

Vol. 13, No 2  
February 2008

Reed Business  
Information

# chain leader<sup>®</sup>

## TREND-FORWARD INSIGHTS TO BUILD BRANDS

TV ads teach about regional Bajío and its origins. **PAGE 18**

Ruth's Chris sates demand for **citrus drinks**. **PAGE 23**

El Pollo Loco gives **franchisees** a leg up. **PAGE 38**

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## A GREEN Revolution?

Though there are leaders, most chains are on the environmental defense.

**PAGE 30**

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Big Bowl's eco-efforts include using organic salmon and locally grown produce.





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Quick-service customers prefer to sit in the car, especially when they are alone. More than 40 percent of fast-food goes through the drive-thru.

# WINDOW of Opportunity

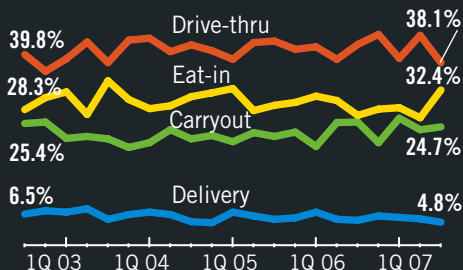


## Drive-Thru Data

Share of all QSR occasions by dining type, 21-quarter average

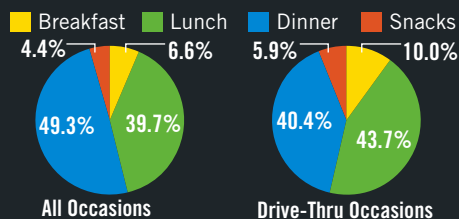
### In the Fast Lane

Share of all QSR occasions by dining type



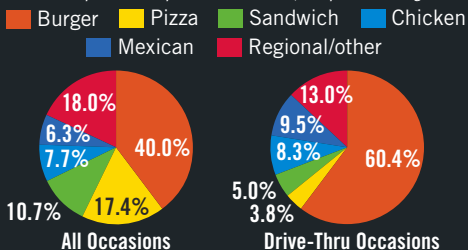
### Drive-In Diners

All QSR users' last purchase occasions, 21-quarter average



### Segment Share

Share of past-month purchase occasions, 21-quarter average



**T**he drive-thru sees the greatest share of fast-food occasions—fully 40.8 percent, according to a 21-quarter average. Quick-Track, a quarterly study by San Clemente, Calif.-based research firm Sandelman & Associates, reveals that 29.9 percent of QSR occasions were eat-in; 23.3 percent, carryout; and 6.0 percent, delivery.

- 37.9 percent of respondents who used the drive-thru were alone, while 27.2 percent of all QSR customers were, a 21-quarter average shows. Average party size was also smaller for those at the window than all fast-food users (2.2 vs. 2.7), as was the mean amount spent per party (\$9.66 vs. \$13.73).

- The average amount spent per person is also smaller for those using the drive-thru on their most recent occasion (\$4.32 vs. \$5.00), even though drive-thru users were less likely to take advantage of a special deal (11.2 percent did vs. 20.2 percent of all QSR users) and more apt to buy side dishes (63.7 percent vs. 57.0 percent).

- Drive-thru customers using a special

deal on their last occasion were most likely made aware of the special via signs at the restaurant (37.3 percent) or television ads (20.4 percent), according to a 21-quarter average. The top sources of awareness for all QSR users were direct-mail fliers (27.5 percent), signs at the unit (24.8 percent) and newspapers (23.5 percent).

- 37.5 percent of fast-food customers using the drive-thru on their last visit had a hamburger; 15.5 percent ordered a chicken, submarine or other sandwich; 13.3 percent ate chicken either bone-in or in strips or nuggets; and 8.1 percent had Mexican food.

- The window is busiest during lunch. According to a 21-quarter average, 43.7 percent of QSR customers who used the drive-thru on their most recent occasion did so at lunch; 40.4 percent, at dinner; 10.0 percent, breakfast; and 5.9 percent, snacks. Of all most recent fast-food occasions, 39.7 percent were at lunch; 49.3 percent, dinner; 6.6 percent, breakfast; and 4.4 percent, snacks. ■

**METHODOLOGY** Customer trend data is based on the quarterly Quick-Track survey by Sandelman & Associates, a San Clemente, Calif.-based research firm. Quick-Track queries a nationally representative sample of 600 fast-food customers on a host of demographic and usage questions. The firm defines “QSR drive-thru users” as those who have purchased food via the drive-thru from a QSR at least once in the past month. Most-recent purchase data is based on all QSR users whose dining type was drive-thru on their last QSR occasion.



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— Wes Pigott, Store Manager, Huddle House, Senatobia, Mississippi

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Picture left to right: Quincy Wooten, Cook, Charlotte Kelsay, District Supervisor, and Wes Pigott, Store Manager.





## 30 COVER STORY

### Environmental Defense

A handful of chains—like Chipotle Mexican Grill, McDonald's and Big Bowl—have taken significant steps to address environmental concerns. But so far such efforts appear to be exceptions. *Chain Leader* discovered that a number of large companies remain largely on the sidelines despite widespread publicity about the so-called green movement.

By David Farkas



## 18 STORYBOARD

### Mexican Imports

Bajío Mexican Grill launched its first advertising last year as it continues with its aggressive growth plans. The commercials educate consumers about the concept's connection to the Bajío region of Mexico, emphasize its made-from-scratch food and communicate its fun atmosphere.

By Margaret Littman



## 20 IDEA TO ROLLOUT

### Wildly Popular

O'Naturals wanted to find a way to keep wild bison on the menu after dropping the beef and bison burgers from its menu. So it created the Wild West sandwich, featuring wild-bison meatloaf.

By Monica Rogers

## 23 LIQUID MEASURE

### Lemon Aid

After learning that five of its top 10 cocktails had a lemon or citrus profile, Ruth's Chris Steak House created its own signature version of lemoncello, vodka infused with fresh lemons, to serve as the base for a dozen fusion cocktails.

By Monica Rogers

## 26 RESTAURATOUR

### Way to Go

Coco's Bakery Restaurant is trying to capitalize on its breakfast core competency by adding an espresso bar and takeout bakery to its restaurants. Targeting a younger demographic, the new cafe features an earth-inspired palette, quartz-like countertops and two-toned wood cabinetry.

By Lisa Bertagnoli

## 38 FRANCHISE MANAGEMENT

### A Leg Up

El Pollo Loco offers new franchisees extensive help, from the time they sign the franchise agreement to opening week and beyond. Assistance includes site selection, setting up accounts with vendors and six weeks of training before opening day.

By Lisa Bertagnoli





## WEB EXCLUSIVES

- Green efforts to trim operating costs
- Concept creator Cameron Mitchell talks about what's next now that he has sold Mitchell's Fish Market to Ruth's Chris
- Restaurants Unlimited is poised for expansion thanks to its acquisition by Sun Capital Partners and purchase of Pacific Coast Restaurants
- How sales contests can motivate server productivity
- Lee Roy Selmon's spinoff from OSI Restaurant Partners
- Damon's engineers a turnaround
- Houlihan's shares how it secured an investment to grow
- Concept creator Steve Schussler discusses his new concept
- Phoenix-area restaurants prepare for the Super Bowl

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- Mark Hampton's execution of Vicorp's Legendary Recipes program
- Roland Dickey Jr. primes Dickey's Barbecue for national expansion
- Greg Burns transforms O'Charley's and Ninety Nine

## HOW TO GROW TO 100 UNITS

- Kelly Harris of Times Grill pinpoints the 10 key areas small chains need to invest in as they expand
- Don Vlcek of Marco's Pizza provides 10 tips for working with suppliers
- Financial adviser Mark Saltzgaber offers small chains a primer on raising capital

## PLUS

- Senior Editor David Farkas muses about the restaurant industry in his blog, Dave's Dispatch
- Daily news
- Franchise opportunities
- Topic-specific pages on marketing, expansion, operations and more

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### Open Exchange

Panda Restaurant Group communicates with its manufacturers and distributors frequently to ensure food safety with initiatives that include audits at least once a year and hiding temperature-tracking devices in cartons of product.

By Mary Boltz Chapman

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—Adam Baird, Vice President of Food/Beverage



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# Do the GREEN Thing

**W**hen we were developing the Cover Story, we decided not to discuss whether earth-friendly practices were the right thing to do. Instead, we wanted to focus on the business strategy, the return on investment, even though there aren't a lot of examples to share. I'm not going to talk about doing the right thing either.

