

# Chain Leader<sup>®</sup>

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Information

January 2007

INSIGHT FOR RESTAURANT EXECUTIVES

[www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com)

**Pick Up Stix hones food  
quality and service speed.**

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**Benihana watches the  
store over the Web.**

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## **Above and BEYOND**

After 27 years at Del Taco,  
Shirlene Lopez runs the  
whole enchilada.

**PAGE 40**



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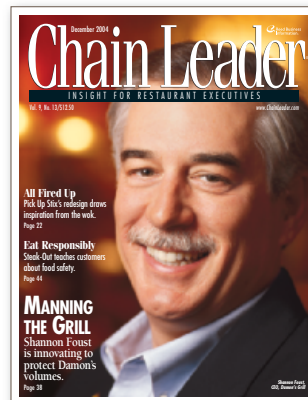
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# Experience NECESSARY



Shannon Foust brings a career's worth of operations and franchise knowledge to a local upstart. **By Mary Boltz Chapman**

**S**hannon Foust was on the cover of *Chain Leader* in December 2004, when he was president and CEO of Damon's Grill, updating its prototype and upgrading the menu. He didn't know it at the time, but he was preparing the 133-unit casual-dining chain for sale 16 months later. Since August, Foust is president of Columbus, Ohio-based Roosters Franchising Inc., hawking a "bottom rung" full-service chicken-wing concept with 11 units and big plans.

## What made you accept the job at Roosters?

I had known this concept for many years and have been a frequent customer. The attorney that handles all of Roosters' work also handled Damon's work and has been a lifelong friend of mine.

It's a concept that I thought was well positioned for today's economy: full service, but when you walk out, you don't get sticker shock. They've been around since 1989. They're operators, and they never really thought about the development side. We started talking about franchising, and they knew I had a lot of experience in that. So we started putting together a program to bring this concept to the rest of Ohio and the Midwest.

## What are you bringing that they were lacking?

Hopefully I'm bringing my 25 years of experience and the many mistakes that you make throughout that time, and you learn from those mistakes, and you find the things that work well and things that don't work so well and try to apply them.

These models are getting really stressed out by increasing costs in a lot of areas and putting a lot of pressure on making an adequate return. A lot of people are looking at the industry and saying, "This is a lot of work

and a lot of risk, and what am I getting out of it?" What we try to do at Roosters is focus on keeping the model strong and try to find ways to lessen the costs.

## What does that look like?

Our royalty fee is low [3.25 percent]. We are not going to have any marketing fees. Focus on the model. We're not going to have a home office; we're going to have people that work out of their homes. The Web site is going to be the main message area for franchisees. And we're looking for experienced operators, not first-timers. No new construction, no set footprint. We're going to take failed businesses and boxes around the country—and there's plenty of them—to convert.

## You called it the bottom rung of full service.

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## You have the history in Columbus. How are you going to expand that into new markets?

It's amazing. We've sold contracts in Cincinnati, in Cleveland, and people travel, and they come around here to Ohio State games. I was shocked actually about how much brand recognition we did have.

When we go into new markets, they're going to see very quickly what Roosters is about. It's a fun, casual joint. ■

**on the web:** For more about Foust's expectations and plans for Roosters, download or read the entire interview at [www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com).

**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.





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# Chain Leader®

INSIGHT FOR RESTAURANT EXECUTIVES

Vol. 12, No. 1/January 2007



## ■ cover story

### Above and Beyond 40

After 27 years of experience at Del Taco, Shirlene Lopez was named president and chief operating officer in October. An operations expert, Lopez will be stretching herself as the chain attempts national expansion via aggressive franchising and co-branding.

By David Farkas

## ■ marketing

### Ringing Endorsement 23

Juice It Up hopes cell phone coupons will help cultivate the smoothie chain's hip image. Instead of text messages that pop up at inopportune times, the program requires users to download a coupon. Initial redemption is about 10 percent. By Margaret Littman



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### Gathering Place 27

In addition to reducing the size of the kitchen, Benihana's new prototype places the bar, kitchen proper and sushi bar in close proximity so servers can collect items at one central location, significantly improving table turns.

By Mary Boltz Chapman

## ■ toque of the town

### Sticking Points 35

Vice President of Marketing and Menu Development Alison Glenn Delaney is focusing on food quality and speed of service at Pick Up Stix. She is developing more pan-Asian dishes, promoting existing items and evaluating how to best use its commissary. By Monica Rogers







## ■ technology

### Covering All Angles 46

Benihana's Internet-based risk-management system places cameras where POS activity and cash handling occur and enables management to access the images online. When the cameras detect something unusual, the system proactively generates and e-mails an exceptions report.

By Lisa Bertagnoli

## ■ the learning organization

### Building Blocks 50

Chain operators gathered to learn more about "Excellence in Execution," the theme of the third annual *Chain Leader LIVE*. The conference featured sessions ranging from menu development to growth strategies, award presentations and receptions. By David Farkas

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### Web Exclusive

- *Chain Leader LIVE* pictures and highlights you won't see in the magazine, plus recipes from its unique culinary events

### Cover Society

- Panera Bread CEO Ron Shaich tells what's new with the bakery-cafe leader

### How To Grow To 100 Units

- Web-exclusive content and related articles on growing concepts
- Video coverage of *Chain Leader's* "How To Grow To 100 Units" roundtable
- California Tortilla's Pam Felix on the trials and joys of growing her spunky concept

### 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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# Style and SUBSTANCE

Cosmetic changes are nice, but only if they aid the end user.



**Mary Boltz Chapman**  
Editor-in-Chief

**R**eaders tell us they like the depth of our stories, the lively writing and the high-end design. They appreciate that our content is dedicated to the needs of chain leaders, that it's written just for them. *Chain Leader* has been recognized with several design and editorial awards from journalism associations. So what's with the redesign? Why fix what's not really broken?

We aren't changing our niche: bringing business insight and analysis to executives of restaurant companies. We'll continue to package information in our award-winning case-study style and feature successful companies, personalities and strategies.

## New and Improved

But we've improved the variety and flexibility of the editorial. We'll still run our signature features like *Restauratour* and *Toque of the Town*. But we've reduced their frequency so we can offer different types of operations stories beyond design like features on back-of-the-house topics and a variety of menu-development stories.

We'll rotate *Storyboard*, which examines a chain's TV ad campaign, with branding stories and articles about other types of marketing, like e-mail campaigns and buzz marketing. Margaret Littman, our contributing editor who covers that beat, is having a great time exploring new media and determining how to measure returns. Such curiosity on our part will only make for better articles.

We also updated our upscale design. Again, it's already a great design. We didn't throw it all away just to change because we already use a lot of classic, timeless elements. But we wanted to improve it to be cleaner and more contemporary.

Don't confuse contemporary with trendy. We can't communicate our depth of coverage through the clutter of something like *ESPN the Magazine* or *Fast Company*, or through the

sparse look of *Real Simple*. We cleaned up our pages to eliminate some unnecessary elements in order to highlight those elements that offer value to the reader. Look for "signposts," as we call them in publishing, that help guide you through the magazine or direct readers to more information on [www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com).

## Function First

We're fortunate to have an art director, Ala Ennes, who is a typography expert, so she knows about readability as well as design. She's won awards for typography and design, and has done several magazine redesigns in her career. Her talent and experience enable her to add style to substance while only enhancing the latter.

The trend in restaurant design is to remove the clutter, do more with less and streamline as much as possible to be as efficient as possible. As Douglas Medina, Benihana's senior director of supply chain and operations improvement support, told me when I interviewed him for the *Back of the House* story on Page 27, "With the new prototype, the idea is to maximize every square inch of that restaurant." Benihana revamped the kitchen to allow servers to save time and steps so they can focus their efforts on their guests.

That's what we're trying to achieve: the best use of space for the benefit of the reader's experience. Drop me a line to let me know what you think and if you have any ideas for improving the magazine even more. ■

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



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Senior Vice President, Restaurant Development



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# Sharing **THE LOAD**



Outsourcing can save time and money, but define expectations upfront.

By David Farkas

**R**amey Millet, CFO for Flat Rock Grille, a six-unit casual-dining chain based in Charlotte, N.C., discovered outsourcing saved her from some menial tasks but not from learning a hard lesson about how to go about it wisely.

**How and why did you decide on outsourcing?**

We're currently at six units but developing an infrastructure to support 40 or more Flat Rock Grilles. Part of that process was a cost-benefit analysis of outsourcing accounting, payroll, IT and marketing. In each case there were clear economic and quality advantages.

**How much are you saving?**

It would cost us an additional \$35,000 to \$40,000 annually per store to keep these four functions in-house. This includes not only salary and benefits for staff but also software, hardware, tech support, office space, etc.

**Was there an immediate advantage to management besides cost?**

Yes. It allowed us to become a flatter and more collaborative team-managed company.

