



Restaurants & Institutions January 15, 2006

Window on the Future

Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York was created in conjunction with Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, to help find employment for 250 surviving employees of the World Trade Center's Windows on the World restaurant. The organization's mission since has broadened to securing funding for employee-owned restaurants in the city, and Colors, its second such operation (Rene Pujol Restaurant was the first), is set to open this month.

Colors will be cooperatively owned by employees, many of whom were Windows on the World staffers (including Head Bartender Victor Rojas). Raymond Mohan—a veteran of Chicama, Pipa, Patria and other Manhattan restaurants—is executive chef and has used many recipes contributed by staff to create a global-flavors menu. Appetizers are priced at \$9 to \$12, entrées \$18 to \$28. Entrée choices include slow-roasted honey-glazed pork with Colombian bandeja paisa (rice and beans), arugula and plantain, and goat curry stewed in coconut milk and served with Peruvian lentil-rice cake, endive and bananas.



Beverage Director Julee Resendez (previously at Aquavit) has assembled an equally international wine cellar, with most bottles priced from \$30 to \$60. Along with a 100-seat dining room, the art-deco-inspired restaurant (designed by Jim Walrod) has a 20-seat private-dining room and a nine-seat bar area.

MENU FOCUS

A year-round source of menu inspiration, beets are beloved for their sweet flavor and crisp texture.

- AVON, COLO.
Vista Restaurant: Colorado beet carpaccio with spiced pecans, crumbled blue cheese, micro greens and pomegranate-port vinaigrette
- IDAHO FALLS, IDAHO
The Cellar: Mixed greens tossed in white-truffle vinaigrette with fried striped-beet chips
- KANSAS CITY, MO.
Children's Mercy Hospitals & Clinics: Orange-glazed beets
- MINNEAPOLIS
Five Restaurant & Street Lounge: Tartare of beets with goat cheese and shoestring potatoes seasoned with truffle salt and Banyuls vinegar
- MULTIPLE LOCATIONS
Napa Valley Grille: Harvest Platter with marinated beet salad with bocconcini mozzarella, grilled half artichoke, port-wine aioli, poached-fig bruschetta, roasted nuts and raisins (r.)
- NEW HAVEN, CONN.
Yale University Dining Services: Moscow-style borscht
- NEW YORK CITY
Thor: Red beet terrine with horseradish, fresh goat



- cheese and beet greens
- SANTA MONICA, CALIF.
Valentino: Red-and-golden beet salad with shrimp, calamari and octopus

Bringing Students Back

There's little point in providing healthful school meals if students steer clear of cafeterias. Like many others, Los Angeles Unified School District has limited availabilities of snacks and soft drinks. Now it's addressing problems highlighted by a recent survey that finds nearly six of 10 students say they don't eat meals at school because of perceived poor food quality, lines or other reasons.



Last month the Los Angeles City Board of Education passed the Cafeteria Improvement Motion based on feedback from parents and more than 346,000 students who eat lunch every day. Officials say they will re-examine facilities and food quality and safety.

"It is especially incumbent upon us to serve the healthiest food we can," Marlene Canter, board of education president, said at a recent hearing. Students can expect a "moderate, phased-in reformulation of the menu with reduced fat, sodium and added sugar, more whole grains and no more trans fats," according to Canter. Plans also call for providing nutrition information for all food items to give students more control over what they eat.

The district has committed to having a hazard analysis and critical control point (HACCP) plan by July, to serving school lunch before 12:30 p.m., and to adding lunch periods in overcrowded sites and posting cafeteria inspection reports online (at parents' request).

Not Bigger, But Better

Freshness, authenticity and enough heat and spice to appease even the boldest palates are hallmarks of the recently revamped menu at Big Bowl, the eight-unit, Asian-themed chain Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises repurchased from Brinker International in March 2005. Built around 21 new dishes and "100 other little changes," the upgraded, updated cuisine is responsible for sales increases approaching 50% in some locations, says Creator and Culinary Partner Bruce Cost, who spearheaded the overhaul with Executive Chef Matt McMillin

Big Bowl's renewed commitment to quality is evident in such practices as roasting peanuts in house, making sauces fresh daily, wrapping summer rolls before every shift and finishing hot-and-sour soup to order. Newly introduced ingredients include baby bok choy, kaffir lime, tree ear mushrooms, Asian eggplant and Thai chiles, the latter a fiery driver on the menu's new "Red Hot Dishes" section. Heat seekers will also find dishes sparked with fermented Sichuan chile paste, fresh Fresno chiles and house-made chile oil.



Seafood is delivered six times a week, with such selections as scallops, halibut and other seasonal fish featured in a variety of presentations. Chinese dumplings, steamed bao and spicier sesame-peanut noodles headline an appetizer lineup that includes smaller-portioned, lower-priced options meant for sampling and sharing.

Cost, McMillin and other Big Bowl team members personally introduced the changes at each location. "For me, this is more than a business," Cost says. "I like to teach our staff about where the dishes come from and why we're doing this so it becomes fun for them, and they also have information for the customers."

What Do You Expect?