For one thing, I don't want to be a hypocrite: Though I believe in the cause, I'm just learning how to tread softly on this planet—to walk the talk, so to speak—and taking small steps. And I am financially supported by a company that uses a lot of

**I challenge you to look objectively at long-term environmental risks and costs just as you look at food safety or real estate.**

paper, killing a lot of trees—though Reed Business Information is making eco-progress as well. Secondly, I don't think it's as effective to make a point based on values or conscience as it is to make a point based on objective rationale.

## WHAT WE ARE NOT

To be honest, I was surprised that more restaurant chains weren't able to talk about sustainability as a long-term business strategy. Successful companies look into the future and plan for worst-case scenarios. I'm not talking about polar bears going extinct or Manhattan being flooded by rising sea levels created by melting ice caps. I'm

thinking of rising food costs because more and more corn is diverted for fuel. Gas prices and heating prices will increase not only because of limited supply but because carbon emissions will be taxed. Also potentially taxable: takeout packaging and disposable water bottles.

If you think it's a pain to have to list calorie, sodium and saturated fats for each menu item, just wait until you have to list how much carbon gas your products generate. Can your units even open for business if a metropolitan area needs to ration clean water? Can your suppliers? Oh, and they will face the same cost increases, passing some of them onto you, who will have to pass some of them onto your customer.

Your customer increasingly cares about environmental issues and is skeptical about "greenwashing," paying lip service to sustainable issues. Many people also decide whether to work for a company based on issues such as caring about the planet.

## YOU'RE READY FOR THIS

You have sophisticated tools that track and measure inventory in real-time and predict what product you will need for next Wednesday's lunch rush. But can you predict whether you'll be able to source those ingredients in five or 10 years' time?

Some businesses feel that an environmental strategy is just too long-term at this point, that they have too many other pressing issues, especially in today's tough operating environment. Perhaps, but the most-innovative and trend-forward companies look far into the future to ensure their own sustainability.

I think the industry is ready for this, and I challenge you to look objectively at environmental risks and costs just as you look at food safety or real estate or food costs.

Meantime, I'll challenge myself, and my employer, to walk the talk. ■

## BIG ideas

**"If you can take credit for making small steps such as using organic produce or sustainable seafood or LEED-certified buildings, let's spread the word."**

—Harry Day, franchisee, *Pizza Fusion*

**"If you are not starting to look at sustainability, there's always the potential that your competitors are."**

—Tim Stein, consultant

**"Nature provides a free lunch, but only if we control our appetites."**

—William Ruckelshaus, first head of the EPA

**"Things do change. The only question is that since things are deteriorating so quickly, will society and man's habits change quickly enough?"**

—Isaac Asimov, science-fiction author

*Mary*  
Mary Boltz Chapman



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## Tuscan-Style Breast Strips





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A financial analyst predicts quick-service chains will come out on top in 2008.

# LEADERS of the Pack

**W**e asked restaurant analyst Jeffrey Bernstein of New York-based Lehman Brothers to peer into his crystal ball and tell us which chains are prepared to survive the looming recession and which will have to tough it out in 2008.

## What's the outlook for sales and earnings among the companies in your universe?

There definitely remains a split decision between quick-service restaurants, which are posting strong sales and earnings, and casual-dining and high-growth specialty chains, which continue to struggle with those same metrics.

## The reason?

Fast-food chains not only have strong domestic business from trade-down and a compelling value message, they also have significant international exposure and are primarily franchised, thus limiting their commodity and labor cost exposure.

## Yet aren't fast feeders suffering, too?

Absolutely. Lunch and dinner have definitely softened for fast food as well, but it's not of the magnitude of casual dining. With the consumer no longer eating the traditional three meals, QSR has responded by pushing breakfast, afternoon snacks and late night, none of which are priorities in casual dining. Those dayparts have carried the QSR sector's results over the past 12 to 24 months.

## Given that scenario, will you be in upgrade or downgrade mode this year?

We are very bullish and remain strong believers in QSR chains. Even though many are trading near peak multiples, there are still buyers. Casual-dining chains, despite sitting at close-to-trough multiples, don't seem to have any near-term support. We've been looking for some sign of stabilization, and we've not seen it yet.

## Are you saying casual-dining and specialty chains won't recover anytime soon?

There will be continued pressure on them even though their valuations appear compelling. Many people compare their current prices to historical ranges and say, "Wow, these names are getting relatively inexpensive."

## And the problem with that?

The thinking being that those ranges applied to the times when these chains were growing at x percent a year, and now they have slowed down unit growth and traffic has turned negative. So even if you believe they can get back to that growth over the next three years, in the near term, there is no way investors are willing to pay 20 times for it. Historical ranges are only so relevant in this environment.

## Which stocks demonstrate resiliency to the macro trends in 2008?

Burger King and McDonald's have done the best job responding to macro issues, with value menus and daypart opportunities. They also have tremendous international exposure. If the U.S. economy falls into a recession, they have the potential to offset some of that weakness.

## Which stocks are going to have a rough year?

We definitely remain more cautious on casual-dining stocks, like Brinker and P.F. Chang's. In addition, we are still cautious on Panera, which is a fast-casual chain.

## Speaking of which, what's the outlook for Chipotle?

Chipotle is the one name proven to be somewhat immune to the broader consumer macro weakness. Whether or not that stock holds in there remains to be seen. If it demonstrates even a modest slowdown from its stellar results, it could see significant pullback in 2008. ■



**"Burger King and McDonald's have done the best job responding to macro issues, with value menus and daypart opportunities."**

—Jeffrey Bernstein

**IN THE WORKS:** Bernstein is watching Wendy's for signs of a turnaround, but he hasn't seen a boost.





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# STICKING Around

Justix refines its skewer concept and partners with industry experts to accelerate franchised expansion.

**W**hen John and Cindy Lupi created Justix, they had always envisioned it as a national franchise. After two years refining the fast-casual skewer concept, the husband and wife team has kicked Justix' franchising program into high gear.

The Lupis came up with Justix in 2004. At the time, they owned Countryside Cafe, an upscale restaurant in Marble Hill, Ga.; they previously worked as managers for the Peasant Restaurant Group, an Atlanta-based multiconcept operator. Although they had restaurant experience, the Lupis had no experience with franchising. So they partnered with Mike

or indulgent as they want. "We wanted it to be one of those concepts that let the customer have complete autonomy over what they were going to eat," he says.

Lupi claims Justix is simple to operate: One prep person spends two-and-a-half hours cutting the proteins and three to four hours cutting the vegetables and making the sauces. The cooking process, which involves grilling the skewers for a minute to sear and mark them before finishing them off in the oven, keeps ticket times to six to eight minutes. And each unit only needs four to six employees per shift.

It costs \$230,000 to \$300,000 to open a unit, which is about 1,800 to 2,000 square feet. Although the Roswell store only generates \$450,000 in sales, Lupi says volumes will increase to \$550,000 to \$600,000 because of changes to the concept.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Last year Justix expanded its menu to eliminate the veto vote. It added brown and white rice, macaroni and cheese, and asparagus salad as sides, as well as wraps and entree salads.

Justix also developed a breakfast menu for units in business districts, where dinner is slow. Units in a mix of residential and business areas will have the option to include a small bar with a few wines and beers to drive dinner business.

Beyond refining the concept, Justix has turned to experts to accelerate expansion. It recently hired Concept Manager Chad Holmes. Last fall it partnered with the Findley Group, a Waco, Texas-based franchise sales and consulting company contracted to sign 80 franchisees in the next three years. Justix has also hired an advertising firm and real-estate company with a national brokerage network.

This year Justix will open a company unit in Atlanta, which will serve as a training store.

A franchised store opened in Kentucky in August. Because it recently kick-started its franchising program, Justix hasn't signed more franchisees yet. However, it expects at least five franchised stores open by year-end, most likely in the South and West.

The company hopes to have 50 restaurants in five years. ■



## SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Justix  
**Headquarters** Atlanta  
**Units** 2  
**2008 Systemwide Sales**  
 \$2 million  
 (company estimate)  
**Average Unit Volume**  
 \$450,000  
**Average Check** \$8.35  
**Expansion Plans**  
 1 company and at least 5  
 franchised units in 2008

Lassiter of Atlanta-based Franchising Concepts to develop a viable concept for franchising.

## STICKING POINTS

Justix debuted in Roswell, Ga., in December 2005. Today guests choose a protein such as chicken or tofu for their skewers; sides such as steamed broccoli or sweet-potato fries; and brown or white rice. Then they head to the sauce bar, which features 13 sauces such as Bodacious Blue Cheese.