**You mention "more collaborative" management. How do you fit in?**

Without outsourcing, I'd be spending lots more time making sure the transactional accounting functions were happening as they should. Also, without the labor specialists at our [professional employer organization] to turn to for advice, we'd spend a lot more time dealing with those issues internally. The main advantages it gives you are the ability to focus

on the needs of our restaurant operators and to do more strategic planning.

**Sounds great, but how do you make sure you're getting what you pay for?**

Here's what's most important: Define expectations clearly upfront before you sign the contract. Be very specific about time lines, deadlines and deliverables. Address what happens to pricing and expectations as more restaurants are added. Evaluate the expertise—we wanted labor attorneys on staff at our PEO and CPAs at our accounting provider.

**You had problems with your first outsourcing firm. In hindsight, could you have avoided that?**

We and they could have done a better job predicting how challenging it would be for them to shift from providing QSR accounting services to servicing full-service restaurants. We could have also asked better questions about the possibility that our provider would begin to use overseas staff. Once the overseas plans were implemented, service quality dropped. Time zones, language, terminology and other challenges made the relationship untenable.

**Lessons learned from that experience?**

Understand your provider's plans for growth, their current and anticipated staffing levels, and how that will impact how they service your account. In our new outsourcing relationship, we addressed these issues on the front end.

**Finally, does having six units make it easier to outsource so many tasks?**

It's definitely an advantage to begin with six units and grow the relationship going forward as opposed to implementing it in a larger organization. We'll grow over time with our providers, and they will grow with us. ■

"Without outsourcing, I'd be spending **lots more time** making sure the transactional accounting functions were happening as they should."



# Who would have thought?

## Robusto Sandwich

Pavone Mortadella, Pavone Prosciutto, Pavone Genoa Salami, chopped pimiento-stuffed green olives, chopped black olives, extra virgin olive oil, chopped arugula and crumbled feta cheese served on a grilled ciabatta roll.



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## Fast ACTING

Franktitude expands quickly in South Florida as it prepares to take its gourmet hot dogs up the East Coast. **By Maya Norris**

**C**EO Ari Wurmman has no foodservice experience, but that hasn't stopped him from opening Franktitude, a fast-casual gourmet hot dog concept, at a rapid clip. He has already opened three units since fall 2006, plans to open two more by February and will start franchising in 2007.

"To be big, you have to start big," says Wurmman, who worked as a brand manager at an electronics company in his native Chile before earning an MBA at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., in 2005. "I needed to capture attention, and opening five gives me that. Maybe I'm crazy, but it gives me that."

### Center of Attention

Wurmman came up with the concept in 2005 after learning that 20 billion hot dogs are sold each year, yet there was no national hot dog chain. "If you think about burgers, you think McDonald's. When you think about pizza, you say Domino's or Pizza Hut," he says. "But when you say hot dogs, there's no real big brand that you recognize as a leader. So I thought, here is an opportunity, and there's a huge market, but for some reason nobody has taken that opportunity."

After raising \$2 million from investors in Chile, Wurmman opened the first unit of



The Fresh Frank features a tofu dog on a whole-grain bun with artichoke hearts, cucumbers, tomatoes and carrots.

Franktitude's sleek, bright design includes photos of people eating hot dogs while engaged in activities like playing with a Frisbee and coming out of the shower.

Franktitude in Miami in September.

The concept offers beef, tofu, chicken and salmon franks and three types of buns: poppy seed, whole grain and plain. Toppings range from the standard relish and onions to the nontraditional hummus and artichoke hearts.

The menu takes advantage of its unusual toppings by offering items like the Unique Frank, choice of frank and bun, avocado, tomato, wasabi mayo and banana chips, \$3.49 solo or \$6.49 combo, which includes a medium soda and a side of french fries, sweet-potato fries, corn on the cob or coleslaw. But the best-selling dish is the Cheesy Frank, \$3.49 solo or \$6.49 combo, with chili, chopped onions, cheese and tomato.

Healthful options include the Ironic Frank, \$3.49 solo or \$6.49 combo, which only has 2 grams of fat. It features a tofu frank on a whole-grain bun with tomato, mushrooms, pickles and black olives. The Salmon Frank, \$3.49 solo and \$6.49 combo, comes on a whole-grain bun with tartar sauce, tomatoes, onions and sesame seeds.

### Being Frank

Franktitude is on track to generate \$500,000 in average unit volumes, Wurmman says. Since debuting four months ago, Franktitude has opened two stores in November and December in Doral and North Miami Beach, Fla. It will open two more by February in Pembroke Pines, Fla., and Miami, and expects to have 20 franchised stores open this year throughout the East Coast.

It costs about \$220,000 to open a Franktitude, which averages 1,350 square feet with seating for 40. The company is looking for inline sites in strip centers near a mix of residential and office buildings because its customers range from professionals to families.

"Everybody likes a hot dog," Wurmman says. "Because we have all these different options, we can reach basically everyone." ■

### SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Franktitude

**Headquarters** Miami

**Units** 3

**2007 Systemwide Sales**

\$5 million (company estimate)

**Average Unit Volume**

\$500,000 (company estimate)

**Average Check**

\$6.82

**Expansion Plans**

2 company, 20 franchised in 2007





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■ how to grow to 100 units

# Passing the Baton

How do entrepreneurs know when it's time to bring in the professional managers?

By Mary Boltz Chapman

**T**he question: What signs should an entrepreneur look for that indicate it's time to turn the concept over to chain experts? The answers, provided by industry leaders:

**Larry Sarokin, principal, Sarokin & Sarokin, a Beverly Hills, Calif.-based multiunit restaurant consultancy**

- When the entrepreneur notices that key numbers such as sales, food cost, labor cost,

employee turnover, etc. are slipping.

- When product quality is down.
- When the company is not progressing as fast as companies of a similar "age."
- When the entrepreneur can't take a vacation because things will fall apart.

**Phil Roberts, chairman and CEO, Parasole Restaurant Holdings Inc., a multiconcept operator based in Edina, Minn.**

A successful national concept has two sets of DNA: left brain and right brain. As an entrepreneur, I get jazzed by conceiving and growing concepts. I'm passionate about recipes, trade dress, uniforms, music, lighting, presentation. What matters to me is creating a culture that's interesting, engaging and alive. But that only gets you so far.

If you're going to go national, you need to find a left brainer who will bring the same amount of passion to financial controls, labor costs, insurance, real estate, etc.

So how do I know when it's time to turn my concept over to a chain expert? When the concept has grown to the point where I'm just repeating myself, and after I've found an operator who can grow the business without screwing up the culture.

# Their Flavors...



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**Chris Thomas, president and CEO of Orlando, Fla.-based Passport Restaurants, a multiconcept operator**

A rising level of stress in your business can indicate that it's time to turn the concept over to chain experts. There are five areas where stress may start manifesting itself.

- The quality of your balance sheet is beginning to deteriorate. Debt is rising, current liability is rising and cash is dwindling.
- Pace of growth. Partially due to lack of capital, you are unable to accelerate the pace of the company's growth.
- Vision of growth. The leader is unable to articulate growth plans in writing and/or the strategy to achieve growth.
- Management stress. The manager is unable to satisfactorily execute the scope of his or her activity, and unable to delegate due to a lack of trust. This ultimately causes the level of execution to deteriorate.
- Operating stress. New units are not working or not working as well as earlier units. Aggregate restaurant margins are beginning to decline.

**Michael H. Seid, managing director of West Hartford, Conn.-based franchising consult-**

**ing firm Michael H. Seid & Associates**

Often we see concepts coming to us in the first few months after they have opened their initial location asking us to help them develop their franchise system into a national chain. Opening volumes, traffic, press coverage and early financial projections usually are pointing to the possibility of expansion. Realistically, though, it takes some time for any restaurant to reach a level of stability.

Restaurants that are ready to expand have a sustainable track record that is duplicated outside of its core market area. An understanding of trends begins to develop, seasonality and return on investments can be predicted, real-estate development costs honed, operations fine-tuned and operating procedures systematized.

Most important though is management's capability to grow and manage the enterprise. You have a better chance to expand a weaker concept with great management than a strong concept with weak management. ■

**on the web:** For more information about how to take a young chain to the next level, visit *Chain Leader's* How To Grow To 100 Units section at [www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com).

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Juice It Up calls on prospective customers by offering coupons on their cell phones.

# Ringling Endorsement

By Margaret Littman

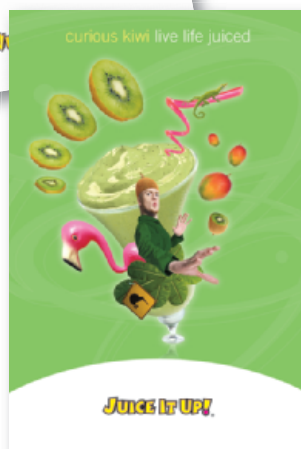
**F**or consumers of a certain age—those who wrote college term papers on typewriters and shared a telephone (land line) with several roommates—the idea of receiving advertising messages via cell phone is downright intrusive, not to mention a little technologically intimidating. But not so of the younger set, who Juice It Up is targeting with its new cell phone coupon program. The Irvine, Calif.-based company hopes the new marketing approach will help cultivate the smoothie chain's hip, fun image.

