-safety regulations would be national, uniform and public.

Consistency Breeds Safety



Mary Boltz Chapman
Editor-In-Chief

The more I know about food safety, the more interested I am. I've been covering the subject for a few years now, and I continue to learn from the zealots at chains who thrive on knowing they are saving lives—or at least gastrointestinal systems. For example, while researching and reporting for the article “Data Points” on Page 50, I learned a new word: organoleptic, affecting a sense organ. In this case, taste.

At the time, I was speaking with Bob Doyle, vice president of product development and quality assurance at Cracker Barrel Old Country Store. He told me about all of the information his department collects to watch for trends and continue to improve food-safety protocols. Like most restaurant chains, they collect every health department inspection done on every restaurant.

What's unique is that they also transfer the information from vastly different inspection reports into one consistent report so they can compare apples to apples, unit to unit. It's a thorough and forward-looking step that other companies should consider.

But what a pain in the neck.

Food-Safety Utopia

In an ideal world, each state, county and municipality health department would use the same inspection protocols. Inspectors would be certified the same way. Minimum requirements would be consistent. Reporting procedures would be transparent, and corrections would be made collaboratively.

Maybe I'm dreaming. But why not? The Food and Drug Administration's Model Food Code is already in place to guide local health departments toward consistent regulation. It addresses topics like cooking temperatures and how often restaurants should be inspected. The National Restaurant Association endorses the code because it is uniform, workable and based on sound science.

The more consistent the regulations were, the easier it would be for restaurant companies of any size to follow them. Which would only lead to safer food for restaurant customers. And individual restaurant-inspection scores could be made public, even posted on the door, to promote that fact.

Come Again?

I had you nodding in agreement until I suggested publicizing the results, right? Again, why not? We have the safest food supply in the world. Leading restaurant companies spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to staff and equip quality-assurance departments; develop crisis-management systems; and test and retest food, equipment, tables, floors and the balls in the play area. Why *wouldn't* you want to be recognized for that?

I know, I know: The more you do, the more you're held accountable for. But if every restaurant nationwide is held to the same standard, that argument is less convincing.

Now you're sure I'm dreaming. Well, I'm OK with that. Meantime, I will continue my food-safety education by talking to the passionate experts saving lives from their QA labs and sharing what I learn with you.

By the Way

Did you know September is National Food Safety Education Month? Find downloadable posters and other materials from the NRA Educational Foundation's International Food Safety Council at www.nraef.org/nfsem. ■

I welcome your feedback. Contact me at (630) 288-8250 or mchapman@reedbusiness.com.

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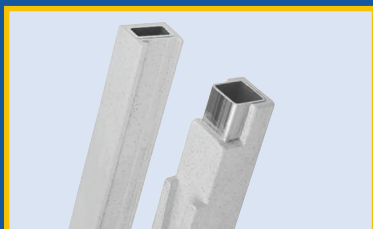
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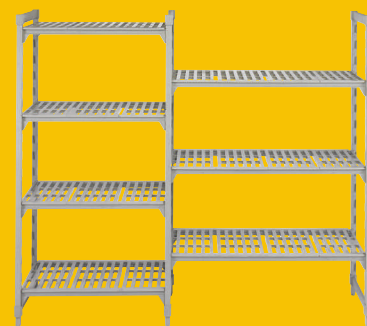
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CAUTION: Bumps in the Road

A former restaurant analyst offers his perspective on IHOP's acquisition of Applebee's. **By David Farkas**



Investment banker
and former analyst
Allan Hickok

During his 15 years as an equity research analyst for Piper Jaffray, Allan Hickok won five "All-Star Analyst" awards from the *Wall Street Journal*, in part because of his accurate coverage of Applebee's International. *Chain Leader* recently asked Hickok, now managing director for investment bank Houlihan Lokey in Minneapolis, for his analysis of

IHOP's acquisition of Applebee's.

Can you think of a similar deal, when a company buys another with twice its market capitalization? [Long pause.] I can't think of one.

What are bumps in the road for this acquisition? When you try to buy another company, you want to integrate it some way, making sure you get the efficiency you expect. You have different systems, people and cultures. Sometimes the process of change occurs very swiftly and is efficient and embraced. Sometimes it does not.

How long will that take? That's hard to predict. Maybe several years. My advice is to make sure everybody is aware that this [integration] will take time. These are two big organizations.

By "everybody," I'm assuming you mean investors and franchisees? Yes, investors and franchisees. I don't know how long it takes to put [the two chains] together in the way they should be put together.

"When you try to buy another company, you want to **integrate it** some way, making sure you get the **efficiency** you expect."

IHOP CEO Julia Stewart has shown she can handle change.

True. It started with reinvigorating the IHOP business with menu changes and the look and feel of the units. She dragged the concept into the year 2000, all the while getting a more viable lunch and dinner business. IHOP today is not just cheap pancakes and an endless variety of syrups.

I was also thinking about the shift in IHOP's business model.

This is my read. Julia didn't assume she knew everything. She brought in some professionals who helped assess the situation and helped her come up with recommendations. IHOP had issues. It was an older concept and it wasn't growing that much. The company would use its own balance sheet to build stores. It was a very different model then.

She asked, how do we capitalize on the balance sheet and store base? We don't need these [company] stores. We are going to change and let franchisees be franchisees.

How did Applebee's miss addressing the devastating macroenvironment around them?

They got away from the basic idea of the concept: being the low-cost provider in casual dining. The product was acceptable and affordable. It's not always that the best food wins.

Can Applebee's return to its former glory?

Just because the stock declined from \$40 to \$24 and it got bought by IHOP at a \$4 premium, it doesn't mean the chain doesn't have a dominant presence. Applebee's is going to be around for a long, long time. ■

on the web: For more analysts' remarks on IHOP's acquisition of Applebee's, visit www.chainleader.com.



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Environmental Impact

Pizza Fusion's eco-friendly business practices set it on the path to expansion. **By Maya Norris**

Pizza Fusion's organic pizzas feature toppings such as goat cheese and New York strip steak.

Pizza Fusion prefers to locate units, which cost about \$275,000 to \$500,000 to open, in endcaps or free-standing buildings where the household income in the area is over \$65,000.

The focaccia sandwiches feature organic bread baked daily and all-natural deli meats free of nitrates, hormones and antibiotics.

Pizza Fusion uses hybrid cars to deliver pizzas.

Pizza Fusion's eco-friendly slant goes far beyond recycling and a few organic pizza toppings. The two-unit company has an aggressively green business model that has proven to be both good for the environment and profitable, setting the stage for franchised expansion.

CEO Vaughan Lazar and COO Michael Gordon created Pizza Fusion in 2006 because it reflected their interest in organic fare. "We were both at the time into the environment. We both did quite a bit of charity work and things like that," Lazar says. "So we wanted to do something that had a feel-good feel to it. And somehow the concept of doing a small restaurant came up, like a pizza place."

However, Lazar, who owned a printing and design firm, and Gordon, who owned a real-estate and property-management company, had no restaurant experience. So they hired pizza consultant Dave Ostrander to help develop the concept, which debuted in July 2006 in Deerfield Beach, Fla.

Going Green

Pizza Fusion sells pizzas, focaccia sandwiches, wraps and salads, in which 98 percent of the ingredients are organic. While customers can customize their pizzas with toppings ranging from artichokes to wild-caught shrimp, the best-selling item is Bill's Pizza,

\$25 for medium and \$30 for large. It features organic New York strip; tomato sauce; mozzarella, aged Parmesan and Gorgonzola cheeses; red, yellow and green peppers; oregano; and red onions.

Pizza Fusion builds its stores according to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design guidelines of the U.S. Green Building Council. The modern decor features recycled and sustainable materials such as a wall of stone sourced from local quarries, tabletops made of reclaimed wood, and countertops made from recycled detergent bottles.

Organic Growth

Lazar says Pizza Fusion's eco-friendly business practices helped it to generate \$350,000 in sales in 2006; the 850-square-foot unit was open five months, offering takeout and delivery only. The company expects to ring up \$2 million in 2007 because future units will be 2,000 to 2,500 square feet, feature a fast-casual service model and post more than \$1 million in sales each, Lazar says.