According to John Lupi, the mix-and-match nature of the concept sets it apart. Guests create their own flavor profiles and make their meals as healthful

**IN THE WORKS:** Justix plans to add to its training team in 2009 after 10 units are open.



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# GAME Plan

Villa Enterprises bets on casinos as a viable venue to expand and boost sales.



Compared to a traditional location, it costs 10 percent to 30 percent more to open a Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen in a casino because of union labor and flashier signage.

## CASHING IN

Villa Enterprises has since opened two more Villa Pizzas and three Villa Fresh Italian Kitchens in the food courts of casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J. (The company reconcepted Villa Pizza into Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen two years ago with a more upscale look but

the same menu.) According to Torine, casino units yield higher sales and average checks than traditional locations, but he won't release exact figures. He attributes the higher numbers to the units having longer hours.

In addition, because casino customers are there specifically to gamble and spend money, they're more likely to spend more at the restaurants on the property. "It's the spending patterns. People are a little more apt to spend at the casinos. They're in that mind-set," Torine explains. "You know if you're losing x amount of dollars gaming, then to spend \$5 or \$10 in the food court is no big deal."

## SNAPSHOT

**Concepts** Villa Pizza and Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen

**Headquarters**

Morristown, N.J.

**Units** 165 Villa Pizzas, 35 Villa Fresh Italian Kitchens

**Average Unit Volume** \$550,000

**Average Check** \$7.15

**Expansion Plans** 4 to 6 Villa Fresh units in casinos in 2008

Casinos have proven to be a safe bet for Villa Pizza and Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen. With six units in casinos, the Morristown, N.J.-based company plans to open more casino locations. Those stores ring up higher volumes than traditional units, help build brand awareness and give the company another outlet for expansion.

Parent company Villa Enterprises opened its first casino unit in 2001: a Villa Pizza in the Santa Fe Station Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. The casino had approached Villa about opening on the property. The QSR typically opens in high-pedestrian locations such as shopping malls and airports. But because there were fewer shopping malls being built, Villa Enterprises decided to try it. "The casinos were kind of a natural spinoff from the malls," says Vice President of Business Development Adam Torine. "It's a similar type of environment."

## REWARDING EXPERIENCE

It's not only the restaurants that reap the rewards of their casino locations. The casinos also benefit from having national restaurant brands like Villa on their properties, according to Torine. Casinos can concentrate on gaming knowing that an experienced restaurant company is handling food and beverage services.

"The brand recognition is very comforting for their guest," Torine says. "People are traveling very far away at times. And to see a brand like a Villa or a brand like Panda [Express] gives them a warm feeling that they're going to get a quality product at a good price. And it just enhances the overall experience. The better the overall experience the guest can have, the more money everyone's going to make—the casino, the restaurants, the theaters, the bowling alleys, etc."

**IN THE WORKS:** Villa is testing a display saute station that cooks pasta to order at a casino unit in Atlantic City, N.J.





Villa units in casinos ring up higher sales because they are open longer and guests are in the mood to spend money.

While there is money to be made, it comes at a price. Opening a Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen in a casino costs about 10 percent to 30 percent more than a traditional unit. Most casinos use union labor. And to fit in with its glitzy surroundings, a Villa casino unit sports flashier elements such as a digital menu board with lights and rotating food photos and larger-than-life signage that features art such as a big slice of pizza.

Despite these challenges, Villa is committed to opening more casino locations and has its own set of site-selection criteria. If a new casino is connected to a hotel, Villa benefits from the hotel expanding in the next few years because that means more customers down the road. The company also prefers to open in casinos that have entertainment and retail components such as a movie theater, bowling alley and lifestyle center in or near the property. According to Torine, casino visitors are looking to occupy their time with activities beyond gaming.

For example, when the developer of the Green Valley Ranch Station Casino in Las Vegas opened a lifestyle center within walking distance of the casino two years ago, the Villa Pizza unit in the casino saw sales go up 10 percent. The Villa Pizza in Santa Fe Station also experienced a sales boost when the casino brought in a movie theater, a children's play area, a new bar, and additional meeting and convention rooms.

#### RAISING THE STAKES

Out of the 38 Villa Fresh units opening this year nationwide and in Mexico, Italy and the Czech Republic, four to six of them will open in casinos in Las Vegas and some other cities that Torine can't disclose at this time. In addition, Villa is looking into bringing two of its other concepts to casinos: Green Leaf's, a salad concept, and Bananas, a smoothie and yogurt brand.

"[Casinos are] a great line extension," he says. "We're very comfortable with it. We're making a bigger push for it. And wherever there's an opportunity, we're going to seek it out, and hopefully the casinos seek us out as well." ■

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**“Subtitle”** *Length: 30 seconds*



**1.** Business group:  
Laughing.



**2.** Man: Why do they call it  
Bajio anyway?



**3.** The Bajio Trio: Sings song,  
quickly, in Spanish...



**4.** While subtitles roll  
too fast to read.

# Mexican IMPORTS

Bajio Mexican Grill's first TV campaign  
**EDUCATES CUSTOMERS** about its  
concept and Mexican heritage.

**A**mericans aren't known for having a great grasp on the geography of their own country, much less that of their neighbors to the south. So a restaurant branding campaign developed around a lesser-known region of Mexico may not seem destined for success.

But when American Fork, Utah-based Bajio Mexican Grill launched its first TV advertising last year, it included a little geography in a campaign that resulted in double-digit same-store-sales gains and positioned the concept for aggressive growth.

## CROSSING THE BORDER

Founded in late 2002, Bajio Mexican Grill is named after the agriculturally rich Bajio region of central

Mexico, known for cooking with a sweeter—rather than spicy—flavor profile. Founders Jason Stowe and Dave Tuomisto traveled to the Bajio region frequently as young adults, staying in a place owned by Tuomisto's parents. They fell in love with the fruit flavors used to marinate meats and in salsas and decided to bring the tastes back home to Utah.

Their plan was successful, except, as they expanded, they found customers didn't know how to pronounce the chain's name or how the menu differed from other fast-casual Mexican concepts like Chipotle Mexican Grill, Moe's Southwest Grill and Qdoba Mexican Grill.

"People had a very hard time saying our name or knowing what we are about. They thought we were a travel agency," says Stowe, who is now director of franchise development for the chain.

In late 2006 Bajio charged The Summit Group, a Salt Lake City-based ad agency, with creating a branding campaign that would teach consumers how to say the chain's name, explain the concept's connection to the Bajio region, emphasize that food is made from scratch in-house and help communicate the fun atmosphere that the concept believes it offers.

## EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION

The Summit Group, now Bajio's agency of record, convinced Bajio that a foray into TV was the most efficient way to build this kind of broad awareness. Before 2007 marketing had been focused on local promotions, newspaper inserts, radio and print ads. With 22 stores in the greater Salt Lake City area, the chain had the density to make television expenditure affordable, says Kelly Conroy, the Bajio account manager at Summit.

Summit worked with Bajio to create the Bajio Trio, a mariachi band, to serenade customers in the





5.



6.



7. The Bajio Trio:  
Aye, aye, aye, aye, aye.



8. Voice-over: Bajio!

ads and impart specific information through their lyrics. The trio was chosen because “trio” rhymes with the correct pronunciation of “Bajio” and would be a subtle way to educate diners. The Summit Group wrote the lyrics and gave them to the band, three brothers from Utah, who composed the music, Conroy says.

The six initial TV spots, in both 15- and 30-second lengths, featured the Bajio Trio delivering a variety of fun messages. One emphasizes that servers, called “amigos,” recognize their customers and learn their names. In another the trio sings about wanting a house made from Mexican pizza, one of the chain’s signature dishes. In a third the trio sings while a long list of subtitled information about the Bajio region scrolls across the screen too fast to read. (Some real information is also on the company Web site, [www.bajio grill.com](http://www.bajio grill.com), so that those who are curious can learn.)

The spots show off the warm interior of a Bajio restaurant, which is decorated with items imported from the Bajio region to help keep the look authentic.

The ads targeted Bajio’s target demographic: the fast-casual diner, between the ages of 20 and 44, with a heavier emphasis on adults under 35 without kids. Most of the chain’s core customers eat out three or four times a week, according to company research.

Bajio rotated the ads on and off the airwaves, both cable and broadcast, throughout 2007. The chain saw double-digit same-store-sales increases when the spots aired. Bajio rang up an estimated \$30 million in systemwide sales in 2007.