When Dené Sanders, a partner at Santa Ana, Calif.-based Post-Agency Advertising LLC, began working with Juice It Up, the chain had an image problem. Not a Tom Cruise/O.J. Simpson/Michael Richards-type image problem. Perhaps it would be better classified as a lack-of-image problem.

"When we started, there was no branded look and feel to the stores. People would leave not knowing where they had been,"

Sanders says. "They knew they had been in a smoothie shop, and they knew that it wasn't Jamba [Juice]. But that was about it."

In the 18 months since Post-Agency began working with Juice It Up, things have changed. After research determined that the 124-unit chain's best demographic was 18- to 24-year-old women, particularly college students, the agency created a feel that Sanders describes as "hip and fun," rather than "Zen and healthy," which is the vibe for many smoothie concepts. It capped the messaging with a cheeky tagline: "Live Life Juiced," which appeared on billboards, bus wraps, direct mail and as part of local event marketing. A promotion timed with the opening of the concept's 100th store in summer 2006 increased the chain's customer e-mail database



Instead of text messages that pop on to a phone at inopportune times, Juice It Up's cell phone coupon program requires users to download the coupon. The marketing effort also includes direct mail, bus wraps and billboards with cheeky language.





Juice It Up's marketing materials help create a hip, fun image, rather than a Zen and healthy image, which is the vibe for many smoothie concepts.



from 2,000 names to 8,000.

### Not Your Mother's Coupon Clipping

With that foundation, Post-Agency started brainstorming ways to let the target audience know about the hip 12-year-old chain. From September 2006 to February 2007, Juice It Up is testing a cell phone coupon program aimed at its young customers, who text message as often as they talk and are never without their cells.

"This pay-per-click model was a way for us to test a cutting-edge technology that is important to this audience," says Stephanie Sproull, Juice It Up's director of marketing.

Instead of text messages that pop on to a phone at inopportune times, as some mobile promotions do, the program requires users to download the coupon, with the retailer's logo, after subscribing to the free service from San Diego-based Eureka Mobile. Users search for appropriate coupons for restaurants or beauty salons, for example, based on the neighborhood where they'd like to find the service at that particular time. Eureka Mobile currently provides coupons via cell phone to Cingular wireless users in California, and is looking to expand nationally in 2007.

Just five stores are company-owned, so getting franchisee buy-in on the promotion was essential, Sproull says.

"The cashier enters [a code from the customer's cell phone coupon] into the register

like any other coupon," says Sproull. "It was very important for us that it was simple to execute at the store level. It is amazing how simple it is."

### Can You Find Me Now?

In addition to the simplicity, customers are getting targeted information. Instead of a list of all the chain's stores in a city, as they might find on a bus side, they are getting a message about just the closest location.

"The retailer is getting the person at the time they are making their buying decision," explains Dan Bailey, Eureka Mobile's co-founder.

The Juice It Up cell phone couponing effort—a \$1 off promotion—was still under way at press time, so final redemption rates were not yet available. Initial response was in the 10 percent range. Bailey says the average redemption rate so far for Eureka Mobile's cell phone coupons in general is about 30 percent.

The overall Post-Agency marketing efforts, however, have been measured. Same-store sales last year were up 10 percent over 2005, and in February and July 2006, when Juice It Up's limited-time offers were active, same-store sales increased 22 percent.

Fees for the retailer for issuing a cell phone coupon are 5 cents when a consumer downloads the coupon and 45 cents when he or she redeems it, making the promotion affordable for Juice It Up, which has an advertising budget of just \$450,000.

But even larger chains are taking notice, Bailey says. The technology allows national chains to test cell phone marketing with a particular demographic in a narrow geographic area. Bailey says Eureka Mobile has worked with Einstein Bros. Bagels and Chili's, both of which are testing the service in certain California ZIP codes. Chains can also limit the number of people who receive a certain offer.

"Our brand proposition is that the product we offer is a reward, a treat. It is something fun and exciting and different. It is not the healthy yoga of our competitors. So it makes sense that we are trying something different with our marketing," Sproull says.

For Bailey the marketing is more basic: "For the 16 to 24 age group, this is what drives them: Things that are cool." ■

### SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Juice It Up

**Headquarters**

Irvine, Calif.

**Units** 124

**2005 Systemwide Sales**

\$19 million

**2006 Systemwide Sales**

\$28 million

(company estimate)

**Ad Budget** \$450,000

(company estimate)

**Ad Agency**

Post-Agency Advertising, LLC, Santa Ana, Calif.

**Expansion Plans**

55 units annually



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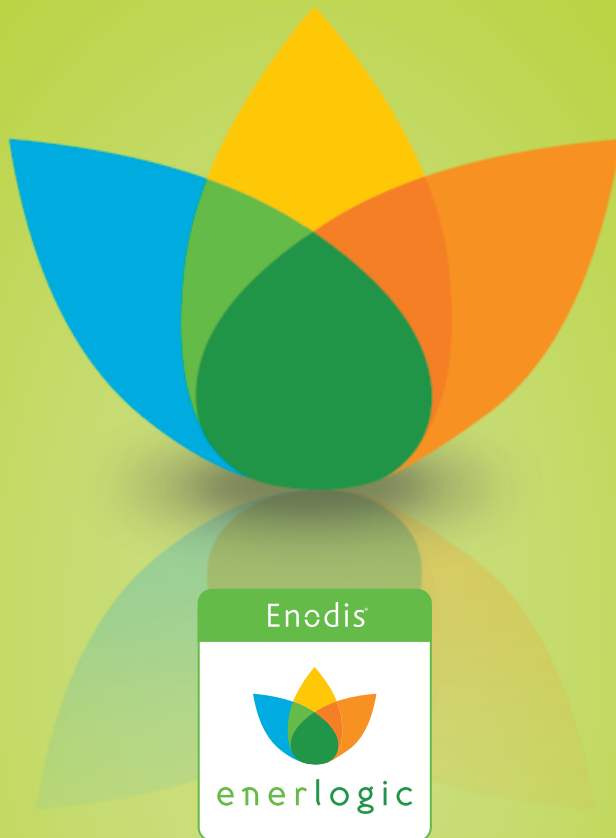
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1. Benihana's new kitchen configuration puts most of the equipment in one location behind the sushi bar.

2. Servers can collect beverages and soup behind the sushi bar; a pass-through window allows them to pick up sushi and appetizers there as well, saving steps.



Benihana's new kitchen centralizes the equipment so servers can take fewer steps and make fewer stops.

By Mary Boltz Chapman

# Gathering PLACE

**T**he focus of an everyday kitchen redesign is on the back-of-the-house staff, ensuring they can do their jobs efficiently. Benihana's new kitchen aids the prep cooks, sure, but it's helping the front-of-the-house staff—thus the customer—even more.

The back of the house was a significant part of Benihana's redesign, begun early in 2004 and debuted in spring 2006. Because teppanyaki chefs in the dining room do much of the cooking, the kitchen didn't require the space it would in a typical casual-dining restaurant.

## Scaled-Down Model

"The space in the kitchen was dictated by more traditional benchmarks, a percent of kitchen space," says Mark Godward, president of Miami-based Strategic Restaurant Engineering, which designed the kitchen. "The first step was to reduce what was the back of the house to what was really needed

for food-prep activities and storage." In the end, the kitchen is 900 to 1,000 square feet smaller than in the old design.