Since opening the first unit, Pizza Fusion has sold that store to a franchisee to concentrate on franchised expansion. Franchising veteran Randy Romano joined the company as vice president of development and partner in March. Pizza Fusion has also hired three trainers who have worked at McDonald's, Subway and Disney. The company is constructing a test kitchen and training facility at its headquarters in Fort Lauderdale.

Franchisees have opened one unit in Fort Lauderdale and will open three or four more in Weston, Palm Beach, Boca Raton and Pittsburgh by year-end. They will open 20 units in 2008 in Georgia, Nevada, New Jersey, Colorado and Florida. Pizza Fusion says it has received more than 500 franchising requests and expects another 200 to open by 2010. ■

SNAPSHOT

Concept Pizza Fusion
Headquarters
 Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
Units 2
2006 Unit Sales
 \$350,000
2007 Systemwide Sales
 \$2 million
 (company estimate)
Average Unit Volume
 \$700,000
 (company estimate)
Average Check \$28
Expansion Plans
 3 or 4 in 2007, 20 in 2008





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CAPITAL Ideas

Operators share how growing chains can gain access to financing. **By Maya Norris**

Whether it's to pay down debt, open new units or improve operations, capital is vital for any chain looking to move to the next level. But while established companies have the clout and track record to obtain financing from large lenders, operators of upstart chains have to turn to other sources of funding to develop and grow their companies. *Chain Leader* spoke to several operators about how they gain access to capital.

Ken Reimer, chairman and CEO, Baker Bros., Dallas

If [franchisees] have pretty good net worth, then I've recommended they go to the private bank section of significant banks. That is a section that deals with what they call high-wealth individuals. And high wealth doesn't mean \$50 million or \$100 million. It could mean \$2 million. It's a separate department of the bank that deals directly with the individual. They'll do a loan on a signature basis, meaning that they don't go through all the traps and all the requirements that the commercial section of the bank does.

David Rutkauskas, founder, president and CEO, Beautiful Brands International, parent company

of Camille's Sidewalk Cafe, Coney Beach and Freshberry, Tulsa, Okla.

We did it all through our business. We never borrowed a penny. We just grew our company. We cash-flowed it. We started selling franchises. And I use the franchise fees to build the staff, build the company. We were so successful that our royalty streams started exceeding our expenses. So all of our franchise fees were like capital. I mean you're talking millions of dollars in franchise fees for Camille's alone.

Wayne Lipschitz, CFO, Grill Concepts Inc., parent company of The Grill on the Alley and Daily Grill, Los Angeles

We're a public company. For us the easiest thing to do is a secondary offering, which is what we just did. That's how we raised money [\$14.1 million] for the next 18 months.

In the past, when we haven't been able to go out and raise capital, what we've done is joint ventures, where we have partners that put up [some of] the money and we manage the restaurants. So we've used that as a means of financing.

And the third means of financing is, we've done managed locations, where we have partners who pay for the whole location, and we manage it and take a management fee and share in the profits.

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“We were so successful that our royalty streams started exceeding our expenses. So all of our franchise fees were like capital.”

—David Rutkauskas, founder, president and CEO, Beautiful Brands International

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Alan Thompson, COO, Off The Grill, Franklin, Tenn.

I was quite lucky because I found some guys that really believed in my company and gave me the autonomy to run it and, at the same time, were willing to invest millions of dollars to see what we could do with it. So my way of raising capital was through equity—selling equity. But finding those guys is a hard thing, because not only do you have to find guys that have the wherewithal to do it, but then they have to believe in your chain. And most importantly, they have to believe in you, or else you're just selling your company.

Dwayne Northrop, chairman and CEO, Garlic Jim's Famous Gourmet Pizza, Everett, Wash.

Once we had a few franchises sold and a few stores open in Washington, and we wanted to expand into California. . . we sold some of our revenue stream in Washington. So if we're collecting royalties of 5½ percent from all stores in Washington, we then said to an investor, “Here, you can have one-tenth of 1 percent or half of 1 percent of the Washington stores’ royalties in exchange for cash. So you can have that for, say, the 10 years of the first franchise agreement.” As we open stores and we go from 5 stores to 35 stores in Washington, and then the royalties are X amount, it's a pretty good return on their investment. In that case it gave us the capital to go start franchise sales in California.

Kelly Harris, president and CEO, Times Grill, Jacksonville, Fla.

Instead of trying to secure commercial bank loans, restaurateurs can pursue investor capital by offering investors a convertible loan structure. Under that arrangement, a restaurateur pays a stated rate of interest, and the portion of the loan would be converted into equity for the investor. The incentive for the investor to invest is he or she gets equity in the restaurant. ■

on the web: For more operator perspectives as well as financial adviser Mark Saltzgaber's primer on what small chains should keep in mind when raising capital, visit www.chainleader.com.



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Friendly's created a dedicated Web site that allows customers' photos and videos (shown with YouTube) to be shared with other ice cream fans.



Friendly's uses its new interactive campaign to **GENERATE BUZZ** among teens and young adults.

AGE Appropriate

By Margaret Littman

Friendly's is a 72-year-old brand that is loved by young kids and parents, particularly 25- to 55-year-old women. But among teens and young adults, it suffers from a "not cool" stigma that many established brands face.

"One of our objectives is to become a bigger part of consumers' lives at a younger age," says Hope McManus, marketing manager for Wilbraham, Mass.-based Friendly's. "We know they were part of the brand when they were younger, with their parents and grandparents, and we are trying to reintroduce them to the brand. To reach them, we had to look at alternative media."

Until it came to this conclusion last year, Friendly's had a Web site, but had not taken online efforts much further, nor had it looked into other media that capture the attention of teens and young adults. To change that, Friendly's worked with Boston-based Cone and Charlestown, Mass.-based One to One Interactive, in addition to its

agency of record, Chicago's Laughlin Constable, to develop an interactive promotional campaign for the ice cream brand's hot summer season.

15 Minutes of Fame

From June to August, the company asked young customers to submit videos and photos that represented the way they felt about Friendly's. Customers could upload them at www.iscreamfriendly.com (spelled with a lowercase "i" to be evocative of the iPod) or send them via mobile phone. While adults tend to use their mobile phones as discrete devices for select conversations, teens and young adults—who don't remember a world without cell phones—are happy to receive relevant sales messages, surf the Web and take photos with their phones.

Diners voted for their favorites, viewing new additions as they were posted on the Web site after One to One Interactive vetted them. Viewing and voting on user-generated creations is second nature to the YouTube demographic. They selected weekly winners, who received prizes teens crave more than ice cream, including an Apple TV, video iPod

SNAPSHOT

Concept Friendly's
Headquarters Wilbraham, Mass.
Units 317 company owned, 198 franchised
2006 Systemwide Sales \$671 million
2007 Systemwide Sales \$690 million*
Average Unit Volume \$1.3 million
Average Check \$7.84
Ad Agencies Laughlin Constable, Chicago; Cone, Boston; One to One Interactive, Charlestown, Mass.
2007 Ad Budget \$20 million*

*Chain Leader estimate



Friendly's interactive campaign targets teens and young adults, who like to receive sales messages, surf the Web and take photos with their phones.



The iscreamfriendly.com site permits Friendly's fans to vote on their favorite diner-created ad messages and link to new winners each week.

and Apple shopping sprees. One winning video features teenage boys imagining they are dancing with a Friendly's staffer. Another shows couples, kids and others "screaming" over the thought of going to Friendly's. Photos include cats and dogs eating ice cream and someone getting a tattoo that says "Friendly's."

Friendly's will not disclose what it spent on this campaign, but according to Nielsen Monitor-Plus, the chain's total advertising spending reached close to \$20 million in 2006. An interactive effort such as this is a small fraction of the price of a mass-market ad campaign.

Calling All Teens

To get the word out, Friendly's sent young, mohawk-clad representatives to 15 cities. They walked the streets, talking about the contest and passing out coupons for free iced lattes and Friendly's Chillers (a concoction of lemon-lime soda and orange juice), two menu items promoted with the contest. The representatives encouraged onlookers to send

text messages to the company with the word "iSCREAM" to try for smaller prizes such as T-shirts.