#### EYEING EXPANSION

That branding work is the foundation for 37-unit Bajio’s future growth. Plans are to double the size of

the chain this year, as it has done for the past several years; a year ago, there were just 16 Bajio units. Stowe says the chain could open as many as 50 units in 2008, including new metropolitan markets in Florida and Kentucky. All expansion will come from franchising, focused on endcap locations in high-end strip malls. Stowe owns 11 units, which the company uses for training and other functions usually delegated to a company-owned location.

Growth may also come from adding breakfast to the menu. Currently 60 percent of sales are at lunch, the remainder at dinner, but Bajio plans to test the morning daypart in a Texas unit later this year.

#### CONTINUING EDUCATION

Summit plans to create four new TV ads for 2008. The spots will include the Bajio Trio, who Stowe believes could be to Bajio “what Jared is to Subway.” But the ads will be more focused on specific menu promotions including fajitas and other menu additions, rather than general branding, Stowe says.

Contests such as a “write the next Bajio Trio song” challenge and e-mail and Web promotions are also possibilities for 2008. A local song competition in the Salt Lake City area in 2007 generated significant local news coverage. All of the creative elements will be scalable, so franchisees can use them in local markets for new-store openings as well as for more regional, and eventually even national, advertising efforts.

“Now we can focus a little bit more about why Bajio is different,” Conroy says. “We can have more messages about ingredients, how everything comes with sides of beans and rice.” Of course, he adds, thanks to the Bajio Trio, they’ll do it in song. ■

#### SNAPSHOT

**Concept**  
Bajio Mexican Grill  
**Headquarters**  
American Fork, Utah  
**Units** 37  
**2007 Systemwide Sales**  
\$30 million  
(company estimate)  
**Average Check** \$8  
**Ad Agency** The Summit  
Group, Salt Lake City  
**Ad Budget** \$750,000  
**Expansion Plans**  
50 in 2008



**Concept** O'Natural's  
**Headquarters**  
 Portland, Maine  
**Units** 7 (5 full-service  
 restaurants, 2 kiosks)  
**2007 Systemwide Sales**  
 \$6 million\*  
**Average Unit Volume**  
 \$1 million at company-  
 owned stores  
 (less for kiosk units)  
**Average Check** \$7.50  
**Expansion Plans**  
 4 restaurants and  
 4 kiosks in 2008  
 \*Chain Leader estimate



O'Naturals finds a **HOME FOR BISON** on the menu with its Wild West meatloaf sandwich.

# WILDLY Popular

**W**ith Portland, Maine-based O'Naturals set to expand its seven-unit base, a bigger slice of America will get its first taste of the chain's Wild West sandwich. Featuring wild-bison meatloaf, the \$7.10 sandwich is baked and served warm on signature flatbread with roasted red peppers, cheddar cheese and stone-ground mustard. (Lettuce, tomato and red onion are optional.)

Among the top three sellers on the sandwich menu since its launch in 2003, the sandwich was O'Naturals' solution for how to keep bison on the menu after it dropped both beef and bison burgers.

"When we started the concept, we thought the world needed a better burger and that guests would crave that," says Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Jay Friedlander.

O'Naturals' guests, it turned out, craved otherwise. They preferred flatbread sandwiches, salads and noodle bowls, even though the two burgers

O'Naturals menued were top quality—one made with Angus beef, the other, wild bison.

"Wild bison actually outsold the beef by a long shot," says Friedlander. But even so, burgers just weren't big sellers. Taking its cue from guest behavior, O'Naturals dropped burgers by its first anniversary, year-end 2002.

## HOME ON THE RANGE

But burgers or no, O'Naturals wanted to keep wild bison on the menu. Sourced from Western herds that are part of a Great Plains restoration project, the meat "not only tastes good, it's part of a good cause," says Friedlander.

The team re-introduced bison in 2003, baked into meatloaf, sliced and sold on flatbread as a sandwich. This time, guests loved it, Friedlander says. The Wild West has been one of the top three sellers in the sandwich category—No. 2 during cold weather months—ever since. ■





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Sweet on sour: Five out of Ruth's Chris' 10 top-selling cocktails last year had citrus in them. So management chose house-made lemongello, dubbed Lemonessence, as the base for its new line of 12 fusion cocktails.



## SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Ruth's Chris Steak House  
**Headquarters** Heathrow, Fla.  
**Units** 118  
**2007 Systemwide Sales** \$610 million\*  
**Average Unit Volume** \$5.7 million  
**Average Check** \$74  
**Expansion Plans** 6 or 7 company owned, 6 to 8 franchised in 2008

\*Chain Leader estimate

# Lemon ADD

Customer demand for citrusy drinks prompts Ruth's Chris Steak House to create its own lemon base for **NEW FUSION COCKTAILS**.

**M**using over methods for enhancing Ruth's Chris Steak House's cocktail program, Vice President of Beverage Kevin Boyer noticed something interesting. Sales data indicated that five out of the Heathrow, Fla.-based company's 10 best-selling cocktails had a lemon or citrus profile. "So it was a natural to focus on citrus as the base to whatever we did," says Boyer.

Building on what Boyer calls Ruth's Chris' 2006 "seismic shift to a fresh bar approach," with no bulk products, all fresh-squeezed juices, mixers and handmade garnishes, in 2007 the chain decided to create its own signature version of lemongello, vodka infused with fresh lemons. Master mixologist

Francesco LaFranconi developed the recipe for the fresh infusion dubbed Lemonessence. Every three days staff at each Ruth's Chris location make batches of the elixir, which takes five days to steep. Finished product is stored in Swiss-made, conical-shaped crystal carafes prominently displayed on the bar.

The base is used as an ingredient in a dozen fusion cocktails that include a variety of spirits. (Because the beverage program is new, Ruth's Chris is still tweaking the prices.) The Ginger Citrus Cooler, for example, blends tequila, orange-flavored liqueur and Lemonessence and is finished with ginger beer and a garnish of lemon slice and pickled ginger. The Grand Fusion includes Lemonessence with orange-flavored vodka, orange-flavored brandy liqueur, fresh orange juice and an orange zest garnish. And the Apple Cello Martini mixes Lemonessence with melon-flavored liqueur, sour-apple schnapps and fresh-made lemon sour.





**BIG idea** By this month, all Ruth's Chris service and management staff will have completed a beverage e-training program and more than 100 employees will have participated in the Society of Wine Educators' Certified Specialist of Wine program—on Ruth's Chris' dime.

## FLEXIBLE FUSION

Ruth's Chris took the fusion approach because "one of the problems that we identified with typical vodka and fruit infusions is that there is little flexibility," says Boyer. "But with our fusion cocktails, whether you are a scotch, vodka, gin, tequila or rum drinker, there is a cocktail using the Lemonescence product that will appeal to you."

Going the fusion route also allows flexibility for regional tastes. Kentucky drinkers, for example, like the Bardstown Cocktail, bourbon and Lemonescence served on the rocks or chilled and garnished with a slice of orange and fresh mint sprig. But in Miami, the Lemonjito, Lemonescence and sugar-cane rum muddled with fresh mint and lemon juice and topped with seltzer water and a lemon and mint garnish, is a bigger seller.

In a five-unit test for the last six months of 2007, the new fusion drinks did well. The Pear Twist—pear-flavored vodka and Lemonescence with a splash of lemon sour served chilled in a martini glass with a lemon twist—was the best seller. The Fusion Martini, a blend of orange-flavored vodka and Lemonescence with a splash of lemon sour served chilled in a martini glass with lemon-zest garnish, tied for the No. 2 spot with The Lemon Luxe dessert cocktail, which features Lemonescence with a splash of simple syrup and a chantilly cream topper. The program will be rolled out systemwide by the end of this month.

Adding nuance to the new cocktail program, Ruth's Chris is also more focused on ingredients that fit healthy and active lifestyles, says Boyer.



Ruth Chris' fusion cocktails (above r.) including the Ginger Citrus Cooler, Lemonjito and Pear Twist blend Lemonescence with a variety of spirits such as tequila, rum and vodka.

The Bardstown Cocktail mixes bourbon with Lemonescence, garnished with an orange twist and mint sprig.

One of the top-selling Lemonescence drinks, the Lemon Luxe is served chilled classic cordial fashion with a float of cinnamon-chantilly cream.



In the last year, drinks including ingredients such as pomegranate, green tea and pear, for example, have become top sellers. "More and more there's been an attitude shift," he says. "Anything with a fresh, healthy appeal we've seen spike in sales."