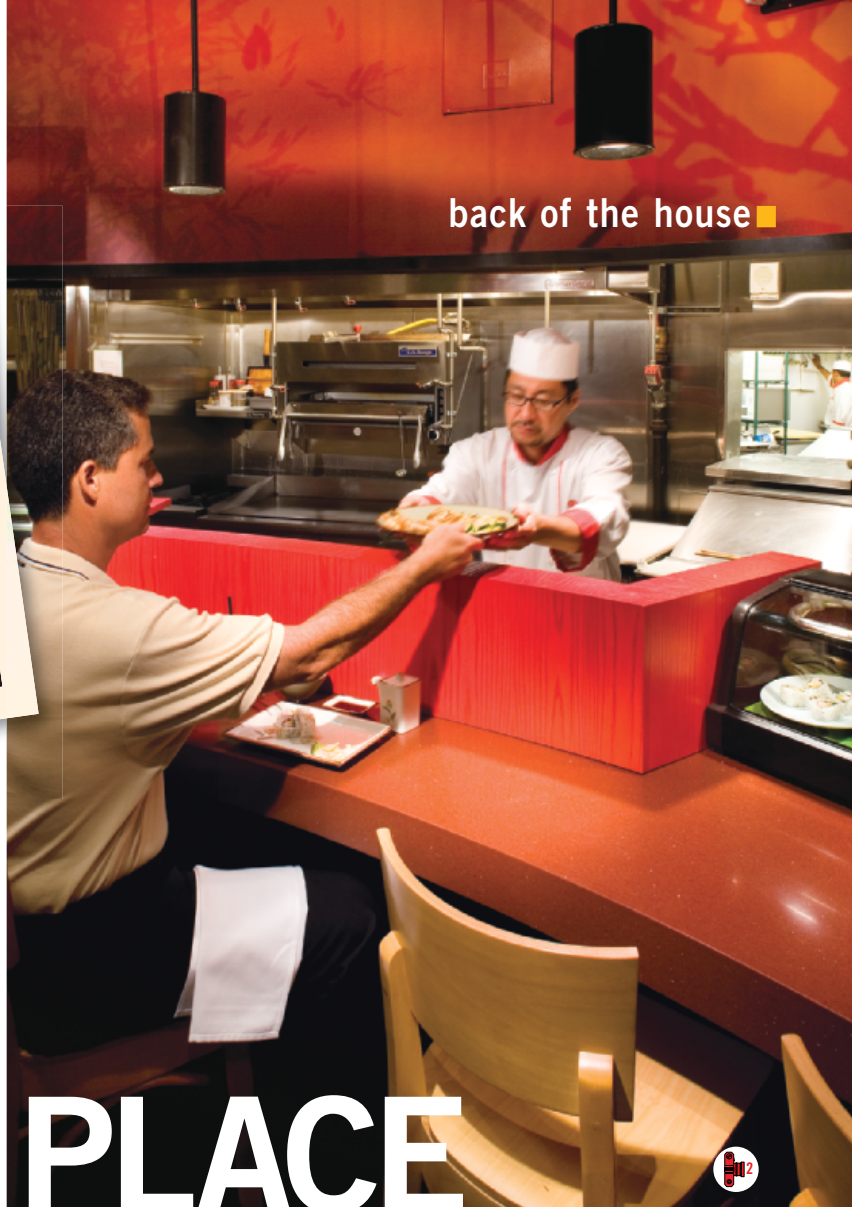
"With the new prototype, the idea is to maximize every square inch of that restaurant, minimize the size of the kitchen as much as possible to be more efficient," says Douglas Medina, Benihana's senior director of supply chain and operations improvement support.

The back-of-the-house work is mostly food preparation and some limited cooking such as steaming rice, simmering soups and toasting sesame seeds.

Limited cooking in the kitchen did not make the redesign easier. "It was difficult coordinating what happens at the teppanyaki table with the items that go in as appetizer orders, the items that go in as sushi orders and the bar drinks," Godward explains.

In most restaurants, servers collect everything from the central kitchen or the bar. At

back of the house ■



## SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Benihana  
**Headquarters** Miami  
**Units** 70  
**2006 Systemwide Sales**  
\$210 million\*  
**Average Unit Volume**  
\$3 million\*  
**Average Check** \$25  
**Kitchen Designer**  
Strategic Restaurant  
Engineering, Miami  
**Expansion Plans**  
6 in development  
\*Chain Leader estimate



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Benihana's back-of-the-house work is mostly food preparation.

Benihana raw ingredients go to the table to be cooked, appetizers used to come from the back kitchen, sushi came from the sushi bar, and drinks from the bar. If someone came in for the teppanyaki experience and another customer at the table wanted sushi, it was difficult to coordinate.

#### Back to Front

Now the bar, the kitchen proper and the sushi bar, which also acts as a display kitchen in cooking appetizers and take-out orders, are located in very close proximity. When a server goes to that general area, he or she can pick up all the things that go to the table.

"It's a good example of how we leverage the back of the house and the whole functionality to provide a greater variety of consumer experiences," Godward says.

Medina adds that new refrigeration prep equipment for the teppanyaki chefs enables them to gather their cut



3. Teppanyaki chefs gather raw ingredients from the prep area and wheel them out to the dining room.

Much of Benihana's cooking is done at teppanyaki tables in front of the customer, allowing the company to create a smaller kitchen than most casual-dining restaurants.



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## ■ back of the house

Benihana's new kitchen is 900 to 1,000 square feet smaller than in the old design.

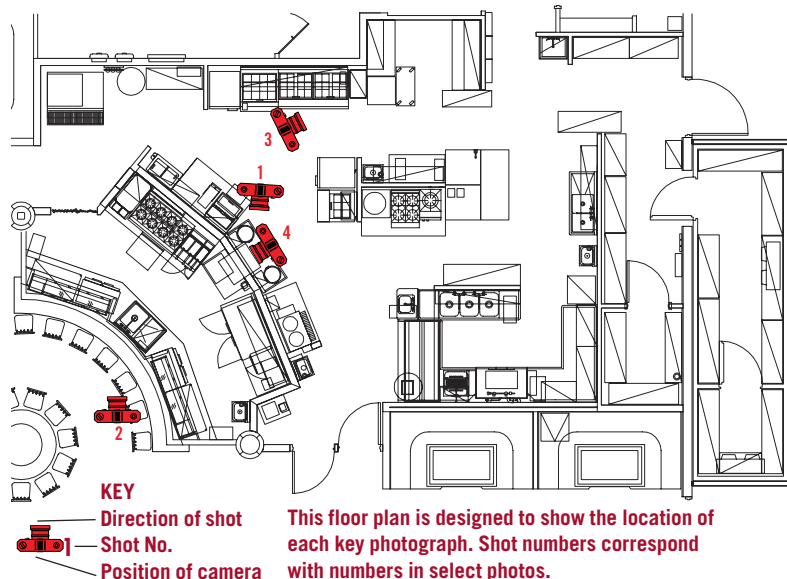
ingredients quicker. "So the chef can get out to the dining room in less time," he says.

The centralized kitchen has improved table turns to 75 or 80 minutes from 90 to 100 minutes. Godward also credits a new cash-register system: Instead of cashing out with a cashier in the back of the house, at busy times even waiting in line, servers now ring up their checks at POS terminals in the dining room.

Looking ahead, Benihana will reconfigure the pass through that goes from the center of the sushi bar to the back into two, one on either side of the sushi bar, because it needed a little more space in the kitchen. The tighter kitchen has also led Benihana to look at the supply chain for ways to minimize the prep that's done in the kitchen, perhaps passing some of it to vendors. ■



4. In future iterations of the prototype, the pass-through window from the sushi bar to the kitchen will be reconfigured into two, one on either side of the bar.



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# SNAPSHOT

## Concept

Pick Up Stix

## Headquarters

San Clemente, Calif.

## Ownership

Carlson Restaurants  
Worldwide, Carrollton,  
Texas

## Units

117 company owned,  
8 franchised

## 2006 Systemwide Sales

\$97.6 million (company  
estimate)

## Average Unit Volume

\$891,000

## Average Check

\$7.92

## Expansion Plans

6 to 10 in 2007, 10 to 15  
in 2008, 125 by 2012



# STICKING Points

Alison Glenn Delaney hones in on Pick Up Stix's food quality and speed of service as she develops a modern pan-Asian menu.

## By Monica Rogers

**P**laying a game of pick up sticks, you've got to drop sticks before you can pick them up. The game sequence matches Carlson Restaurants Worldwide's process with its fast-casual growth vehicle, Pick Up Stix.

Despite speculation about fast expansion when Carlson bought the Asian concept from founder Charles Zhang in 2001, management instead has dropped some Stix and honed the rest. It closed units to strengthen and grow its largely California core.

Planning to double its 125-unit presence by 2012 in current markets, the chain will keep the focus on food, speed and brand through 2007—priorities that seem sensible to restaurant consultant Dennis Lombardi of Dublin, Ohio-based WD Partners. "The challenge for Pick Up Stix is to find its place and solidify its presence with unit economics compelling enough to attract franchisees—doable, but challenging," he says.

For Alison Glenn Delaney, appointed vice president of marketing and menu develop-



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Orange Peel Chicken, with fresh orange slices, red chile pepper and

seared onion, served with white or brown rice, **\$7.29**

Mongolian Beef, with soy-garlic sauce and white and green onions over crispy rice noodles, **\$7.99**

**NOODLES**

Pad Thai: rice noodles in sweet and sour sauce with chicken, green onion, egg, peanuts and sprouts, **\$6.29**

Takeout is 60 percent of Pick Up Stix's business at dinner, slightly less at lunch.

ment in March 2006, those challenges make the next 12 months potent with possibility. "We're very excited about what we're working on," says Glenn Delaney, who works closely with President and COO Ray Blanchette. The company launched a new prototype in November that features an open kitchen, new logo, and wasabi and pumpkin hues. This year Glenn Delaney says food initiatives will take Pick Up Stix farther up the "truly Asian path" it wants to walk.