Diners bring expectations to restaurants along with their appetites. A nationwide poll of more than 6,100 adults conducted for the Washington, D.C.-based National Retail Federation Foundation (NRFF), finds that consumers expect better service from restaurants than from any other retail category: an average of 4.39 on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Since it is unlikely that consumers expect or would be satisfied with poor service from any business, NRFF's study results can be seen as indicating that consumers have experienced higher service levels from restaurants than from other retailers.

With restaurants, more than half (53.5%) of the sample say they expect excellent service; women have higher expectations (55.8% expect excellence) than do men (51%). Only among consumers age 65 or older do less than 50% say they expect excellent restaurant service, and even then it is 49.5%.

For specialty retailers, expectations average 4.32; for supermarkets the average is only 3.77.

Table Turns

Laurie Curtis (r.) was named vice president of brand marketing for Carrollton, Texas-based T.G.I. Friday's USA. She had been global brand marketing director for Yum! Restaurants' Pizza Hut brand. ...

Chef-restaurateur-snowboarder Kerry Simon's newest is Simon Telluride, which opened in December at The Peaks Resort and Golden Door Spa in Telluride, Colo. David Mullen, last at 71 Clinton Fresh Food, is chef de cuisine; the menu mixes comfort foods with "mountain fare." ...

Michael Tsonton, most recently chef at Eli's The Place for Steak and a veteran of Tizi Melloul and several other Chicago restaurant kitchens, is opening his own restaurant, Copperblue, in Chicago. ...

Jaya Koipillai-Bohlmann joined Sodexo USA, Gaithersburg, Md., as vice president of public relations. ...

Restaurateur Eytan Sugarman (whose New York City nightclub Suede closed last month) is partnering with singer Justin Timberlake to create Italian concept Destino. Mario Curko, ex-chef at New York City legend Rao's, will head Destino's kitchen. ...

Brad Phillips joined Saltaus, Chicago, as executive chef. He succeeds former Chef-partner Michael Taus, who parted company with the restaurant. ...

Aqua at St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort & Spa in Dana Point, Calif., is being replaced by Chef Michael Mina's new concept, Stonehill Tavern. Tony Chi designed the restaurant. ...

O'Charley's Inc. Chairman and CEO Greg Burns is doubling as concept president for O'Charley's following the resignation of Steve Hislop. Richard May also stepped down as chief strategy officer for the Nashville, Tenn.-based company. ...

Dianna Robinson (r.) was named national marketing director for Dallas-based Boston's The Gourmet Pizza. Robinson previously was a marketing manager for Brinker International's Romano's Macaroni Grill. ...



Vince Runco was promoted to president of worldwide franchising for Plano, Texas-based Bennigan's Grill & Tavern. He had been a vice president. ...

Yum! Brands in Louisville, Ky., promoted Greg Creed to chief operating officer from chief marketing officer for its Taco Bell brand. ...

Chef-restaurateur Ken Oringer, who owns Clio and Uni in Boston's The Eliot Hotel, opened Toro, a tapas restaurant, in Boston's South End.

Courting QSRs

Aramark Corp. is deepening its relationships with quick-service restaurant brands. One month after the Philadelphia-based contractor inked a deal to use Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Donuts' coffee and break-room supplies in its coffee-service sites, Aramark announced the signing of a master licensing agreement with South Pasadena, Calif.-based Panda Restaurant Group. This is Panda's first such agreement, allowing the contractor to open Panda Express quick-Asian units in client sites.



"Until recently, we have been unwilling to franchise our concept, but now we are willing to do that with [master concessionaires] such as Aramark," says John Mitchell, Panda Express senior vice president of restaurant development. The new relationship helps Panda expand its reach to contract-managed college campuses and healthcare and employee-feeding accounts. Aramark's first licensed campus locations are expected to open in mid-2006.

"Panda Express meets Aramark customer needs," says Diane Coyne, senior director, franchise brands and strategic alliances for the contractor. "Asian is a popular category and Panda can be retrofitted into many locations. In terms of putting a national brand in front of students, Panda is progressive."

Coyne says Aramark's plans for the future include aligning with other QSRs on campuses and other venues.

Private Eyes

Judging from a series of recently announced deals, restaurant companies are highly attractive to private equity firms. Last month, a three-firm consortium agreed to pay Pernod Ricard \$2.43 billion for Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Brands, parent of Dunkin' Donuts, Togo's and Baskin-Robbins (below). The consortium includes Bain Capital Partners LLC (already a major stakeholder in Burger King Corp.), Carlyle Group and Thomas H. Lee Partners LP. At press time, Wichita, Kan.-based Fox & Hound Restaurant Group was evaluating a \$14.50-per-share cash offer from Newcastle Partners LP and Steel Partners II LP. Earlier, an affiliate of Wellspring Capital Management LLC agreed to buy Dallas-based Dave & Buster's.



Nicole Miller, Minneapolis-based restaurant analyst for ThinkEquity Partners, says that restaurants have become hot investment candidates because they produce a lot of cash that private firms can use to improve a chain's operations or to invest in other businesses (McDonald's Corp. generated \$3.9 billion in cash from operations in 2004). "The private-equity players can try to make the concept more relevant, shutter stores that are under-performing, or change management," Miller says. "There are a number of things they can do to change a concept fundamentally."

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