## ITEMS SOLD, DOLLARS SPENT

Technomic's 2007 Top 500 report analyzing 2006 sales ranked Ruth's Chris as No. 12 among the top 50 chains in beverage-alcohol sales, with alcoholic beverages comprising 25 percent to 30 percent of total sales and alcoholic beverage sales accounting for 25.2 percent of the average guest check. Boyer says the company did about the same in 2007 for alcohol sales in relation to total sales, but has been up over 2006 numbers in terms of items sold and dollars spent per guest, "which in a challenging economic environment is very encouraging for us."

Boyer attributes some of the improvement to the drink menu upgrades and to big design changes at the bar, making them much larger, more dramatic looking and easier to access. Ruth's Chris started the design changes with new units two years ago and is still retrofitting older units. ■





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# WAY TO GO

Coco's new **ESPRESSO AND TAKEOUT BAKERY** counter capitalizes on its 60-year breakfast tradition.

**C**oco's Bakery Restaurant had good reasons for embarking on a remodel: The 115-unit chain's last overhaul took place well over two decades ago.

But in December 2006, when parent company Catalina Restaurant Group set the redesign wheel in motion, it decided to do more than buy new furniture and slap on a coat of fresh paint.

The idea: an espresso bar and takeout-bakery program to "capitalize on our core competencies," says Heather Gardea, executive chef and vice president of food and beverage and marketing for Carlsbad, Calif.-based Catalina.

That core competency is breakfast, a menu mainstay at the 60-year-old concept. "The bakery was the

natural progression," Gardea says. "And from that, we went to espresso and iced beverages."

The result is a 25-seat cafe area within the 216-seat restaurant that offers customers the chance to eat a quick breakfast at Coco's or order it to go. A new menu, complete with a good-selling ham-and-cheese muffin (\$2.49), and a new equipment-to-beans coffee program accompanies the prototype, which bowed last September.

## DEDICATED PLANNING

Remodeling the Coco's in Mission Viejo, Calif., to add an espresso bar and takeout bakery took some planning, says Tom Ertler, prototype director at WD Partners, a Columbus, Ohio-based restaurant design firm. The reason: Coco's mandated that Ertler use the same footprint and basic layout as the existing store.





1. Earthy colors and finishes please Coco's older demographic while attracting a "fresh" client base that includes teens and 30-somethings.

2. Traffic flow is smooth: Staff needn't traverse the dining room to get from the kitchen to the espresso bar.



"It was not a very fun or sexy store-planning exercise," Ertler says. "We were really working on it to analyze the flow." The biggest challenge, he says, was designing the espresso bar so operation of it would not interfere with the restaurant's eat-in business.

The kitchen's convenient location, in a corner right next to the space dedicated to the espresso bar, made the design process a bit easier. Servers and staff can get from the kitchen to the espresso bar without traversing the dining room, which is invaluable to smooth traffic flow.

The kitchen's location also made it easier for Ertler to design a dedicated entrance for the espresso bar. That, plus a dedicated parking spot, menu boards and POS system, "tell [customers] that they'll get me in, give me a quality offer and get me on my way," says Ertler.

#### AN EARTHY LOOK

The espresso bar's colors and finishes, like that of the entire restaurant, are earth-inspired. A palette of oranges, reds, yellows and sage green attracts a



#### SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Coco's  
**Location** Mission Viejo, Calif.

**Ownership** Catalina Restaurant Group, Carlsbad, Calif.

**Opening Day** Sept. 28, 2007

**Area** 6,428 square feet, with 534-square-foot patio

**Seats** 216

**Average Check** \$8\*

**Average Unit Volume** \$1.55 million\*

**Expansion Plans** will not release

\*Chain Leader estimate





# RESTAURATOUR

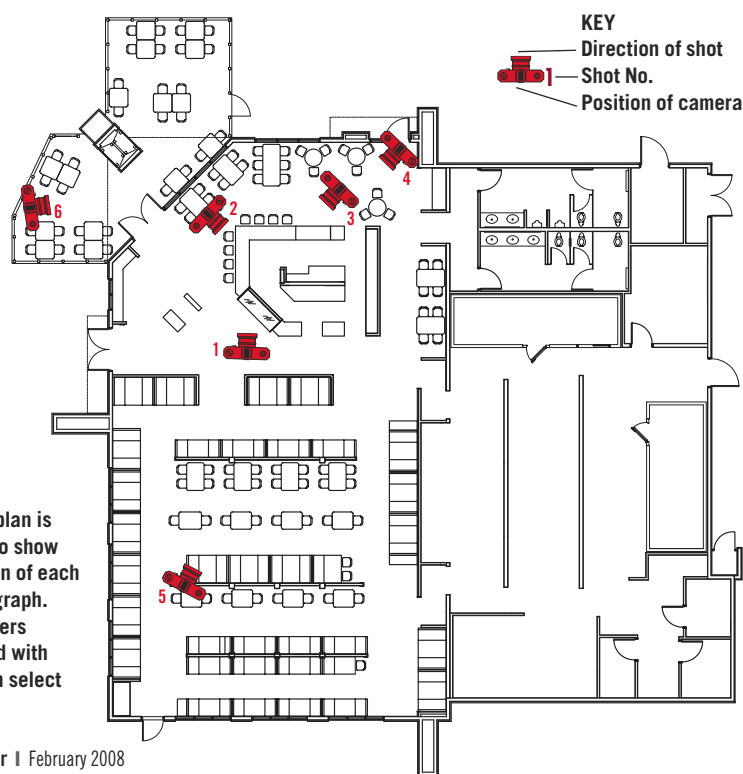


## BIG idea

Coco's espresso bar was designed so operation of it would not interfere with the restaurant's eat-in business.

**3.** Bar- and dining-height counters and chairs add visual interest to the espresso bar, as well as seating options for customers.

**4.** Tilted, brightly lit menu boards make the bakery menu—created especially for the prototype—easy to read.



This floor plan is designed to show the location of each key photograph. Shot numbers correspond with numbers in select photos.

“fresh” demographic of 35- to 45-year-olds without alienating Coco’s core customers: those from 45 to 65 with a household income of \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year, says Catalina CEO Sam Borgese. Wood furniture and a large stone wall, visible from all vantage points, also lend an upscale, but not intimidating, feeling.

Menu boards, tilted toward the floor, are equipped with changeable photography as well as copies of the whimsical chef drawing that adorns Coco’s printed menu.

The espresso bar’s top is a quartz-like material; cabinetry below it is two-toned wood. Tables and chairs, which are upholstered with artificial leather, sport the same two-toned wood as the cabinetry. Accent lights are clad in a natural, translucent plastic that looks like paper.

### CAPTURING CUSTOMERS

So far, the prototype is posting sales twice that of the older Coco’s, says Borgese. That’s partly because the restaurant’s location, near a mall and just off the freeway, makes it an ideal spot for a quick eat-in or takeout breakfast.

Still, customers aren’t taking advantage of the espresso bar, which is also open for dessert in the evening, “to its full extent,” Gardea says. As a result, takeout sales remain a tiny, though growing, portion of the sales mix; sales will likely build when the Mission Viejo restaurant begins marketing the program more aggressively later this year, according to Gardea.

It’s all part of a strategy to snare some of fast-casual’s grab-and-go market, Gardea says: “If we can capture some of that with this design, then it’s a win for all of us.” ■





A designated entrance is crucial to the takeout program; it tells customers that Coco's "will get me in, give me a quality offer and get me on my way," says designer Tom Ertler of Columbus, Ohio-based WD Partners.

5. While the coffee bar and takeout bakery is situated in the corner, it is visible from the main dining room.

6. The patio fireplace is a distinctive element at Coco's: "That's nothing you'd find in a regular restaurant," says Catalina Executive Chef Heather Gardea.



## minds for restaurants

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**W**ill 2008 be your green year? If you are operating a restaurant chain, your answer is most likely, “um, well, maybe.”

To be sure, a handful of chains—notably Chipotle Mexican Grill, McDonald's and Big Bowl—have taken significant steps to address environmental concerns. Big Bowl, for instance, will soon roll out new uniforms made from organic cotton, reducing its carbon footprint. New Chipotles use drywall made from 100 percent recycled material. And efforts to trim energy use by 4 percent at company stores earned Mickey D's plaudits from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

But so far such efforts appear to be exceptions. In calls to a number of large companies, *Chain Leader* discovered that managements remain largely on the eco-sidelines despite widespread publicity about the so-called green movement.

It's the case even in bellwether California. "We just pulled together a small group of people that are digging into this part of our business," offers Sarah Grover, vice president of marketing for Los Angeles-based California Pizza Kitchen. "Honestly, there's not a lot to talk about yet."