"We've been exploring bolder, more intense flavors and dishes that derive from all over Asia—Indonesia, Southeast Asia, Japan and even India," says Glenn Delaney. "Whatever we do, the question is, what would make it ownable and defensible for Pick Up Stix?" She says the aim is "Asian cool/American hip, with modern vibrancy."

**Blossoming like mini-lotus flowers, Pick Up Stix's best-selling appetizer, Cream Cheese Wontons, includes a blend of green onion and water chestnuts in the cheese filling.**

**Success with Pick Up Stix's first bundled lunch deal—House Special Chicken with choice of rice and appetizer and 32-ounce drink for \$6.99—means the company will do more combos.**

**Boldly Pan Asian**

The first food example of this thrust launches in early 2007. Called Thai Coconut Curry, \$7.15 for chicken and \$9.15 for shrimp at dinner; and \$5.79 chicken, \$5.99 shrimp at lunch, the dish is a blend of red and yellow curries with vegetables and choice of chicken or shrimp. "The curry will be a real test for us in our core markets of just how much the customer palate has truly matured," she says.

Development took several months. Early versions of the sauce didn't adhere to ingredients well enough, or were too thin or too thick. First tested with guests through December as part of the same 20 to 30 item concept sort that identified Crispy Honey Chicken as a winner, Thai Coconut Curry was one of several items that "popped to the top," Glenn Delaney says.

Crispy Honey Chicken, \$7.15 dinner and \$5.79 lunch, is No. 2 on the menu behind House Special Chicken, selling at 8 percent to 10 percent of entree sales when it was a limited-time offer in fall. "Our aim is to launch a few heavy hitters like Crispy Honey Chicken that are television worthy and have broad appeal," says Blanchette.

The development challenge with Crispy Honey Chicken was to get the right blend of spicy with sweet in the sauce. There were also textural challenges. Pick Up Stix used to batch cook the breaded chicken and then bring it back up to temperature per order. Switching to a flash-fried product allows chicken to be cooked more quickly with a better texture. Reception of the dish was so positive during testing in early summer 2006, "We almost ran out of the sauce," says Glenn Delaney.





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## ■toque of the town



Lunch sales increased 10 percent in 2006, making it Pick Up Stix's fastest growing daypart.

### Promoting Awareness

Promotions for 2007 will be balanced with products already on the menu. "We don't want to stress the system by overdoing it with new things," Glenn Delaney says. "There are a lot of dishes on our menu that guests may not be as aware of that would promote very well."

Lemon Chicken, for example, white chicken meat with lemon-ginger sauce and lemon pieces over crisp rice noodles, \$7.29, was featured in July and August 2006 with impressive results. "Sales on this item more than doubled during the six-week promotion," she says.

Also promotable: "People really like combo meals—especially at lunch," says Glenn Delaney. Pick Up Stix first bundled a meal in fall 2005: a lunch portion of House Special Chicken with choice of egg fried or steamed rice, choice of appetizer, salad, and a 32-ounce drink for \$6.99. It did so well—accounting for 30 percent of lunch sales in 2006—that the company is looking at more combo possibilities.

"Virtually all of our sales increases of the last year have been in guest traffic, not in average check increases," adds Blanchette.

"We're encouraged to see lunch traffic growing the fastest." Lunch business increased 10 percent in 2006; it now accounts for 37 percent of sales.

### The Need for Speed

Because consistency and speed are key, Glenn Delaney says biggest menu initiatives for 2007 are systems oriented.

Watching a wok chef make won ton soup from scratch at the company's new prototype, all seems

smooth, fast and efficient. But Glenn Delaney points out later, "There are steps that we can streamline even more."

For example, ladling cooking wine into the wok after water and stock are bubbling is a step the company is trying to eliminate by blending the wine into the stock at the commissary. "We've made a lot of progress on improving the quality of all of our sauces by scrutinizing the raw ingredients," says Glenn Delaney. But now, to drive consistency and speed, she is looking at which ingredients can be added to sauces at the commissary.

Some ingredients, like garlic, would not be added ahead of time. "Quality trumps everything," says Blanchette. "If there's any risk at all to the taste of the end product, we won't change it."

One recent example? The choice of beet sugar over cane sugar for several recipes. "The switch would have meant a cost savings for us," Blanchette explains. "But there was a perceptible difference in flavor."

Much of this work happens at commissaries in San Clemente, Calif. "This means we're in control every step of the way," Blanchette concludes. "I think the sugar story is a good illustration of that. If we had been dealing with a third-party vendor on that recipe, chances are the switch to cane sugar would have happened and we would never have known about it."

Another example: Pick Up Stix is moving beef slicing there. "More thinly slicing meat ourselves will not only improve the quality of the product, it will save us 30 cents per pound," says Blanchette.

Beyond tight controls at the commissary, Glenn Delaney says hands-on training and mentoring within unit kitchens is important, "especially because all of our food is prepared fresh to order in woks." New cooks shadow lead wok chefs for several months before they work a wok station.

Overseeing quality control, Pick Up Stix has three brand-standard supervisors that travel the company's three regions.

Such scrutiny is essential because food quality is one stick that Pick Up Stix can't afford to drop. "There are so many subtle nuances to getting each dish just right," says Glenn Delaney. "You've got to stay on that every day." ■

Cutting beef in-house to new specs has resulted in better texture and sauce coverage for Pick Up Stix beef dishes such as Mongolian Beef and Szechwan Beef.

Selling at 8 percent to 10 percent of sales from September to October 2006, Crispy Honey Chicken was Pick Up Stix's most successful introduction in 18 months.





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With 27 years of experience at Del Taco, **SHIRLENE LOPEZ** is stretching to operate the whole enchilada. **By David Farkas**

# Above and BEYOND

**No McJob:** Shirlene Lopez landed her first and only fast-food job at 14, mopping floors and making sundaes. Today she's president and COO of Del Taco.

**K**evin Moriarty, the former CEO and owner of Del Taco, recalls the time a reporter sought a quote to describe his longtime protégé, Shirlene Lopez. "I told him that if you threw her into a pit of wild alligators and came back 30 minutes later, she'd be standing there with a set of alligator luggage," he says.

You'd never guess by looking at Lopez. She's a trim 5 feet 4 inches tall, and her round and rosy face belies 27 years in fast food's brutal trenches—all of them with Del Taco, no less, where she began as a 14-year-

old part-timer. Yet those who know her say she's a purpose-driven executive who gets the job—*any* job—done. She was named president and chief operating officer in October, eight months after Sagittarius Brands, a Nashville, Tenn.-based holding company, acquired the quick-service chain for an undisclosed amount.

"I'm not usually happy to meet a target," says Lopez, 42. "I'm only really happy when I exceed it."

Exceed indeed. Her steady rise through the ranks in operations demonstrates her



prowess in impressing her superiors. “The more we got to know Shirlene, the more terrific she was,” declares Sagittarius Brands CEO Sid Feltenstein, the veteran restaurant executive to whom she reports.

She has a chance to impress him even more as the chain attempts national expansion via aggressive franchising and co-branding. Lopez, to whom operations, purchasing, human resources, IT and marketing now report, has access to plenty of capital. Feltenstein estimates capital expenditures will grow 15 percent to 20 percent for '07.

For his part, Moriarty, who was Lopez's boss for 16 years, was known as a debt-adverse leader who opened restaurants strictly out of cash flow. He preferred to sign franchisees that could do the same. “There will be more capital available to us for things specifically for growth,” Lopez says. “That has to be the biggest change from my perspective.”

### Spending Frenzy

How will Lopez deploy it? “In addition to building new stores, we want to reinvest in existing facilities. We'll also allocate capital to a new POS system,” she says. All-but-neglected marketing research will also get a boost to keep the concept relevant to customers. “Kevin was big on marketing but not on research,” Lopez says. “It was expensive, and he thought no one knew more than we did about the customer.”

This year, Del Taco will open 15 company restaurants in core markets, which include most of California, Las Vegas and,

most recently, Phoenix. “Phoenix started off as a franchise market,” Lopez explains. “But some areas were not being developed, and we stepped in and started to develop a piece of it.” Today, the company operates eight restaurants in Greater Phoenix; seven franchisees run 25 Del Tacos there.

Lopez acknowledges the risk of opening even more Del Tacos in company markets. “The point is, in order to grow and to back-fill, I will have a certain amount of cannibalization,” she explains. “The question is, over time is that the right decision? And I believe it is.” She thinks rapidly growing Las Vegas could be a 40-store market; today, there are half that many.

After an unsuccessful bid to sign up area developers in the late '90s, Del Taco has reverted back to its original franchise formula: finding franchisees capable of opening three to five units within five years. “There is a huge opportunity to expand and accelerate growth. Our challenge is to do this in a disciplined way,” Feltenstein says.