In addition, each of the chain's 515 units had POP signage about the promotion, and McManus says many of the photos submitted were taken from inside a Friendly's.

At press time, Friendly's had received 3,000 contest entries; 70 percent of those who registered for the contest were between 15 and 21 years old. The Web site attracted an average of 300 visitors daily. Friendly's was surprised both by the number of entries and that none—as of press time—included inappropriate content that could not be posted to the site.

The agencies did not coordinate the promotion with other Friendly's advertising because it wanted customers to feel free to be creative with their videos and photos.

"Freedom of expression is critical to the success of any interactive campaign. Savvy marketers understand that the empowerment of consumers to interact with a brand in ways most important to them is the key to effective engagement and customer loyalty," explains Bill Fleishman, executive vice president of brand marketing for Cone. "Attempting to put strict controls over the content will likely limit success."

The interactive summer campaign began before Friendly Ice Cream Corp. announced that an affiliate of Sun Capital Partners will acquire it later this year. The \$337.2 million deal will take the firm private. If successful, the new owners will help pay down Friendly's debt, about \$222 million, while capitalizing on the strength of the brand name—and targeting young consumers will be an important part of that strategy.

Adds McManus: "The goal was to start a dialogue to become a part of their life [again], to remind these people that they should go back to why they loved Friendly's." ■

on the web: Check out some of the entries Friendly's customers submitted at www.iscreamfriendly.com.

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CHAD THOMPSON

builds on Einstein's bagel heritage and tries to drive afternoon traffic with sandwiches, salads and frozen drinks.

By Monica Rogers

Brand EXTENSION



Chad Thompson in a chicken suit. The visual is a vivid one that Einstein Bros. Bagels managers still smile about, even though it's been months since Thompson wore the costume at a conference to help generate enthusiasm for a new line of grilled chicken sandwiches. "The idea was to make an impression and to have a little fun, both with the menu and the way we promote it internally," says Thompson, senior director of research and development for the Golden, Colo.-based chain.

Making a big impact, lightheartedly, is a strategy well suited to the fast-casual segment, where quick-changing consumer

desires demand a nimble system and breezy approach. It's especially important for Einstein Noah Restaurant Group, biggest of the bagel-bakery bunch. The company has five bagel brands, of which 433-unit Einstein is the largest.

Riding on the wings of its 2006 return to profitability, Einstein Noah just moved Einstein Bros. into greater growth mode. Late in June, the company sold franchise rights for the first time. A franchisee will open 23 units in Northern Florida; more multiunit deals are pending in seven additional Southern states. A large number of licensed units will also open at airports, hospitals and colleges.

But as important as new store openings are to enhancing the revenue stream, upping traffic and sales at existing stores is just as vital. Towards that end, Einstein Bros. has been





remodeling high-volume stores to spruce up looks, increase seating capacity, and expand beverage sections with more bottled drinks in the cooler, new frozen drinks behind the counter and bigger self-serve coffee bars. The company is testing wireless ordering systems in 55

stores to shorten wait times and testing staying open 'til 6 p.m.

Co-mingled with all of the above, "New menu innovations are a critical supporting aspect of our growth strategy," says Paul Murphy, CEO of Einstein Bros.

This keeps Thompson hopping. Accredited through the American Culinary Federation's Chef Apprenticeship Program in 1987, Thompson served as executive chef for Continental Airlines for six years. He then worked as part of the R&D team at Boston Market before joining Einstein Bros. in 1997. Since then he's helped the chain weather the low-carb craze and morph from a bagels-only, morning-focused concept to one that serves soups, salads, sandwiches, gourmet bagel dogs and more.

Lunch and Later

Now Thompson's innovation energy is spent in pursuit of a larger lunch-and-later share. His team expanded the "Anytime" section of the menu to add depth and interest. Featuring 24 entrees under six Anytime categories, the menu launched in the first quarter. It

replaces previous menus, which had 14 entrees under four other-than-breakfast categories.

Thompson drew inspiration not only from 10 years of trial and error at Einstein Bros., but from overseeing the menus of Einstein Noah's other concepts. Expanding the bagel dog section to include more exotic sausages, for example, was an idea that came from Noah's New York Bagel, the Pacific Northwest version of Einstein Bros., which has had specialty sausage bagel dogs on its menu since 2005. Likewise, Einstein's grilled chicken sandwiches have builds based on similar sandwiches that had sold well at Noah's. While he won't report exact percentages, Thompson says such synergies also help keep food costs down.

New items include the Thai with Chili Lime Dressing salad, \$5.79, a toss of mixed greens, Asian slaw, cucumbers, cilantro and roasted cashews. In the four-item Chicken Sandwich category, there's the best-selling Spicy Chicken on Onion Challah, \$6.59, with garlic-chili sauce, gorgonzola-mayo spread, lettuce, tomato and red onion. And in the Gourmet Bagel Dog section, the Chicken Portobello dog, \$5.59, with caramelized onions and sage, is baked in sesame-sprinkled whole-wheat bagel dough.

New Builds on Old

Some of the new ideas build on past experiments. "Many of the ingredients from menu items that we discontinue can often be used in new menu items in the future," says

Breakfast paninis are popular on weekends when guests want "something more substantial," says Senior Director of Research and Development Chad Thompson. "But I can't menu more than three at a time, or they swamp the line."

Einstein Bros. successfully launched its new Bros. Blender frozen drink program in 2006 with flavors such as Cafe Mocha and Cookies & Cream.

(Opposite) The best-selling salad is the new Thai with Chili Lime Dressing, with mixed greens, Asian slaw, cucumbers, cilantro and roasted cashews.

SNAPSHOT

Concept

Einstein Bros. Bagels

Parent Company

Einstein Noah Restaurant Group, Golden, Colo.

Units

433

2007 Systemwide Sales

\$380 million*

Average Unit Volume

\$870,000*

Average Check

\$7

Expansion Plans

35 in 2007

*Chain Leader estimate

MENU SAMPLER

BREAKFAST PANINI

Vegetable, with spicy cream cheese, egg, spinach, mushrooms, tomatoes, cheddar and mozzarella, **\$4.59**

GRILLED SANDWICHES

Turkey Club Panini on Ciabatta, with turkey breast, bacon, spinach, oven-dried peppered tomatoes, mozzarella and provolone, **\$6.79**

GOURMET SALADS

Thai with Chili Lime Dressing, mixed greens, Asian slaw, cucumbers, cilantro and roasted cashews, **\$5.79**

GOURMET BAGEL DOGS

Chicken Portobello, with caramelized onions and sage in sesame-sprinkled whole-wheat bagel wrap, **\$5.59**

SIGNATURE SANDWICHES

Veg Out on Sesame Bagel, with feta-pine nut spread, garden-vegetable cream cheese and veggies, **\$5.69**



Pizza Bagels are back after a long hiatus thanks to new fast-cook convection ovens, which work more smoothly than the conveyor toasters Einstein Bros. previously used.

Spicy chili-garlic sauce first added Asian zing to Einstein's **Spicy Elmo** sandwich. It's now used on Einstein's new **Buffalo-style Spicy Chicken on Onion Challah** sandwich, balanced with gorgonzola mayo.

Thompson. Using spicy Asian sauce in combination with blue cheese on the Spicy Chicken on Onion Challah sandwich, for example, was a new twist on Buffalo chicken. Thompson had used the spicy chili sauce on a limited-time offer in 2006: the \$4.59 Spicy Elmo was a bagel omelet sandwich with chili-garlic-blended cream cheese, bacon and green onions. "I knew it would work well with chicken," he says.

Asian chili-garlic sauce also flavors the dressing Thompson created to sauce the Thai with Chili Lime Dressing salad and to marinate the protein on the Thai Chicken with Peanut Spread sandwich, \$6.59, with Asian slaw, cucumbers and cilantro on a challah roll. "We wanted to move away from the sweet hoisin-type sauce we formerly used by moving to this more tart and spicy version," he says.

Thompson also reformulated the peanut spread on the sandwich, which was originally served with an Asian sesame flatbread that accompanied a salad in 2000. "All we did to change the spread for the new sandwich was to incorporate the peanut flavors with our new Thai vinaigrette," he explains.