Concedes another vice president of marketing at a Golden State casual-dining chain, who requests anonymity: “[We’re] not on the forefront of the green movement. We have discussed it, but right now there are so many other pressing issues that it is just not near the top of the list.”

No surprise. Casual-dining chains are taking a hammering, especially at dinner, their most profitable daypart. According to Knapp-Track, a closely watched survey of casual-dining chains, comparable sales and guest counts remained mostly negative throughout 2007. "The reality is, dinner is weak everywhere, including fast food," says UBS restaurant analyst David Palmer, who doesn't expect to see improvement until the second half of the year.

There's the issue: Can green initiatives be undertaken without sacrificing already threatened profits?



## CONSUMERS WANT GREEN

What's more, the retail sector only recently hopped on the eco-bandwagon, spurred by surveys showing consumers liked eco-friendly products and were willing to pay more for them. A report by the National Restaurant Association, for instance, claims 64 percent of adults 35 to 44 say they would pay more for food grown in an "environmentally friendly way."

However, a poll of Canadian and American adults conducted last April by Canadian research firm Ipsos Reid showed 70 percent of Americans agree that marketing is the motive behind many green initiatives.

And why not, wonders Harry Day. "If you can take credit for making small steps such as using organic produce or sustainable seafood or LEED-certified buildings, let's spread the word," declares the former RARE Hospitality marketing executive who's now a Denver-based franchisee of eco-friendly Pizza Fusion.

The typically cautious restaurant industry nonetheless has been slow to react to the popularity of the cause.

**Big Bowl, a trendy Asian concept based in Chicago, is one of a handful of high-volume chains taking meaningful action to help save the planet including buying local produce and naturally raised meats.**

**Localvore**s, people who try to eat food grown nearby, can find several locally grown vegetables at Big Bowl.

Making the business case for a **GREEN STRATEGY** remains elusive for many restaurant companies.

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# COVER STORY



**Using naturally raised meats such as hormone-free salmon has raised food costs considerably at Big Bowl.**

**Big Bowl may soon switch to uniforms made of organic cotton, a fiber processed without chemicals or harsh dyes.**

"Relatively speaking, we are still in our infancy," acknowledges Senior Vice President of Business Development Todd Mann, the NRA official who's heading the association's efforts to bring operators up to speed on sustainability issues. Mann says the NRA's Web site will include a list of green-related resources by spring.

It's not that restaurant executives are ignorant of environmental stewardship. Nearly everyone we talked to expressed a willingness to save the planet. Some, like Darden Restaurants' Bob McAdam, drop eco-jargon when asked how a company might strategically implement green programs. "What

you do is look for opportunity to merge sustainability practices with solid business practices for a triple-net win," offers the senior vice president for government and community relations, who played a role in developing the sustainability strategy at Wal-Mart two years ago. Yet he, like several other executives interviewed for this story, remains mum on specifics.

That large restaurant companies lack well-defined sustainability strategies doesn't surprise

Day. "It's the right thing to do. No one in the industry questions that," he explains. "The question is: Can you be profitable and green at the same time?"

Well, can you? Pay-back remains uncertain given so few industry models. Even these models can't say for sure if there's a business case to be made.

Consider Big Bowl, an eight-unit division of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises. It buys local produce whenever possible. It purchases more expensive naturally raised pork, salmon

and chicken. It uses unbleached napkins and may soon switch to pricey paper straws and organic cotton uniforms. Its cleaning chemicals are all nontoxic.

The Chicago-based chain is also beginning to trade carbon emissions on the 4-year-old Chicago Climate Exchange, a commodities market for greenhouse gas allowances. Some scientists say that carbon emissions need to be cut by at least 50 percent by 2060 to avoid a dangerous climate change brought about by global warming.

Last year, the full-service Asian chain hiked prices about 4 percent to cover rising costs. Still, President Dan McGowen admits, "I run no numbers that say in three years all this will pay for itself." He adds that sustainability endeavors "might not make you money, per se."

## SHOW ME THE ROI

"ROI is a tough thing to wrap your hands around," says Director of Design Bob Welty of WD Partners, Columbus, Ohio-based consultants, who recently confronted the issue during a green audit for a mostly franchised QSR he doesn't want to name.

He says the chain's officials, who were chiefly concerned with the concept's salability to franchisees, did not undertake his suggestions. "They wanted to know where they stood and how green they were without having to do anything," he adds.

For the record, Welty estimates that spending an additional 5 percent on energy-efficient equipment such as heat exchangers and tankless water heaters in a new build could take two to five years to pay for itself, certainly too long for most franchisees, he adds. Once installed, such equipment could trim operating costs by 10 percent.





## How Green Is Your Menu?

**S**ustainability consultant Tim Stein says authentically green menus should adhere to the following guidelines:

**No bottled water.** Bottled water is totally inefficient when you consider the sourcing, bottling and packaging, and shipping and handling required. Instead, filter tap water.

**Sustainable seafood.** Choose the recommended products from reputable seafood guides like Seafood Watch ([mbayaq.org](http://mbayaq.org)) or *Seafood Solutions* ([chefs collaborative.org](http://chefs collaborative.org)).

**Local, seasonal produce.** These products will have been picked closer to peak ripeness, will be fresher, retain more nutrients, and will not have traveled far.

**rBGH-free dairy.** Organic dairy products cannot be produced with recombinant bovine growth hormone or any other added hormones, according to the USDA standard.

**Cage-free eggs.** Although not necessarily cruelty free, they do come from hens with space for walking, spreading wings and laying eggs in nests.

**Organic, fair-trade coffee.** Coffee can be one of the easiest products to change on menus. Also use organic fair-trade chocolate in desserts and hot chocolate drinks.

**Heritage and grass-fed meats.** These proteins protect biodiversity and avoid the disposal of feedlot waste.

**Organic grains.** Grains grown without chemical pesticides, herbicides and petroleum fertilizers are better for the environment.

**Organic potatoes.** The big plus: Organic potato farms require high soil fertility and eliminate the use of chemical pesticides.

Energy-efficient equipment such as heat exchangers may cost an additional 5 percent, but they could trim operating costs by 10 percent.



Environmental advocates have long been making a business case for shrinking carbon footprints in commercial buildings, which are responsible for the bulk of greenhouse gases, by arguing for more energy-efficient equipment and building materials.

Burger King, for example, recently completed testing a more efficient broiler, which it's now rolling out in company and franchise stores. Spokesman Keva Silversmith claims the equipment cuts gas consumption by 52 percent and electricity (for cooling kitchens) by 90 percent—a whopping savings if accurate. The NRA's recent "Restaurant Industry Operations Report" shows company-owned limited-service restaurants budget about 3.4 percent of sales for "utilities services."

The Miami-based burger behemoth has also designed a smaller prototype that may roll out this

year, featuring tankless water heaters among other energy-saving devices, adds Silversmith, an outside communications executive who is leading Burger King's nascent green strategy. "We're hoping to come up with a strong sustainability platform," he says. "I would hope that we'll be putting things on our Web site and talking publicly by the summer of '08."

Saladworks, an all-franchised 18-unit chain based in Conshohocken, Pa., is hoping franchisees will consider adopting the sustainability efforts company officials are making at headquarters. So far, an environmental consultant has helped them ban bottled water, replace plastic pens with biodegradable pens made from cornstarch and switch to chlorine-free recycled copy paper. There are also plans to use energy-efficient lamps and install tankless water heaters.

**Like many large chains, California Pizza Kitchen has yet to implement a comprehensive sustainability strategy, although an official says the company recently evaluated HVAC, hot water and lighting.**



**BIG idea** Pizza Fusion franchisee Harry Day says marketers should boast about taking green steps such as using organic produce, LEED-certified buildings or hybrid cars.



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## COVER STORY

“Gas consumption with our new broiler has been reduced about 52 percent.”

— Keva Silversmith, Burger King spokesman



“We have really just begun the process,” allows Director of Franchise Services Joe Mammarella. “We haven’t done a cost analysis.”

California Pizza Kitchen is also at the starting line with its green initiatives. “Most of our [efforts] are at the very beginning stages,” says Grover. She also mentions replacing incandescent lamps with compact fluorescent bulbs, waste heat recovery from pizza ovens, and better temperature-control strategies.

### LET THERE BE LIGHT

“Changing lamps out is almost a no-brainer, because payback is fairly quick,” declares Tim Stein, a Denver-based green consultant and former food and beverage director for environmentally conscious Xanterra Parks & Resorts. “Maybe you also look at your menu and ask what equipment you can do without, though you don’t ever want equipment decisions to drive your menu.”