Most operators would be salivating at the growth potential. Sales for the QSR Mexican category—dominated, of course, by giant Taco Bell—surged 12.4 percent in '05, to \$9.2 billion, according to Technomic Inc., a Chicago-based market research firm. Del Taco's systemwide sales grew a compounded 9.7 percent from 2003 to 2005. The 481-unit chain, however, is now the country's third largest Mexican fast-food chain, slipping behind 500-plus-unit Chipotle Mexican Grill in 2004.

Last year told a different story. Spiking

### SNAPSHOT

**Concept** Del Taco

**Headquarters**

Lake Forest, Calif.

**Units** 273 company, 209 franchise

**2006 Systemwide Sales**

\$535 million  
(company estimate)

**Average Unit Volume**

\$1.18 million

**Average Check** \$5.52

**Expansion Plans**

40 to 45 company and franchise units in 2007

**Del Taco expects franchise restaurants—today about 43 percent of the system—to outnumber company stores within five years, especially given the chain's strong unit economics.**



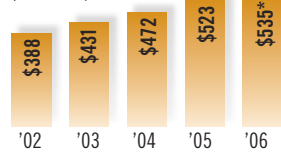
"Everyone is hands-on here. We spend a lot of time in the field."

—Shirlene Lopez, president and COO

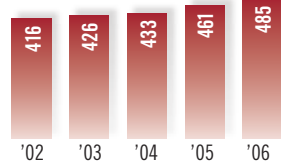


## Del Taco Rises to the Occasion

Systemwide Sales  
(in millions)



Units



\*company estimate

energy prices and adjustable rate mortgages hampered sales throughout the industry. Del Taco wasn't spared. The Lake Forest, Calif.-based company expected systemwide sales to ramp up just 2.2 percent, to \$535 million, in 2006.

As of late November, Lopez wondered if the chain's 16 years of consecutive same-store-sales gains would end in '06. "This year has been tough for us," Lopez admits. "We are going up against some very strong numbers."

### For the Seafood Lover

Enter the Crispy Shrimp Taco. The \$1.79 product was launched two weeks prior to its arrival in the restaurants. Window clings, bag stuffers, coupons and disc jockeys drummed up interest in the product, as was the case with the battered and deep-fried fish taco rollout 18 months earlier. The Crispy Fish Taco sold for \$1.59, slightly less than competitors' fish tacos, and soon became the most successful product launch in company history, Lopez claims. Now a part of the permanent menu, it accounts for 9 percent of company unit sales.

Lopez denies rolling out shrimp tacos, a limited-time offer, merely as a reaction to slumping sales yet concedes timing was of the essence. "It was not just to get news out, but to get interesting news. Shrimp is popular," she says. "We look for it to bring in some big numbers." The company aired TV ads supporting the rollout in core markets by the third week in November; by Dec. 1, they were 4 percent of sales, the company says.

Seafood will soon strike an even more familiar chord at Del Taco. This spring it hooks up with Captain D's, the Nashville-based seafood chain Sagittarius Brands took control of in early 2005, in the first of four co-branded restaurants. Officials talk up the synergies of the brands, insisting dayparts and menu items complement one another. Del Taco is, appar-

ently, strong at breakfast; Captain D's packs them in at night.

Officials won't reveal the percentage of breakfast sales, although the figure is probably similar to those of Jack in the Box and Burger King, which ring up 19 percent and 17 percent, respectively. Their reticence is understandable; arch rival Taco Bell recently announced it will test the lucrative daypart, which it estimates to be worth a hefty \$34 billion, in three markets this year.

Del Taco officials insist they are ready for the co-branding effort. "We've designed a kitchen that works really well," boasts former Del Taco President Ron Petty, now Sagittarius Brands' president of development. The first is slated for Nashville, probably in March. If all goes well, franchisees of both concepts will be invited to open co-branded units.

Lopez, an operations expert, has nonetheless grappled to get the right menu for the project. "We have to scale back. I agreed to take things off the menu," she acknowledges. That could be problematic for the 42-year-old brand. Variety is Del Taco's greatest attribute, according to the company's market research. The units whip up burgers, fries and milkshakes in addition to tacos, burritos and quesadillas.

### Made to Order

What's more, because many items are cooked in the units—beans, for instance, are boiled throughout the day—customers can customize orders. That has proved to be an advantage over giant Taco Bell, which prepares very little in its restaurants. Yet it could turn into a disadvantage in a kitchen that must quickly prepare two different menus.

Lopez is also figuring out how to maintain Del Taco's brand image while sharing space with Captain D's. "Sid wants equal everything in the stores—equal signage and elements for both brands," she says "It's more like what Yum is doing."

Feltenstein is well aware of the advantages—paying for one site instead of two and



**Crispy Fish Taco**  
was Del Taco's most  
successful product launch  
in company history.



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“The cult of real Del Taco fans know we do it differently than Taco Bell.”

—Sharon Fogg, vice president of marketing



Because many items are cooked in Del Taco units, customers can customize items like the Macho Taco. That has proved to be an advantage over giant Taco Bell.

Breakfast items like the Bacon and Egg Quesadilla have helped contribute to Del Taco's strong breakfast daypart.

increased volumes, for example—having sold the A&W and Long John Silver's chains in '02 to Yum Brands, which co-brands more than 3,400 restaurants worldwide. “We would expect a significant increase in average unit volumes along with operating profits,” he says. “But our success isn't dependent on that.”

Instead, Sagittarius Brands is also counting on widespread acceptance of the Del Taco brand in franchise markets far flung from California. There is some evidence that is happening. Officials claim sales at two Detroit units, which opened in 2005, are running 35 percent higher than the \$1.18 million average unit volume reported in its 2005 Uniform Franchise Offering Circular, the latest available.

Although Del Taco won't share specifics, the UFOC shows that a single company unit generates pre-royalty and pre-occupancy operating profit of \$386,389, or 32.7 percent, on an average volume just shy of \$1.2 million. Figure in a royalty of 5 percent and another 12 percent for rent, taxes and common-area maintenance fees, and franchisees can expect a 16 percent return on sales. Estimated cash flow: \$190,000, not bad for a fast-food outlet. “It's a solid return that should be attractive to potential operators,” declares consultant Jordan Krolick, former chief development officer for Arby's.

Given those numbers, it's not surprising Lopez expects franchise restaurants—today about 43 percent of the system—to outnumber company restaurants within five years.

Del Taco's ability to attract them, of course, depends not only on returns but its relevancy to consumers. That's something Lopez and Senior Vice President of Marketing Sharon Fogg say is perhaps its most important goal.

So far, fish and shrimp tacos have helped keep Del Taco top of mind. So have car giveaways and offers for free video games, gambits Fogg has employed to boost traffic since joining the company in '05. Fogg has more than stop-gap measures in mind, however. By spring she intends to introduce a new campaign that shifts the brand message away from merely generating news. “I want to make it more than informational. I want to connect with the customer,” she explains.

Fogg, a former Burger King executive, will only hint that any new message will contrast Del Taco's made-to-order freshness with the holding-bin method of certain rivals. “That's the way I would do it in my kitchen,” is how she imagines someone responding to the new commercials. She says longtime Del Taco spokesman Dan (veteran actor Greg Kinkley) will remain, though “definitely in a different role.”

### Team Player

Changing roles also applies to Lopez, no longer a “right-hand person,” as she once described herself, but instead part of a six-person leadership team, including executives from Captain D's and Sagittarius, who meet regularly. Then there's the pressure from the private-equity owners to implement a variety of methods to improve volumes, EBITDA and marketing. “You'd expect sophisticated equity partners to bring along a toolbox to improve business, and the fact is a lot of companies could benefit from it,” says former restaurant analyst Allan Hickok of Houlihan Lokey Howard & Zukin, an investment banking firm in Minneapolis.

“She'll be facing a lot more bureaucracy,” warns Moriarty, adding executives didn't meet formally at Del Taco.

Not to worry. “Kevin got people to understand that they can stretch and do something they never thought they could do,” says Lopez, who intends to finish the degree she started years ago at Cal State Long Beach before too long. “I'm a perfect example of that.” ■





# Franchise Developer

## Working with a Foreign Franchise

Usually international franchising refers to American companies expanding abroad, but some foreign restaurant brands have started doing business in the United States. Working with a foreign franchise carries its own rewards and challenges, says Jose Cofiño, president and chief operating officer of Los Angeles-based ADIR Restaurants Corp., master franchisor in the western U.S. for the Guatemalan fried-chicken franchise Pollo Campero. Here are some of his suggestions:

● **Be entrepreneurial.** Be ready for a different type of partnership with a foreign franchisor than with a U.S. brand. "It can be very fun or very frustrating," says Cofiño. "But assuming the franchisor is willing to be flexible, you'll be able to help form the brand in a way that you can't if you're working with McDonald's."