The Anytime core will also soon include Einstein Bros. Pizza Bagels, which are back after a long hiatus. Initially launched seven

Breakfast still leads Einstein Bros.' business, with Bagel-with-Spreads and Bagel Omelet Sandwiches as the top two menu categories.

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■toque of the town

Going after lunch-and-later business, Einstein Bros. has nearly doubled the number of Anytime menu offerings.



The Cajun Andouille bagel dog, a peppery pork sausage wrapped in bagel dough, baked and topped with onion, is one of three new gourmet bagel dogs on the menu.

years ago, pizza bagels were discontinued because of problems with conveyor toasters. New fast-cook convection ovens work more smoothly.

To make the pizzas, bagels are split, sauced, spread with toppings, toasted in the convection ovens and served open-faced in a special oblong box. Five varieties have been in test in 28 Denver stores since April. Pepperoni, \$3.99, sells best, followed by Spinach Mushroom, \$3.99, which features garlic-herb cream cheese, sautéed spinach, mushrooms and cheese.

Based on the success of the Denver test, pizza bagels will reach 122 more stores before year-end and will go systemwide as soon as possible.

Afternoon Refreshers

Meanwhile, Einstein's beverage program is not quite ready for rollout. The jury's still out on organic fair-trade coffees the company's been evaluating. But Einstein Bros. successfully launched its new Bros. Blender frozen drink program in August 2006 with Cafe Mocha, Cafe Caramel, Cafe Latte, Cookies & Cream, Strawberry and Vanilla flavors. The company introduced Guava Banana and Papaya Yogurt in May. All are priced at \$3.59 for the regular size and \$4.19 for a large.

Envisioned as another way to add lunch-and-later guests, the drinks have been doing very well as an afternoon refresher and a breakfast meal replacement, says Thompson, who cannot give exact sales figures. New flavors such as the Pumpkin Bros. Blender, which launches this fall, will be rolled out seasonally.

Seasonality also plays into the launch of various sweet treats and bagel flavors. For example, Thompson will launch Pumpkin Iced Cookie, \$1.49, and streusel-topped

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Einstein Bros.' retools its core menu once a year, replacing 10 percent to 15 percent of product with new offerings to keep things fresh.

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The Thai Chicken with Peanut Spread sandwich features a grilled chicken breast seasoned with chili-lime vinaigrette and topped with Asian slaw, cucumbers and cilantro.

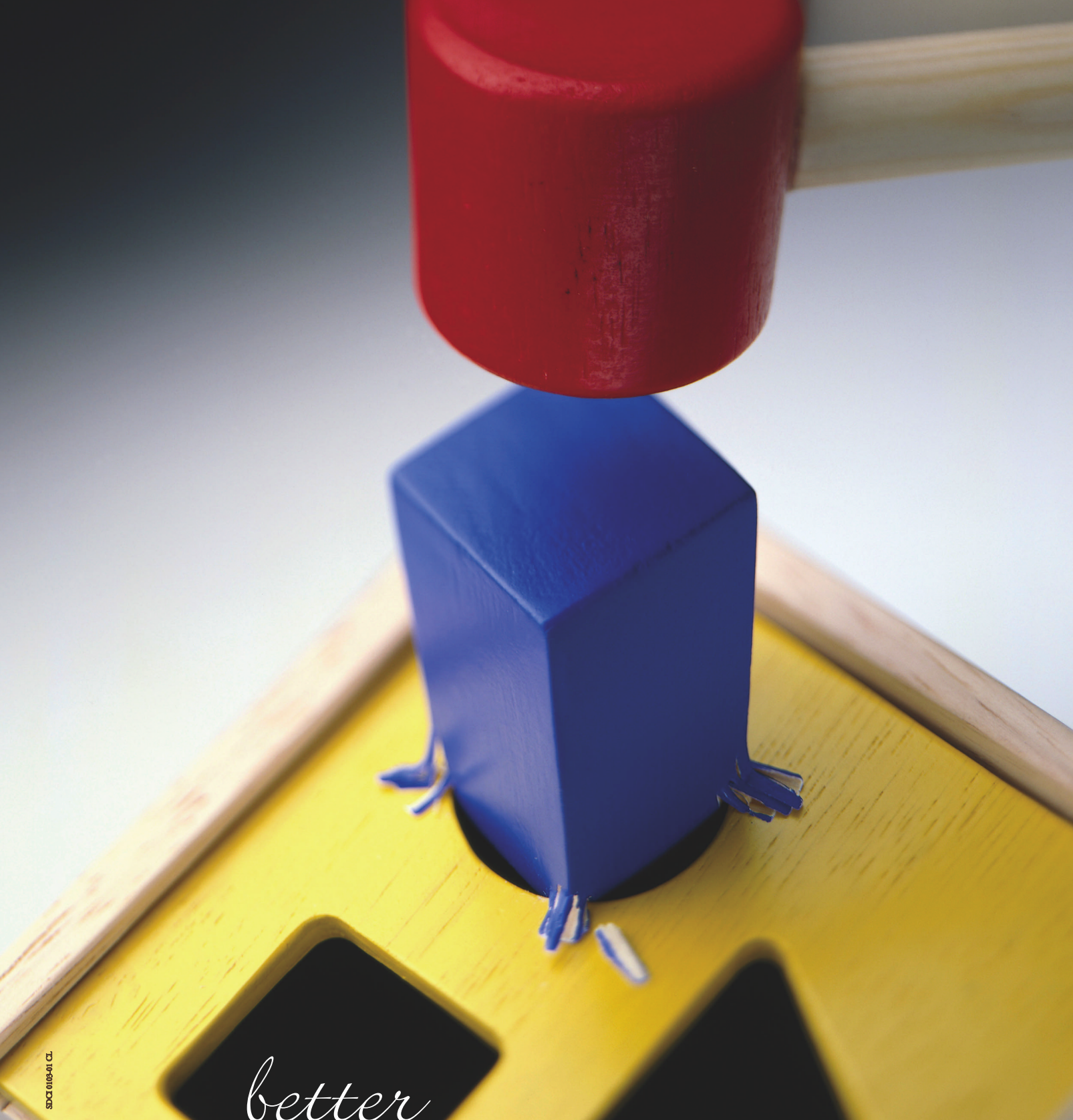
Pumpkin Muffin, \$1.69, in fall. There are also green bagels at St. Patrick's Day. And for Christmas? A candy-cane bagel debuted in 2006.

Balancing New Products and New Units

Making so many menu and operational enhancements at the same time Einstein Bros. moves into aggressive growth mode is a bit of a balancing act, according to Nicole Miller Regan, senior research analyst covering the restaurant sector for Minneapolis-based Piper Jaffray. "But we're confident that the company has the financial capital and human capital to execute—especially given the fact that they just raised new equity and paid down debt June 13," she says.

Although CEO Murphy says it's too soon to definitively comment on the impact of the new menu items, signs are positive so far. "In May of 2007, our comp-store sales for company-owned restaurants increased 5.8 percent, compared to May 2006, which I believe is partially attributable to the new menu rollout," explains Murphy.

Looking ahead, Thompson says continued changes in the way guests eat promises to make his job that much more interesting. "I came to Einstein Bros. because it offered me quirky, risk-taking fun with food," he says. "Today, it's a 24-hour world," where people eat bagel omelet sandwiches at 2 p.m. and spicy chicken sandwiches at 11 a.m.—and where people like Thompson wear chicken suits to celebrate. "That just adds to the appeal," he laughs. ■



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Northern EXPOSURE

With contemporary concepts and its first boutique hotel, **MINNEAPOLIS** is on its way to culinary significance.

By Lisa Bertagnoli

(Above, from l.) Red-checked tablecloths bring Salut's interior to a comfortable level. In Minneapolis, "being terribly approachable is terribly important," Roberts says.

Caribou Coffee founder John Puckett created Punch Pizza, a five-location chain featuring Neapolitan, blistered-crust pizzas.

Chino Latino, in downtown Minneapolis, attracts a see-and-be-seen crowd, there for the drinks and the food.

Figlio, Parasole's one-off in Uptown, has three dining rooms: white tablecloths for the older set, bare bistro tables for the younger, and a bar for everybody.