Stein argues a part of the business case for going green should be driven by what competitors are doing. “If you are not starting to look at sustainability, there’s always the potential that your competitors are,” he warns.

Consultant Tom Galvin, a former design manager at Darden and Hard Rock Cafe, thinks any argument for equipment

requiring additional capital could be doomed. “If you can’t document where you’ll be saving \$100,000, [management] doesn’t care,” he says. (Curiously, an official at Hard Rock Cafe, whose logo once included the slogan “save the planet,” declined to provide information about its green efforts, if any.)

Galvin suggests making the case by developing charts in conjunction with utility companies showing returns. “Yes, this piece of equipment will cost 10 percent more, but it pays for itself in five years,” he says. “If you can show that, [executives] will say, ‘This isn’t a bad thing. I can get a payoff on this.’ It’s not like they wouldn’t do this.”

It may just take time to get things done. “Every industry I’ve looked at for the last 15 years follows a similar cycle,” explains Scot Case, a vice president at TerraChoice, an environmental marketing consultancy in Reading, Pa., who says foodservice is at the beginning of the cycle. “A few small, innovative, almost irrelevant companies do something green and get noticed. That captures the attention of larger players, who first deny what the small players are doing is relevant and later that it’s important but too expensive. Then one of them does it for publicity reasons and figures out there’s money to be made. They have a competitive edge for three to five years. Then the rest catch up.”

In short, there’s still hope for Mother Earth. ■



**on the web:** Learn more about the green efforts some restaurant companies are taking to trim costs at [www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com).



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# A Leg UP

El Pollo Loco's **FROG TEAM** helps franchisees make the leap from signed commitment to store opening.

It's not that El Pollo Loco ever ignored its franchisees.

But in January 2006, with 145 new restaurants in the pipeline and plans to open in new markets, El Pollo Loco decided to pay closer attention to franchisees, who run two-thirds of the Irvine, Calif.-based chain's 390 restaurants.

That year, the chain established the Franchise Restaurant Operating Group. FROG, as it's called, offers new franchisees extensive help, from the time they sign the franchise agreement to opening week and beyond. And although FROG is only 2 years old, El Pollo Loco continues to refine it. For instance, several new hires will take place this year to make the organization more efficient and more serviceable for a growing roster of franchisees.

"[FROG's launch] was really more of a strategic decision...we needed to be more focused on franchise support if we were to develop across the country," says John Phillips, vice president of FROG. The acronym was intended as temporary, but when executives realized its marketing potential, catchy logo included, they decided to keep it. "It was kind of fun," Phillips says.

The FROG management team is headed by Phillips, formerly a franchise business manager for the

chain; Phillips reports to Steve Sather, El Pollo Loco's senior vice president of operations. Phillips was promoted to vice president from director in April 2007. The executive title "shows franchisees we are extremely serious and committed to success and growth," Phillips says.

## SOUP TO NUTS ASSISTANCE

FROG support begins after franchisees sign their papers. El Pollo Loco does not use FROG as a court- ing tool; prospective store operators don't even find out about the services until the application process is three-quarters finished. "We do offer it as a great service," Phillips says. "But the brand speaks for itself."

That low-key tactic is smart, says Frank Steed, former industry executive and president of The Steed Consultancy, a Kerens, Texas-based chain- consulting firm. "You don't want to overpromise and underdeliver," he says. And overall, "anything that franchisors can do to help a franchisee, particularly in the startup phase, is helpful," Steed adds.

Initial FROG assistance includes site selection, setting up accounts with vendors (especially important in markets outside El Pollo Loco's West Coast stronghold), IT assistance and help with restaurant construction.

**FROG trainers are recruited from El Pollo Loco stores around the country and spend several weeks training employees at soon-to-open restaurants.**

**A FROG trainee checks that food prepared for a mock rush, where staffers get experience handling high-volume hours, meets El Pollo Loco's standards.**

**(Opposite) New employees who have successfully made it through FROG training are FROG certified.**





Training, however, is FROG's forte. Six weeks before opening day, store managers fly to California for intensive training. Two weeks before opening day, a team of five FROG trainers arrives to help the manager train the crew. The team, pulled from various El Pollo Loco stores around the country, stays for 10 days. Trainers, who travel approximately once a quarter, consider it a privilege to assist franchisees. "It's a status thing to be pulled out," Phillips says.

In addition to basics such as how to cook El Pollo Loco's menu and place an order, training also includes a mock rush. Trainers put the crew through its paces during a \$500-hour sales period, a \$750-hour period and a \$1,000-hour period.

The FROG training team stays several days after opening to ensure that opening week runs well. New franchisees may use FROG teams for their second and third store openings, but by the fourth restaurant, franchisees are expected to have their own training teams in place.

FROG's services are not inexpensive; the cost to El Pollo Loco is about \$23,000 per store opening, Phillips says. The payoff: Opening week sales "are very strong," though he won't give specifics. New-store crew turnover is also low: "The crew really comes together that first week of training," Phillips says. "There's a real good positive atmosphere of community within the store."

#### HELP NEEDED

Chris Elliott, who opened his first El Pollo Loco restaurant in Hiram, Ga., in August 2007, agrees that the FROG team helped cut turnover. "We expected a natural drop-off of employees" after the first few weeks, says Elliott, whose Atlanta-based firm, Fiesta Brands Inc., will open 50 El Pollo Loco stores in the

next six years. "We didn't experience that." Because of the diligent training, "employees weren't frightened off by the experience," he explains.

Elliott, a seasoned restaurant executive who has been COO of Church's Chicken and president of Morrison's Cafeterias, adds that he was surprised how much FROG contributed to the store's opening. "If you had asked me before [the opening], I would have said I need it less," Elliott says. "But after opening the store, I'd say you need it, no matter how much experience you have."

That's mainly because of El Pollo Loco's from-scratch menu, which features grilled chicken. "You're not just dropping it into a fryer and pressing a button," Elliott says. Also, the stores open "big," with high sales volume, "and that puts a lot of pressure on a brand-new crew," he says.

Elliott says his FROG team continues to stay in touch and offer advice on an as-needed basis. For instance, his store team has faced challenges with food costs, "figuring out where the right number is," Elliott says. On the West Coast, where El Pollo Loco has an established distribution system, there is a benchmark figure; in the Atlanta market, a new one for the chain, there is not.

#### LEAPING FORWARD

In two years, FROG has been successful in helping franchisees open well in new markets. Still, the program has undergone some recent changes. In addition to Phillips' promotion, the chain hired Franchise Business Manager Bob Brown, who is based in Atlanta, to provide franchisees with an East Coast presence and handle field training. "They need someone who's not a three-hour time zone away," Phillips says. In the future, El Pollo Loco may hire a new person to assume Brown's training responsibilities.

Support-wise, though, "I don't know that it could be any better," Phillips says, citing the intense training prior to opening week and the team's presence throughout opening week as key. Still, "our company by nature is never static," Phillips says. "Anything we can do to improve success, we're all over it." ■



#### SNAPSHOT

**Concept** El Pollo Loco  
**Headquarters** Irvine, Calif.  
**Units** 390  
**2007 Systemwide Sales** \$568 million\*  
**Average Unit Volume** \$1.7 million  
**Average Check** \$9  
**Expansion Plans** 10 company, 40 franchised stores in 2008

\*Chain Leader estimate



**BIG idea** El Pollo Loco recruits new-store trainers from units across the country. The experienced trainers consider it a privilege to be asked.





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# OPEN Exchange

Panda Restaurant Group counts on **FREQUENT COMMUNICATION** with manufacturers and its distributor to ensure customer trust.

**A**sked about Panda Restaurant Group's corporate food-safety mandates, Larry Behm pauses a second. "I don't know that there's a written statement, but it's how we do business," says the senior vice president of operations support and innovation. "First and foremost, our business is built on trust with the customer. And so whatever we sell has to be safe. So it's not a program or anything, it's just the way we do business."

Behm says the company doesn't market its food-safety efforts, believing instead that when the customer witnesses a clean environment and safe practices, it means more. As a customer, Panda's expectations from its suppliers are higher, but they mirror that "actions speak louder than words" attitude.

## BASIC PRACTICES

Panda Restaurant Group counts on suppliers to follow the industry's standard food practices and communicate problems through the supply chain.

Currently the company is increasing the frequency of supplier audits so there's a minimum of one a year. The company classifies food items in terms of risk, which depends on a product's inherent qualities and how much of it the company uses. For high-risk products, Panda audits

manufacturing facilities quarterly, says Behm, who joined the company in spring 2005 and leads all development in operations, menu and engineering. Prior to that, he ran a consulting company focused on strategy and operations; during that time he began working with Panda.