● **Consider your local immigrant communities.** A foreign franchise may have strong brand awareness and loyalty among a local community, which can serve as a launching pad for the rest of the market. "We knew there was a market for Pollo Campero because people were importing the product on their own on airplanes in huge quantities," says Cofiño. Then choose your first store location carefully, putting it where people who already know the brand will come.

● **Account for differences in labor costs.** In many countries labor is less expensive, so a foreign business model may include labor-intensive systems. "It's key to ask how the technology, equipment or restaurant layout could be changed to account for the labor costs over here," says Cofiño.

● **Prepare for different cultural norms.** Other countries may have different communication styles and decision-making processes. "Here we tend to make decisions very quickly, which the franchisor may see as reckless," says Cofiño. "And other cultures take much more time to let ideas percolate, which can drive a U.S. franchisee nuts." Communicate more to head off misunderstandings.

● **Ask questions up front:** How much market research have you done on the acceptance of your concept here? Do you have a U.S. office? Do you have U.S.-based tools, systems, processes and manuals (not just a translation of a foreign manual)? What PR are you doing to drive the credibility of the brand in a business-

to-business setting, to make it easier for franchisees to find financing? How have you altered the way you do business for the U.S. market? "If they haven't operated here before, there are going to be challenges for the development of the brand," says Cofiño. "It's very important go in with your eyes wide open."

**When the first U.S. Pollo Campero opened in 2002, people waited up to seven hours for a taste of home.**



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An Internet-based security system lets Benihana managers keep tabs on operations—from anywhere.

By Lisa Bertagnoli

# Covering All ANGLES

One day not too long ago, the police showed up at a Benihana restaurant. They had apprehended a suspect for passing counterfeit money, and some of that money had been passed at the restaurant. Police asked the restaurant manager for security videotape to help identify and prosecute the counterfeiter. But the restaurant was unable to help because it didn't have any surveillance technology.

Being unable to help the police was one factor that spurred Miami-based Benihana to install Internet-based risk-management systems at its restaurants. The company installed the first system at its Miramar, Fla., store four months ago; it's currently in use at 16 locations. The company's remaining Benihana units, as well as its 11 RA Sushi and seven Haru Sushi restaurants,

are scheduled to have the new system by the end of 2007.

## Candid Cameras

This is how the system works: Cameras are placed in strategic areas around the restaurant—everywhere from the front door to the cash registers to the back door. The cameras record images and upload them to a Web site that managers and executives can access from any computer.

When the cameras detect something out of the ordinary, say movement at the front door or back door after a certain hour, or activity at the cash register after closing time, it generates an exceptions report. Managers are notified via e-mail; they then log on and view the images that triggered the report. The manager determines whether the event

**Benihana's Internet-based risk-management system places cameras in areas where POS activity and cash handling occur. They record images and upload them to a Web site that managers and executives can access from any computer.**



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When cameras detect something out of the ordinary, the system generates an exceptions report and notifies the manager by e-mail. The manager can log on to view the images that triggered the report and decide whether the event is worth investigating.



was benign (perhaps caused by a misaligned camera) or worth investigating.

Managers can also make notes, to be read by higher-ranked managers and executives, directly on the video clip. The notes create "cascading documentation that matches with the videos, instead of memos that float up the hierarchy," says Senior Director of Information Technology David Chun.

Most traditional surveillance systems are incident-driven, Chun says. For instance, if someone slips and falls, or if money disappears from the cash register, those incidents provoke managers to go back and review footage. The exceptions reports make the new system proactive, he says.

Internet-based systems "may be very practical, as you can check out your store from anywhere in the world," says Mark Godward, president of Strategic Restaurant Engineering, an operations-engineering foodservice consulting firm based in Miami. However, he adds, they can also be dangerous if hackers are observing a restaurant and decide to make it a target.

"We are fully aware of that concern," Chun responds. All units are firewalled, and all services to units are provided through a private network; moreover, the vendor of the digital video system has completed an Ethical Hack Test.

## SNAPSHOT

**Company** Benihana  
**Headquarters** Miami  
**Units** 70 Benihana, 11 RA Sushi, 7 Haru Sushi  
**2006 Systemwide Sales** \$244 million  
**Average Unit Volume** \$3 million\*  
**Average Check** \$25  
**Expansion Plans** 6 Benihana, 6 RA Sushi and 1 Haru in development  
\*Chain Leader estimate

## What Happens in Vegas

Before installing the Internet system, Benihana stores that were equipped with surveillance technology used videotape systems: Images captured via cameras went to videotape, and the tapes were played when needed on VCRs. "As these products became obsolete, we had a hard time finding them," Chun explains.

When Benihana decided to go digital, it first chose a system that specializes in Las Vegas casinos. The system yielded a large amount of detailed video and required a lot of maintenance. Plus, the system's cameras weren't designed for the temperature fluctuations and ambience of a commercial kitchen. "Cameras were dying or not meeting specifications," Chun says.

A search yielded another vendor more focused on hospitality. The cameras and equipment are designed to work well given the lighting and temperatures of restaurant kitchens. Plus, the vendor "had proven themselves with a number of chains," Chun says.

Depending on the size of the unit, the number of cameras deployed range from





Cameras monitor POS activity and cash handling; they never film customers or specific tables.

nine to 16. Cameras are placed at strategic points throughout the restaurant, among them the front door, the cash register and refrigerated storage units. "It depends on what objectives you want to achieve," Chun says. Benihana's primary objectives: POS activity and cash handling.

### Big Brother Is Watching

The casino system had another drawback: Employees weren't aware that the cameras had been installed. That system "hides the cameras and doesn't give managers access," Chun says. The main users of the videotape system were executives and area managers, who had access to the videos in case of an event such as a workers' compensation challenge.

With the new system, the cameras are in plain view and managers have access to the images. (Customers are not filmed. Cameras are directed at certain areas of the front of the house but not specific tables.) Indeed, how well managers use the system, for instance, responding to exceptions alerts, figures into their year-end reviews.

Yet another difference: Benihana purchased the equipment for the older systems, but it leases this equipment. That way the vendor handles maintenance issues, according to Chun. Systems with 16 cameras cost \$499 per month, with an \$849 installation fee. The default system keeps images for 30 days; Benihana uses 90 days, a more expensive option.

Chun says that Benihana is still evaluating the system's return on investment, but anecdotal evidence shows that lawsuits and workers' compensation suits are "far lower" at restaurants using the updated technology. Planned tweaks to the system include keeping images for more than 90 days and eliminating some of the parameters that generate exceptions reports.

"We created a lot of exceptions, and it's becoming cumbersome for the unit manager," Chun says. ■

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# Building BLOCKS

Innovation and execution were hot topics at the recent *Chain Leader LIVE*.  
By David Farkas

More than 100 operators came to Chicago Nov. 1-3, 2006, to learn more about "Excellence in Execution," the theme of the third annual *Chain Leader LIVE*. The conference featured the insights and personalities of the magazine—namely, in the form of editors, who moderated panel discussions, and operators, whose stories have appeared or will appear in the magazine.

**Maura Havenga of McDonald's stressed the importance of leadership at all levels, corporate chefs shared their menu-development strategies, and Joseph Vajda talked about Rock Bottom's new design.**

**(Opposite) Meal functions included products from sponsors and a sommelier.**

**Clifford Pleau of Seasons 52 talked about menu development from idea to execution.**

**Phil Hickey of Rare Hospitality: "Pick partners wisely...and replace fear with knowledge."**

**Operators got a chance to network and share their execution ideas.**

**Editor-in-Chief Mary Boltz Chapman presented the Legend award to Rich Melman.**

## Get Everyone Involved

Keynote speaker Maura Havenga, senior vice president for McDonald's Corp., set the tone for the meeting by stressing the importance of leadership at all levels of foodservice. Havenga, 41, who worked her way up the corporate ladder from crew member, reminded attendees that leaders focus on customers and units. She disclosed one of the fast feeder's mantras: "It's not real until it's real in the restaurants," she said.

Havenga stressed the importance of understanding your company's ability to create new products and systems. McDonald's, whose latest innovation is the side-by-side drive-thru, operates a test kitchen, dubbed the Innovation Center, capable of producing food for the equivalent of three McDonald's units. Havenga said the warehouse-like structure tests ideas from around the world.

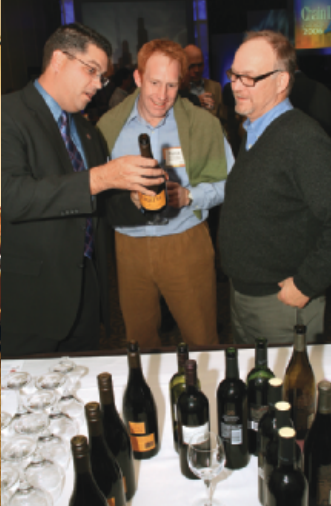
Yet, she added, the test kitchen is just one component of the burger giant's three-prong approach to innovation. "Suppliers and restaurants themselves must also be part of the process for any innovation to be successful," Havenga said.