"My life is not glamorous, it's pathetic," says Roberts of his constant travels. He has more than 35,000 restaurant-related photos stored on his laptop.

Turkey meatloaf (r.) from Good Earth, a Parasole concept.

When non-Minnesotans think of Minneapolis, a few things spring to mind: The Vikings. The Twins. Bitter winters. The Mall of America.

"Mall of America...is that how the rest of the country sees us!" exclaims Phil Roberts, CEO of Parasole Restaurant Holdings Inc., a dominant dining-out force in the Twin Cities along with Larry and Richard D'Amico of D'Amico & Partners.

We are in Roberts' office in Edina, a first-tier suburb of Minneapolis, preparing to view the town's restaurant landscape through his practiced eye. Randy Stanley, Parasole divisional vice president, will join Roberts in showing us the town.

One caveat: This tour won't include the Mall of America. Another: We won't see anything fancy. "Minneapolis is a two-star town," Roberts says. And

we won't see anything overly adventurous, thanks to "too much Lutheran DNA" floating around, he adds. Minnesotans, Roberts declares, do not eat anchovies.

There are signs, though, that Minneapolis' restaurant scene is growing more sophisticated. The city has spawned a number of contemporary concepts: Granite City Food and Brewery, a 19-unit brewpub concept; Punch Pizza, a five-location, authentic Neapolitan pizza concept; Dunn Bros. Coffee Shop, a 76-unit-and-growing concept that features house-roasted beans; and, of course, Famous Dave's, the barbecue chain. Chambers, the area's first boutique hotel, opened recently and is home to Chambers Kitchen, a project of renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten.

All indicate that the restaurant community is stepping up to serve Minneapolis' population, which is well-educated, fairly affluent, and increasingly young and creative, says David Siegel, executive vice president of the Minne-





sota Restaurant Association. Siegel adds that in 2004, Minneapolis ranked second in the nation, after Seattle, in annual food-away-from-home spending, at \$1,243 per capita.

With those thoughts in mind, we hop into Roberts' sparkly, midnight-blue Mercedes S550 and head to Good Earth, our first stop.

Bland on Purpose

Good Earth is located in the Galleria, a mall that's small compared to the behemoth Southdale Center across the street. From the Galleria's parking lot, we can see Southdale's big-box chain heaven: California Pizza Kitchen, Maggiano's, The Cheesecake Factory, P.F. Chang's. All gross, according to Roberts, in the \$10 million range.

The Galleria offers apparel as well as accessories, meaning it's one-stop "outfit" shopping for women. "That's not true of all malls," Roberts says. That's one reason Good Earth, which Parasole bought from General Mills in 1985, attracts a fair number of ladies who lunch. Another reason is the food, health-oriented but hardly hippie, which Parasole has brought into the 21st century. For example, the recipe for the popular cashew chicken salad hasn't changed in 25 years, but the presentation, now architectural on a simple white plate, has.

Donna Fahs, divisional vice president in charge of Good Earth, and culinary aide Bruce Palm bring out an array of dishes: spicy Chicken Bombay, acid-yellow house-made lemonade, a small glass of deep-green wheat-grass juice, a fuchsia raspberry smoothie, a stir-fry made with chunks of a soy-based protein, grilled salmon with mango salsa, turkey meatloaf, and a giant hunk of carrot cake.

The food is colorful and vibrant. The

decor, by contrast, is boring, with blond wood, plain tabletops and no art. That blandness is intentional: Roberts doesn't want the decor to scare anyone away. "It's terribly important to be terribly approachable," he says.

French with an American Accent

From there we head back to downtown Edina and stop by Salut, Parasole's version of the classic French bistro. The wide wooden-plank flooring and red-and-white tablecloths keep the atmosphere at an approachable level. We sit down to a round table groaning with food: onion soup, a croque monsieur served on a huge oval platter, salade Lyonnaise, soft-shell crab, profiteroles, a slab of chocolate cake.

Despite Salut's French atmosphere, the concept is firmly grounded in Americana. "We sell 80 burgers a day," Roberts says. "Is a burger French? Heavens, no." The spot is also popular with ladies who lunch, and who also, apparently, drink: Alcohol accounts for 20 percent of sales at lunch. With a \$28 dinner check average, Salut grosses about \$5 million a year. A second is planned for Saint Paul next spring.

On the way to the restaurant-nightclub hybrid Chino Latino, Roberts discusses the difference between Minneapolis and Saint Paul. "Minneapolis is a Corvette. Saint Paul is a Mercedes," he says. In other words, one city is hip and the other, frumpy. They remain, inexplicably, two separate municipalities, each with its own mayor, despite efforts to merge them.

Chain Reaction

We drive to Chino Latino, which is in hip Uptown, through Kenwood, a wealthy

BIOGRAPHY

Name Phil Roberts
Born Kewanee, Ill., Oct. 14, during the 20th century

Education University of Illinois-Champaign, bachelor's degree in art

Ladder Climbing Worked at Litton Industries, a now-defunct company designing store displays. Left to form his own store-display company (now out of business). Became a restaurateur due to a midlife crisis; founded Parasole with Peter Mihajlov in 1977. Created Buca di Beppo in 1993 and spun it off in 1996; no longer a director or shareholder. Created The Oceanaire Seafood Room in 1999, spun it off in 2002 and is still a shareholder. Parasole now has six concepts: Salut, Manny's Steaks, Chino Latino, Good Earth, Figlio and Muffaletta. Second locations are planned for Salut, Manny's and possibly Chino Latino.

Personal Married to Joanne. Three children: Jennifer, 44, David, 42, and Steven, 42. Lives in Edina, Minn.

Hobbies Eating and traveling



Chains don't thrive in Minneapolis' Uptown, where residents want "realness."

(Top, from l.) Minneapolis has a population of about 372,000. It and its twin, Saint Paul, are socially liberal but culturally conservative.

Chino Latino's substantial sharing menu offers a cook-it-yourself dish, Mishi-Burro Beef, \$16.

Communal tables can hit or miss; the one at Chino Latino is a hit, according to Roberts.

The original Buca di Beppo downtown.

An oyster bar (l.) adds a Frenchified tone to Salut, a 180-seat bistro.

When the weather is nice, Minnesotans eat out: The state ranks second in food-away-from-home spending.

Parasole's consulting company, Idein LLC, helped concept Stella's Fish Cafe downtown.

neighborhood, by the looks of its huge houses and wide, landscaped lawns. We drive along Minneapolis' chain of lakes: Harriett, Calhoun and Lake of the Isles, sparkling blue in the summer sun.

First, a stop at Town Talk, a historic diner resurrected by Parasole protégé Tim Niver. Town Talk is now a destination hot spot complete with what Stanley calls a "chef driven" bar, with hand-muddled drinks, top-shelf liquor and fresh fruit juice. It's in a largely Latino area called Lynlake, now reviving after a long-dormant period. Lynlake fell into disuse partly due to the construction of a Kmart store that truncated Nicollet Avenue, Minneapolis' main street and namesake, further north, of the pedestrian Nicollet Mall.

Soon we're at Hennepin and Lake, the center of Uptown, a bustling area filled with restaurants, but not chain restaurants. Roberts points out a spot that both Panera and Haagen-Dazs once occupied, an empty storefront that was once a Cold Stone Creamery, and Rotisserie, an independent now on the site of a former Johnny Rockets. Uptown habitués "don't want chains...they want that realness," Roberts says.

Chino Latino's façade sparkles with gold paillettes, the type you'd find at an urban car wash. A long hallway, padded with orange upholstery, leads to the nightclub-like space: 410 seats on two levels, with a long communal table on the lower level visible from a balcony above. Opened in 2000, the restaurant serves dinner only and does about \$7 million a year, Roberts says.

"Suburbanites come here to check out the urban life," Stanley says. "There's lots of hardware and tattoos, and that's from the wait staff."

Cultural Touchstones

In the car again, we drive by the Walker Art Center, a metal-clad building designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. It's one of Minneapolis' cultural treasures, along with Guthrie Theater, one of the nation's leading regional theaters. Café Lurcat, a D'Amico





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road trip



Despite the efforts of Parasole and D'Amico & Partners, Minneapolis remains a “two star” dining city, Roberts says.