Founded in 1973 and based in Rosemead, Calif., Panda operates more than 1,000 Panda Express units, a quick-service Chinese concept; six casual-dining Panda Inns, which serve Mandarin and Szechuan cuisine; and 27 Hibachi-Sans, a QSR offering Japanese grill and sushi dishes. Company sales reached \$1 billion in 2007.



## SNAPSHOT

**Company**  
Panda Restaurant Group Inc.

**Headquarters**  
Rosemead, Calif.

**2007 Systemwide Sales**  
\$1 billion

**Units** More than 1,000 Panda Express units, 27 Hibachi-Sans, 6 Panda Inns

**Average Check** \$9 at QSR units, \$38 at Panda Inn

**Expansion Plans**  
160 in 2008

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## FOOD SAFETY



**Panda builds customer trust by ensuring its food is safe and tasty.**

### SELF-FULFILLMENT

Members of Panda's quality-assurance team usually conduct the audits themselves, hiring a third-party auditor when they have to. Behm can't cite a ratio of company audits to third-party audits. "We just figure out how to get the job done," he says.

But he adds that the task is getting easier because food-safety awareness has grown among manufacturers, who understand the consequences of their own sales if something were to happen.

That said, Behm believes the restaurant chain has a great responsibility as well. "We know that our suppliers are doing their job, and there will be mistakes," he says. "It's our job to make sure that we catch everything, because we're the ones that have the trust with the customer. We have to make sure that we follow all the procedures and try to keep them safe."

In the stores, procedures require a report detailing any product that comes in below standards. That triggers a series of events to find the root cause. "We're sitting here at the corporate level looking for patterns," Behm says. "If an issue pops up in 25 different stores around the country, we know we've got a supplier problem real fast. If you get onesie-twosies, that can be anything."

### QUALITY CONTROL

To test all of the steps within the supply chain, Panda auditors will occasionally hide a temperature-tracking device in a carton of product at the manufacturer. A chip on the device records temperatures on a regular basis so Panda's QA team can look over the entire chain and see if temperatures stayed in the range they're supposed to. If they didn't, they know what to work on.

Despite the standards, audits and reporting, Behm says Panda relies mostly on good communication from the manufacturer, distributor and restaurants. "It's really just everybody keeping track and communicating it up and down," he concludes. ■

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# Franchise Developer

## Franchising Outlook

**W**hat's the outlook for franchising this year? The business has nowhere to go but up, predicts Darren Tristano, executive vice president of Technomic Information Services, a Chicago-based research firm. A new Technomic report focuses on America's top 200 franchisee companies, which together represent more than 16,000 franchise units. Here are Tristano's predictions for what lies ahead:

**Larger and More Focused Franchisees.** Among franchisees, expect more area development and larger multi-unit franchisees. "What companies like Subway are starting to learn is that they'd rather have fewer franchisees with larger holdings," says Tristano. "Single franchisees are more work than someone with 10 to 30 units." Look for larger regional companies that stick with just one, two or three concepts. Only 17 of the top 200 franchise companies operate four or more chains, the new report found.



### Explosion of Smaller Concepts.

At the same time, more small franchise concepts will emerge: "Anybody who's got more than one restaurant that's successful wants to franchise; there's no downside," says Tristano. Watch for more coffee and pizza franchises, he predicts.

### Look for growth in area development and in smaller concepts, a new report predicts.

America to open franchise restaurants. "That's really driving the franchise business," says Tristano.

Look for more Asian brands on the West Coast (such as Red Mango and Garlic Joe's) and European brands on the East Coast (such as Wagamama and Paul's Bakery).

### International Incoming.

More international companies will come to

**Limited Service Rules.** Leading franchisees will continue to focus on limited-service restaurants. Technomic's report found that 132 of the top 200 franchise companies (66%) operate only limited-service chains. The leading brand by number of units is Pizza Hut with 2,822, followed by Burger King with 1,969, Wendy's with 1,727, Taco Bell with 1,592 and KFC with 1,209.

**More Franchising.** More restaurant chains that are traditionally company owned will start to franchise. Says Tristano: "To grow aggressively, you have to franchise."



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\*These figures reflect averages of 58 company-owned restaurants opened for at least one full year in 2006. Substantiation of these figures can be found in our Uniform Franchise Offering Circular. We do not represent that any operator can expect to attain the operating margins present in this ad, or any other particular level or range of operating margins. Your success will depend largely on your abilities and efforts. If you rely on our figures, you must accept the risk of not doing as well. This offering is made by prospectus only.





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**Hatco Corp.** p. 15. Manufacturer of a full line of foodservice equipment. Call (800) 558-0607 or visit [www.hatcocorp.com](http://www.hatcocorp.com).

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**Mark Hampton of Vicorp is working with independent restaurants to showcase their recipes at Bakers Square and Village Inn.**

There is a lot of that, which is why I think this kind of program takes a lot of face-to-face interaction. Our independent partners have all found benefits to participating. These show up in hits to their Web sites and thank-you calls to their restaurants.

## **Once you have a “yes” from a Legendary partner, what happens next?**

The next thing is trying to figure out how we can scale up what they’re doing to a chain our size. It’s very easy to make stuffed French toast in one little inn in Bar Harbor, Maine. But when I have to make it in 400-plus restaurants with probably about 1,500 different people a week, you have to really think about the recipe and how you are working it and scaling it up to make it applicable. And then it has to pass muster with the owners [of the independent restaurants].

## **What are the original Legendary Recipes you are featuring at Bakers Square and Village Inn?**

In mid-October we started with the Perini Ranch recipes for roasted tri-tip sirloin at Bakers Square. We serve that in a dinner format and also serve it as a sandwich. Sides include green-chile hominy and cornbread with jalapeño marmalade. We also offer a blue-cheese sirloin entree salad, and cheesecake with jalapeño marmalade. Bakers Square is also serving The Maples Inn Blueberry Stuffed French Toast.

## **Stuffed French toast has a pretty broad appeal, but were you concerned that family-dining guests might balk at the green-chile hominy?**

We had a lot of conversations to determine if we were reaching too far in regards to customers’ tastes. But we decided we wanted to bring the guest the complete experience, rather than short-change them. What we’ve seen is that this approach has driven in new customers to try the product. It’s too soon to give comprehensive results. But during a blind trial, I brought all the Perini Ranch products into one restaurant and we served it with no point of purchase, nothing more than word of mouth from our waiters and waitresses. We sold 54 dinners that one night, which for an LTO is huge.

## **How does that compare to your typical LTO?**

It was probably about 30 percent better.

## **How many more Legendary dishes do you hope to add before the promotion is completed?**

I’m currently working with partners that can carry us all the way through 2009. The program has a lot of legs because we have a lot of places to go in the United States. For 2009, we’re already exploring an operation outside of the U.S. ■

# Independent STUDY

Bakers Square and Village Inn borrow signature recipes from independent restaurants to bring them to the masses.

**A**nybody craving innkeeper Mark Dresser’s Blueberry Stuffed French Toast used to have to travel to The Maples Inn in Bar Harbor, Maine, to get some. Likewise, the only way to enjoy Tom Perini’s seasoned sliced sirloin dinner was to drive out to the Perini Ranch in Buffalo Gap, Texas. But Vicorp Restaurants’ “Legendary Restaurants, Legendary Recipes” program has changed all that. In November, signature dishes from Maples Inn, Perini Ranch and several more independent operations became guest stars at 140 Bakers Square and 263 Village Inn restaurants in 24 states. Vicorp says the program is bringing in a new, younger crowd, and dishes are selling 30 percent better than the typical limited-time offer. Mark Hampton, Vicorp’s vice president of culinary and supply chain, talked to *Chain Leader* about how the company executes the program.

**Historically chain restaurants and independent operators look askance at one another from across the divide. Did you get that reaction from some of the people you met?**

**ON THE WEB:** Read or listen to a downloadable extended interview with Mark Hampton at [www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com).



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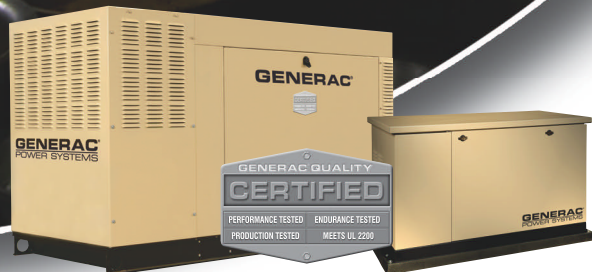
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