

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Tuesday, August 19, 2008

Tallahassee.com

75 Cents



Tom Palazzo, vice president for franchise development said Foster's Grille, plans to expand its fast-casual brand into Jacksonville and Wellington after the Tallahassee location opens this winter. Special to the Democrat

Menu of local restaurants ready to change again

By Will Brown
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Counting the local eateries that qualify as fast-casual and modified-casual restaurants may be similar to counting sheep: there is seemingly an endless supply.

While one, Qdoba Mexican Grill, has closed locations, there are others headed to town. Cheeseburger Bobby's and Foster's Grille are the next new arrivals.

Last month Qdoba downsized its Tallahassee presence from three locations to one. Qdoba officials at the corporate office in Colorado did not return telephone calls. The local franchisee originally had a total of 10 stores serving Tallahassee, Jacksonville and Miami.

As for the two burger places, they are franchises with plans to expand into Tallahassee. Foster's will open in the Falls-chase development later this year, while Cheeseburger Bobby's plans to have 15 North Florida locations by 2010.

Founded in 1999 in Virginia, Foster's opened franchises three years

CHEESEBURGER BOBBY'S

- **Founded:** 2007 in Hiram, Ga.
- **Founders:** Bob and Richard Stoll
- **Concept:** burgers, sandwiches and hot dogs
- **Something interesting:** The Stoll brothers created Stevi B's in 1996. They sold their stake in that franchise six months ago to focus on Cheeseburger Bobby's.

ago. The company adheres to a simple approach when it comes to food.

"We don't have 25 types of burgers or 15 types of wing sauce. We do one of each and we do them very well," said Tom Palazzo, the company's vice president of franchise development. At some other fast-casuals, "I think their menu is so big that their food may go to waste."

Palazzo said his company likes to keep things simple because it allows franchisees a quicker return on their investment. During times when finding credit is tough, restaurant chains are finding it difficult

FOSTER'S GRILLE

- **Founded:** 1999 in Manassas, Va.
- **Founders:** Shawn Foster and Lewie Bloom
- **Concept:** burgers and wings.
- **Something interesting:** Co-founder Shawn Foster is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. He is a Buffalo native who worked in his uncle's restaurant perfecting his recipe for buffalo wings.

to secure investors, refinance debt, fund capital and find new franchisees, said Aaron Allen founder and chief executive for Quantified Marketing Group.

Allen's Orlando-based company provides marketing analysis for more than 4,000 restaurants. He said Tallahassee's student and government populations have made fast-casual and modified-casual dining popular.

This year, however, Allen anticipates that restaurants will be fortunate to break even or see marginal growth, which would break a 20-year growth trend.

"The concepts that will fare the best in Tallahassee through this time will be those offering new innovations and value — not necessarily lower price," Allen said. "There is a big difference between value and price. Consumers are not looking for the lowest price. They are looking for the best value and the best experience."

Shawn Shepherd, president of the local Restaurant & Lodging Association, said fast-casual and modified-casual diners are the "way to go," especially now because people have less discretionary income. He noted that rapid growth, demographics and the all-important location have been reasons why some in this sector have not survived.

"There is very little margin for error," Shepherd said. "In our market, we really have to go over the top with service. We're competing in a bad economy. The dollars that are spent going out, they are being put in the (gas) pump."

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