Walker Art Center is a Twin Cities cultural icon. Visitors can dine at Wolfgang Puck's 20.21 restaurant and bar.

Former Parasole employee Tim Niver bought Town Talk, a classic diner in a gentrifying part of town, and turned it into a hip hot spot complete with a “chef driven” bar.

The recipe for Good Earth's cashew chicken salad hasn't changed in 25 years, but the presentation is up to date.

full-service restaurant featuring a small-plates menu, is across the street.

We pass another landmark, the first Buca di Beppo, which opened in 1993, then end up at Manny's Steaks and The Oceanaire Seafood Room, both in the Hyatt Regency on Nicollet Mall. Neither restaurant has a street presence, and neither is open for lunch, yet each grosses about \$10 million a year. Manny's opened in 1988 and Oceanaire, a retro-feeling seafood restaurant, opened in 1999. Oceanaire now has 14 locations, with three more scheduled to open later this year and next. Roberts spun it off from Parasole after four units were up and running, just as he spun off Buca di Beppo in 1996.

A quick look at Minneapolis' downtown—the IDS Tower (where Mary Tyler Moore tossed her beret into the air) and the AT&T tower—and we are on our way to Punch Pizza, a five-unit Neapolitan pizzeria launched by John Puckett, Caribou Coffee founder. The menu, just pizza and salads, is minimalist, as is the decor, with yellow walls, blue and white tables, and a communal table bisecting the narrow dining room.

That ends our Road Trip, Minneapolis viewed within the framework of one concept creator's creations. He's succeeded by distilling the cuisines of the world into fun, approachable concepts, and others might do the same. The loose formula? Checked tablecloths, not white ones, menus authentic but not too, and most of all, “no culinary gymnastics,” Roberts says. ■

on the web: The Mall of America: A major player or minor figure in Twin Cities dining? Find out at www.chainleader.com.

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Display grills, new carpeting and burritos could bring **BUFFETS INC.** into the 21st century. By David Farkas

Late to the TABLE

On a sweltering Sunday morning in late July, Joe Yannuzzo, a service manager for HomeTown Buffet in Parma, Ohio, is so enthused about a piece of equipment that arrived two days earlier he eagerly leads a guest into the busy kitchen.

There, amid steam kettles, flattops and fryers, stands a brand new char-grill and hood. "I hope you stay for lunch so you can try the grilled steak," he offers.

Yannuzzo isn't alone in his exuberance. "It's costing us from \$5,000 to \$6,000 for the char-grills, and it's money well spent," declares Buffets Inc. CEO Mike Andrews Jr., a few days later in his sprawling office in Eagan, Minn. The company, which operates 648 buffet restaurants chiefly under the HomeTown Buffet, Old Country Buffet and Ryan's Grill Buffet & Bakery brands, expects

to have char-grills in all of its units by this December, many in a display-cooking format.

It is capital that other all-you-can-eat chains, which long ago introduced grilled foods, might otherwise deploy opening new restaurants or marketing existing ones. But Andrews isn't into that kind of spending. Instead, the 48-year-old former accountant, who joined Buffets as chief financial officer in 2000, is attempting to boost sales by sprucing up what he has at hand.

"I have a lot of capacity sitting around," he says matter of factly, "and my best use of capital is what I'm doing with it."

Best of Intentions

Andrews intends to do a lot indeed. With \$50 million budgeted for capital expenditures in the current fiscal year (ends June 2008), he is introducing display cooking, adding new products, franchising HomeTown Buffet, and cleaning up Ryan's. Buffets owner Caxton-Iseman Capital acquired the

Vice President of Business Development Damon Fraser (l.) and CEO Mike Andrews Jr. are counting on a new franchise plan to expand HomeTown Buffets in California and Florida.

**SNAPSHOT****Company** Buffets Inc.**Headquarters**

Eagan, Minn.

2007 Revenues

\$1.7 billion

Units 631 company owned, 17 franchised**Average Unit Volume**

\$2.8 million for HomeTown Buffet and Old Country Buffet; \$2.6 million for Ryan's Grill Buffet & Bakery

Average Check

\$7.95 HomeTown and Old Country Buffet; \$8.50 Ryan's

Expansion Plans

No company units in 2008; 5 to 10 franchise units within 3 to 5 years

30-year-old chain last November in an \$834 million leveraged buyout financed by junk bonds and a sale-leaseback transaction that raised \$566 million.

The deal made Buffets Inc. the country's largest buffet company, surpassing Raleigh, N.C.-based Golden Corral, a \$1.5 billion chain with about 500 units. Buffets, which rang up roughly \$963 billion in sales in fiscal 2006, expects sales of \$1.7 billion for this year.

The acquisition appeared to offer the right synergies. The bulk of Ryan's 320 units are spread throughout the Southeast, where neither HomeTown nor Old Country has a significant presence. The three concepts also share a similar check average and menu.

"So many mergers don't make sense. You end up creating this multiconcept hodgepodge, which I'm not comfortable running," explains Andrews, who thinks of himself as "more of a pure-play operator."

Still, Buffets may have gotten more than it



bargained for. "There are problems on the Ryan's side. It was a poorly managed business," says Senior Research Analyst Mark D. Churchill of Minneapolis-based Piper Jaffray, one of the deal's underwriters.

Buffets CFO Keith Wall concedes sales have been softer than anyone expected. Comparable sales slumped 8.7 percent at Ryan's in the third quarter (ended April 4). They were down 2.1 percent at HomeTown and Old Country units (the concepts are identical except for their names).

Ryan's units also show signs of neglect. "We need to spend more time getting the units back up to the standards we have at

Buffets is depending on a new display-grilling program to lure franchisees capable of opening three to five units. "I don't want to end up with a mom-and-pop system," Andrews declares.

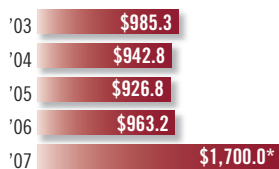


The perception of freshness in buffet restaurants is enhanced when customers can watch grill cooks.

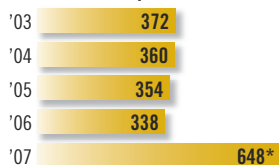
One of the efficiencies gained in the acquisition of Ryan's Grill Buffet & Bakery is marinade, which now flavors grilled steaks at HomeTown Buffet and Old Country Buffet.

Buffets Inc. Doubles in Size

Sales Begin To Rise...
(in millions)

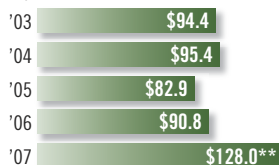


While Units Jump...



And Earnings Swell

(adjusted earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization, in millions)



Fiscal year ends in June; *company estimate; **Piper Jaffray estimate

Buffets. It has turned out to be a longer job than anticipated," says Wall, who won't estimate when sales will turn positive.

To that end, management has been replacing carpeting and wallpaper

in aging Ryan's restaurants. "Our goal is not to revolutionize it but to clean it up," Andrews says, adding the company is doing a design audit.

Extreme Makeover

A unit in McDonough, Ga., has already undergone a serious face lift. "We went in and retrofitted it with a look we thought it should be," he says. "There's much more merchandising of the food."

Andrews says efforts like that require two important leadership skills: "First, have respect for what they are doing right. We will never make Ryan's a renamed Old Country Buffet. Second, have the courage to make the calls that need to be made."

That has meant firing Ryan's corporate employees and consolidating operations in Eagan. Buffets offered a slimmer benefits package to remaining salaried workers.

To increase store-level margins, Andrews is trimming labor and food costs. Where Ryan's once employed two cashiers, for example, they now use one, like HomeTown and Old Country. Servers, who used to bring drinks and rolls to four tables, now tend to eight.

"Ryan's was staffing to peak," Andrews recalls. "We had to figure out labor hours to guest load." Buffets determines margins by dividing the cost of goods by the number of guests per quarter hour.

Ryan's is also boosting margins by using the recipe for HomeTown's mac and cheese, having switched from a frozen product Andrews deemed too expensive. HomeTown's version involves boiling noodles,

"The focus at Ryan's has been on getting the infrastructure right." —CEO Mike Andrews

mixing in sauce and shredded cheese, and baking the mixture off. Although more labor intensive, officials contend it's considerably cheaper to produce: 1.5 cents per guest vs. 5 cents, according to Wall.