## Spending Time and Money

Innovation was also the subject of the Technology breakout session. Bob Katz, president of RSK Enterprises, a Jersey Mike's franchisee, talked about the latest wrinkle in pay-by-touch technology. "The cost savings result from reduced transaction fees and no bad checks," declared Katz. He added that the technology also saves time by moving customers through the lines quickly and making it easy to train workers.

The 45-minute session also sparked the curiosity of operators interested in closed-circuit TV, used by several large chains to monitor activity at cash registers and in kitchens. David Chun, senior director of information systems for 70-unit Benihana, answered questions about the costs and legality of such systems. "We used to run video surveillance ourselves, but it broke often. Now we lease the equipment," Chun recalled, adding all support is included in the lease payments.





During the Storyboard panel, Bennigan's Vice President of Marketing Clay Dover explained how the aging brand, which hadn't advertised on television for three years, recently produced an inexpensive series of innovative commercials highlighting a glaze made with Guinness stout for grilled meats. To keep the costs of the ads low, Bennigan's used still photography. The menu items proved so popular that the Dallas-based chain added them to the core menu in the fall.

"The campaign was done with little money," Dover said, estimating the promotion cost \$100,000 in all.

Television, however, has become a less important part of the media mix for smaller chains, offered panelist Bob Hogan, senior vice president of marketing for Don Pablo's. "The traditional media has to be expanded five or six different ways," he said, offering notoriously popular YouTube.com as one cutting-edge example marketers should consider.

### On the Way Up

There was no shortage of innovative ideas during the Upstarts panel, which featured three executives discussing how they plan to expand their up-and-coming chains. Yorgo Koutsogiorgas, president of six-unit Go Roma Italian Kitchen, talked about how the fast-casual chain sets itself apart with its slick interiors and kitchen technology to aid service.

"We began the concept because of a void in serving high-quality Italian food made from scratch," explained Koutsogiorgas, a former Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises partner. He said two-year-old Go Roma, which has unit volumes of \$1.6 million, opened its latest unit in Merrillville, Ind., to test a smaller market before launching a franchise program.

Phil Roberts, chairman and CEO of Edina, Minn.-based Parasole Restaurant Holdings, showed off his latest creation: Salut Bar Américain, an upscale bistro with a \$29 check average at dinner that offers both classic French dishes and items with a French twist. "It's *sort of* French," declared Roberts, the creator of Buca Di Beppo and the stylish seafood eatery Oceanaire. "But we sell 160 burgers a day." Still, he admitted during a humorous slideshow, "We're slavish to a few French dishes."

Dishes were the topic of discussion during Toque of the Town, a panel consisting of five corporate culinarians. Phil Costner, vice president of research and development for T.G.I. Friday's, admitted it was tough getting Pork Osso Buco through internal filters at the casual-dining chain but worth the trouble. "This was one of our highest-testing products in history," he said.

Eric Justice, director of culinary operations for fast-casual Pei Wei, noted his surprise at the popularity of the chain's Japanese Udon Noodle Bowl, which contains 15 ingredients. "One customer said this was the kind of dish that would make me come back," declared Justice. "We thought it would be a fringe product."

The conference also featured award presentations, including *Chain Leader's* annual Legend award. This year it went to Richard Melman, founder and chairman of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, whose first restaurant in 1971 was R.J. Grunts, a hip burger joint. Today, his widely admired Chicago-based company owns 70 restaurants nationwide that ring up more than \$300 million in sales annually.

Jon Luther, CEO and chairman of Dunkin' Brands, and John Metz Jr., chef and co-owner of several restaurants in Atlanta, received the Chain Leadership and Protégé awards, respectively.







(Clockwise from top l.) CEOs shared their expansion plans.

Chicago chains showcased their fare at the Local Heroes reception.

More than 100 operators attended *Chain Leader LIVE*.

Sessions ranged from human resources to technology.

*Chain Leader* recognized the companies featured in its Best Places To Work issue.

Deep-dish pizza was a popular item at the reception.

“Take regular doses of Vitamin E, for entrepreneurship.”

—*Rare Hospitality President and CEO Phil Hickey*

### Building Business

Later, during the Growth Strategy panel, five CEOs discussed growth plans. Stephen Carley of El Pollo Loco explained how the chain's signature grilled chicken would help give the company a national presence. “It's the fastest growing protein,” he said. Sizzler's Ken Cole offered how remodeling has increased volumes at the aging West Coast brand. And Kevin Brown of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises said the secret to growth is to look “for people not to become managers of restaurants but owners.”

That pretty much sums up the career of Phil Hickey, who has owned restaurants since graduating from Michigan State University. The president and CEO of Rare Hospitality offered thoughts on that subject in a lively speech in which he advised, “Pick partners wisely, listen early and often, and replace fear with knowledge.”

Hickey also said to practice “active” servant leadership. “Be the change,” he said, quoting Mahatma Gandhi, “you want to see in others.” ■

**on the web:** For more pictures and recipes from *Chain Leader LIVE*, visit [www.chainleader.com](http://www.chainleader.com).



(Above) Jon Luther of Dunkin' Donuts, Rich Melman of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises and John Metz, chef and co-owner of several restaurants in Atlanta, received *Chain Leader's* Execution Awards.

(L.) *Chain Leader LIVE* allowed operators and sponsors the opportunity to catch up with friends during breaks, meal functions and receptions.





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# Road WARRIOR



Steven Schussler enjoys his collection of cars and motorcycles at work and play. **By Maya Norris**

**S**teven Schussler is not the kind of collector content with just admiring his collection from afar. The chairman, president and CEO of Schussler Creative likes to put his collection of cars and motorcycles to good use. He not only regularly drives them through the streets of Golden Valley, Minn., but they have inspired him to create restaurant concepts that play up the vehicles' beauty and nostalgia.

Over the last 30 years, Schussler has amassed a mix of classic and modern cars and motorcycles worth about \$500,000. He owns a 1957 Chevy convertible, a 1959 Cadillac Berlitz convertible, a 1959 Corvette convertible, a 1952 MGTD convertible, a 1997 Ferrari convertible, 1997 Bentley and a 2005 Grand Cherokee Overland. His motorcycle collection is equally impressive: a 1916 Pope, 1927 Indian with a sidecar, 1929 Harley Davidson D-Twin 45, 1938 194 Harley Davidson military motorcycle, 1947 Indian Chief Roadmaster, 1949 Harley Davidson WL45, 1952 Harley Davidson RS, 2000 Harley Davidson Fat Boy, 2005 BMW 1200 and a custom-made 2007 Sinner-G chopper.

Schussler's interest in cars and motorcycles goes back to his childhood in New York. When he was 11 years old, he got a job pumping gas after he lied to the owner and said he was 15. There he learned about cars and earned \$500 to buy his first: a 1958

MGA. "I used to drive around the back of the parking lot, worked on it with the mechanics and played the big shot even though I was only 11 years old," he says.

Schussler took up the hobby seriously in the 1970s. In 1979, he purchased a red 1957 Chevy convertible, which remains his favorite. "Everybody gives you the thumbs up when you go down the street in it," he says. "It's unmistakably the finest-looking, most recognizable antique car on the road."

## Hitting the Road

That car also prompted him to create Juke-Box Saturday Night, a chain of nightclubs with memorabilia from the '50s and '60s, in 1979. Schussler incorporated two 1957 Chevys into the decor of each unit. He cut them in half, using the fronts as a canopy and a DJ booth and the backs as booths.

Schussler has since gone on to create such notable concepts as T-Rex and Rainforest Cafe. But his next concept centers on his passion for vintage cars and motorcycles. In 2008, he plans to open America's Roadhouse, a motorcycle- and car-themed restaurant that serves comfort food, in Reno, Nev. The prototype houses his '59 Corvette, '59 Caddy Berlitz and all of his vintage motorcycles. It will also feature his custom-made 2007 Sinner-G, which Schussler calls "motorcycle art. That's something you can have in your living room. That's something that should be in the Smithsonian Institution."

## Enjoying the Ride

When he isn't using his vehicles as inspiration for his concepts, Schussler enjoys driving them. He often drives three different cars a day. For example, most recently Schussler drove his jeep to work in the morning, drove the Bentley in the afternoon, and took his Ferrari out for the evening. "I love the opportunity to drive something from one point to another that's classy, unique, inspiring and gives me the ability to be creative at the same time," he says. ■

Steven Schussler's favorite car is his red 1957 Chevy convertible. "It reminds me of Disney, mom and dad, apple pie, vanilla ice cream," he says. "The car smiles at you."

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