The company estimates the change will save Buffets about \$7.6 million in the next fiscal year. All told, Wall and Andrews figure there is \$55.7 million in cost savings, much of it coming from the food side.

"You lose a little bit of your soul when you go to value-added," Andrews maintains. "If you go back into our kitchens, we can virtually out-cook anybody."

Robust Flavors

Enter Buffets Inc. co-founder Dennis Scott, now a consultant to the company charged with developing new products. He divides his time between a J.J. North Grand Buffet in Portland, Ore., which Buffets owns, and a HomeTown in Kansas City, Mo., dubbed the company's "ideation center."

Both restaurants play a crucial role in Andrew's vision of the future. J.J. North serves as the prototypical layout, the centerpiece of which is a display grill. Says former Ponderosa-Bonanza president and consultant Frank Steed, "It's something they had to do to stay competitive."

"Kansas City is what I want [a Buffets restaurant] to be operationally," Andrews says.

For his part, says Scott, "I'm currently working on trying to get efficiencies between Buffets and Ryan's." He cites Ryan's robust steak marinade, which HomeTown and Old Country Buffet now use. A version of Ryan's sweet, yeasty dinner rolls are also popping up in HomeTowns and Old Country Buffets; so are chicken quesadillas, an item that is made on the new grills.

Scott boasts he's even tested prime rib profitably on Mother's and Father's Day in Kansas City—though he concedes he raised prices by \$2. He's also discovered buffet customers like jambalaya.

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“The reality is that the buffet guest wants exactly the same thing as the casual-dining guest.”

—CEO Mike Andrews

Still, it's meatloaf and chicken pot pie—two dishes he's reformulating—that will likely find their way on the food bar before an expensive cut of beef. “The initiative is adding more flavor to old favorites,” he says.

The Good Old Days

Buffets has long catered to value-oriented customers seeking traditional Sunday-style fare at both lunch and dinner. For years the model worked as long as the all-you-can-eat price point remained below \$10 and the food was freshly prepared.

Scott and co-founder Roe Hatlan accomplished both with a business model that carefully monitored guest counts (so as not to waste food) and zealously applied operational know-how (small-batch cooking ensured freshness). Trouble was, there was no theater to any of it, nor was there anything trendy on the food bar.

It didn't seem to matter. By 2000, then-public Buffets had become an attractive take-out target, posting meaningful same-store-sales gains and racking up big profits. Caxton-Iseman took it private in 2001, in a deal worth \$643 million.

The heady times are gone. Today, Buffets, like many other full-service restaurant chains, is mired in a sales slump. Churchill estimates sales at all three brands will remain negative through the fourth quarter of the current fiscal year, with Ryan's down the sharpest at about 4 percent. Same-store sales are crucial to profits. Churchill calculates a 1 percent change at the 658 company units would yield roughly \$6.7 million of EBITDA.

And then there are those belated grills. Competitors added them long ago. Golden Corral, for instance, features food “pavilions” in new units that offer the kinds of trendy ethnic fare, often grilled, found in casual-dining restaurants.

“Shrimp and ribs and steak with different toppings—that's what people want,” says Golden Corral's Senior Director of Marketing Steve Fortlouis.

Buffets officials say units with grills visible to customers boost unit sales an average 15 percent, or \$420,000, based on a volume of \$2.8 million. The cost to retrofit a display grill into a HomeTown is \$350,000, Wall says.

Enter Franchising

The company is counting on these updated HomeTowns to grab the attention of experienced operators, who could open three to five units in Florida and California, where the brand has already established itself.

Vice President of Business Development Damon Fraser predicts that within three years the company will have inked a half-dozen agreements. Buffets currently has three franchisees who operate 17 units, nearly all in Western states.

“We've been talking to people that were in quick casual or family dining. They are saying this looks like a more interesting model,” Fraser claims. The company's Uniform Franchise Offering Circular includes an analysis of a HomeTown unit with sales of about \$4 million. EBITDAR is a respectable 23.1 percent, which includes royalty and advertising fees of 6 percent.

“The trick is, high volume, good returns,” says Steed, who has consulted for Buffets. “Building a box that big is a challenge.”

Then again, so is keeping up with competitors. “My goal,” Andrews vows, “is to catch up as soon as possible. We'll be catching up with display grills and inside-the-four-walls improvements.” ■

Bow-tie pasta with shrimp is among several casual-dining-style offerings at Buffets Inc.

An air of festivity comes naturally to buffets. HomeTown Buffets and Old Country Buffets will shortly juice the party by adding display grilling at a cost of roughly \$350,000 per unit.

on the web: Buffets Inc. CEO Mike Andrews examines how to do takeout in buffets. Visit www.chainleader.com.

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■ food safety

Training manuals for every position at Cracker Barrel include food-safety protocols, and staff is retrained when issues arise.



DATA Points

Cracker Barrel's new reporting software helps **MANAGE AND QUICKLY CORRECT** the systems already in place. **By Mary Boltz Chapman**

SNAPSHOT

Concept Cracker Barrel
Old Country Store

Headquarters
Lebanon, Tenn.

Units 562

2006 Systemwide Sales
\$2.2 billion (fiscal year
ended in July)

2007 Systemwide Sales
\$2.4 billion
(company estimate)

Average Unit Volume
\$3.1 million

Average Check \$8.29

Expansion Plans
7 by the end of October

When it comes to food safety, the latest news at Cracker Barrel is that the 562-unit family-dining chain implemented data-collection software in May that tracks applicable figures and automatically creates reports.

While executives are happy to discuss the new system, they are quick to note that it's a tool that enables them to analyze measurables that they've been taking all along.

"The software allows us to analyze quicker and analyze for trends so that if something is starting to go the wrong way, you can jump on it," explains Bob Doyle, vice president of product development and quality assurance.

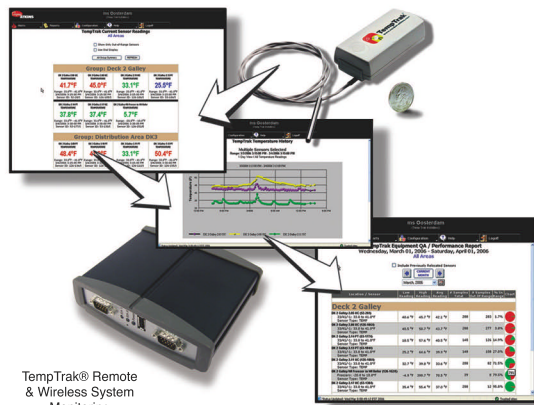
"You can see things that are not moving in the direction you expect them to, and you can take action on them much quicker and prevent issues vs. reacting to them after the fact."

Multiple Inputs

Data inputs begin early in the process. When the purchasing department identifies a potential supplier, Cracker Barrel begins evaluating third-party audit reports and the manufacturer's own quality-assurance and food-safety procedures, including metal detection and recall protocols.

The process doesn't end after Cracker Barrel's QA staff visits and evaluates the supplier and the company begins using its products. "Then there's a whole new set of data we start collecting," Doyle says. "On an ongoing basis, we collect data from plant audits at their facil-

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Cracker Barrel's potential suppliers must submit to a screening process that includes food-safety audits of their facilities.



ities, and we do an audit on their plants.”

Headquarters also conducts product audits, testing physical qualities like shape, chemical and micro properties such as percentage of fat and levels of bacteria, and taste.

The frequency of such testing depends on each item's risk level, based on how important and critical to the brand it is. Take chicken, for example. “With the chicken, an item that is center of plate, very important, and we use a lot of it, we will audit the suppliers’ facilities at a greater frequency than maybe our salt supplier,” Doyle explains.

Unit by Unit

The data collection continues with the processes at the restaurant level, from food com-

ing in the back door to dishes placed in front of the customer. A Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points program ensures that every recipe and procedure has control points that are checked and recorded.

Corporate also collects every health department inspection report. “We do a cross-grading process,” Doyle says. “Because there are numerous forms and grading systems across the country, we standardize it so we understand how we’re performing.”

If Cracker Barrel's QA department sees concerns or issues, members of the team will go to the restaurant to help it address those areas or retrain staff. “Our approach with our stores is not to go in and find fault, it is to help them get better,” Doyle adds.

Cracker Barrel Vice President of Product Development and Quality Assurance Bob Doyle says, “In our restaurants, we talk about what our mission is, and that’s pleasing people. And you can’t please anyone if the food isn’t safe.”

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In the same spirit, the chain encourages restaurants to communicate often with their local health departments, he says. "We invite them back to work with us to make sure that we're taking care of whatever they find. Having that relationship is big, the relationship between the health department and the restaurant. They are doing a job, and they can help you be better than where you're at today."

Cracker Barrel also conducts its own store audits, sometimes driven by a potential problem. The company is preparing to test a new audit program with a third party, scheduled to begin within the next couple of months.

To ensure food safety permeates the chain's culture, all managers are trained in the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation's ServSafe certification program. Hourly employees learn processes and their importance in every position's training manual. "When you have a process laid out, you follow the same steps over and over again. That is absolutely critical, following it and living with it and breathing it every single day," Doyle says.

Data Processing

Back at corporate, Cracker Barrel's new software is taking all these measurables and creating exception reports, monitoring trigger points and automatically sending alerts when necessary. "When you're the size we are—we work with hundreds of products, we have a lot of suppliers—there's a lot of data being generated. This is something that takes all that, makes it manageable, makes it more efficient and more effective," Doyle says.

"Actionable data is what we're looking for, to be proactive vs. reactive," he adds. "This tool allows us to do that." ■

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Screening for Success

If you're an area developer selecting franchisees to fill your territory, how can you ensure they've got what it takes to succeed? "The worst thing an area developer wants to do is put a franchisee in who fails; then you have a dead store and a blemish on your brand," says Dean McSherry, president and CEO of Dallas-based Preferred Restaurant Services, which helps train new foodservice franchisees. Asking these questions up front can help avoid franchise flops.



● **What point-of-sales system will you use?** "Sometimes a franchisee says, 'We'll just do a cash register,'" says McSherry. "That is not enough." Franchisees should utilize a computerized touch-screen POS system that will track sales and time in attendance, integrate credit cards, do daily sales reconciliation and interface with an accounting system.

● **What firm do you plan to use for accounting services, and what software do they use?** Find out whether the franchisee is taking advantage of the latest technology. "Manually inputting information means less time out on the floor," says McSherry.

● **Who will process payroll?** Payroll should be outsourced, McSherry advises, to save time and reduce errors.

● **Who do you plan to use for property and casualty insurance, including workers' comp?** The insurance firm should have a restaurant specialty. "If the franchisee

Knowledge of workers' comp and medical benefits for staff are key areas for potential franchisees to be aware of.

is planning to just call up the guy who does his car insurance, he might wind up paying too much and not getting the right coverage," says McSherry.

● **Are you going to offer health insurance to your managers and staff?** "Franchisees will have less turnover and better managers if they offer health insurance," says McSherry. "You want them to put a good team together and keep it." Offering staff limited medical benefits funded by the employees helps keep and retain staff.

In sum, ask a lot of questions, and have solutions ready from a preferred vendor list. "You're trying to look at how that business is going to be set up, everything from site selection to counting the money," says McSherry. "You want that franchisee to have the biggest leg-up that he can, so he can hit the ground running and open up more units in the future."

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Maria Alex Nitto, area director for Pinebrook, N.J.-based Tiff's, can pull up to 315 pounds for five repetitions.

Heavy LIFTING

Tiff's Maria Alex Nitto proves power lifting is more about brains than brawn. **By Maya Norris**

Maria Alex Nitto does not look like your average power lifter. At 5 foot 10 inches and 130 pounds, the area director for five-unit casual-dining chain Tiff's is taller and leaner than most female power lifters. Despite the physical disadvantages and limited time to train, 28-year-old Nitto can lift more than 300 pounds after only participating in the sport for the last

four years.

"It's not something girls usually do," she says. "If you looked at me, you would never think it."

Quick Study

Nitto took up power lifting in 2003 when her boyfriend, Paul Danna, who owns a gym, encouraged her to try it. He began training her in dead lifting, in which she pulls a barbell off the floor to a standing position with her arms straight down, but not over her head. After training for only a year-and-a-half, she was able to pull 315 pounds for five repetitions, her personal best.

"You just feel like you've accomplished something because you can just see your strength and your power," Nitto says. "And if people are watching you in the gym, that boosts your ego, too. A lot of guys are like, 'Wow, that girl can do that kind of thing.'"

Competitive Mindset

Nitto has participated in two dead-lifting competitions. She didn't place well because many of the competitors lifted 400 pounds or more. "Usually the girls are really short and my weight, so they have an advantage, because if you're shorter, you're closer to the ground," Nitto says. "So naturally if you're smaller, it's easier for you to lift a little bit more weight. I'm tall and have long arms, so it's a little bit more difficult."

Many of her competitors also generally have more time to train than she does. Nitto goes to the gym at 6 a.m. for about an hour to 90 minutes three or four times a week. She dead-lifts once a week and does cardio and weight-lifting exercises three times a week. On the weekends she rides her mountain bike and runs occasionally.

Preparing for two competitions in the fall and early 2008, Nitto is working to dead-lift at least 325 pounds. She is also training in two other power-lifting events: the squat and the bench press. She can squat about 150 pounds but is aiming for 200 pounds. She can bench-press 105 pounds currently, but she hopes to bench-press 150 pounds.

Mind Over Matter

To meet her goals, Nitto says she has to stay focused, but she finds it challenging because she often thinks about her job when she trains. "You've got to really focus on it and really think about pulling the weight off the floor," Nitto says. "Last week I was trying to pull my weight and I missed it. I was real distracted. But then yesterday I went to do it with no problem. I pulled it up for four reps."

"People really take the mind for granted," she adds. "It's pretty much the same with all sports. You just got to have a really strong head. You have to really be focused." ■



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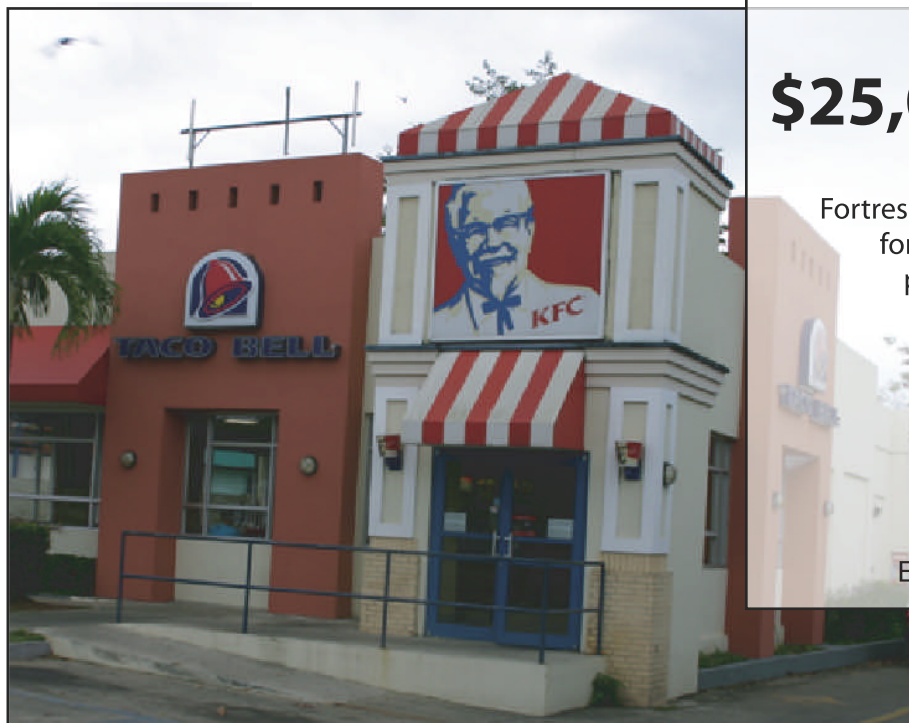
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