

People & Community

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Sources Revealed Shawn Foster

Keeping it simple

Wanna go out for burgers? There are now many more joints to choose from than just a year ago, thanks to this area's rekindled passion for big and juicy (and relatively cheap) burgers. Shawn Foster, chief executive officer of Foster's Grille, faces stiff competition for his franchise concept that now dots the East Coast. But this former corporate chef for The Palm plans to keep his menu simple and his growth slow and steady.

Interview by Joanna Kauffmann

Why are there so many new burger restaurants popping up around town these days? I call it a redefinition of the burger and a renewed love affair. People are realizing that they cannot go out twice a week and afford steak or lobster. In times of economic trouble, people tend to go for comfort food, like pizza, burgers and chicken. There are a lot of gourmet burger places out there selling burgers for up to \$9. We are in a different spot, where you can get a good burger, fries and a drink for about \$8.

How did you get started in cuisine? When I was a young boy my uncle owned restaurants and I started work as a dishwasher and worked my way up through different kitchen positions. I applied to the Culinary Institute of America, was accepted, came out with an associates degree in culinary arts and then went to work at The Palm Restaurant.

What gave you the confidence to start your own restaurant business? I was a corporate chef for The Palm Restaurant

and I worked there in the early to mid-'90s. The tools that I learned from The Palm Restaurant really helped me in building my own restaurant. My wife had front-of-the-house experience, so she took care of the customer aspect, and I had the kitchen aspect. We did a simple menu, and we did it well. We took the time to get to know the customers, to talk to them, and we used comment cards. We were in it about a year when one of our customers asked us to open up a second restaurant.

How did you finance the start of Foster's Grille nine years ago? I have a silent partner who provided financing. The first restaurant came on strong, and we brought in more investment from customers and friends. From there we have used profits from the existing restaurants to keep growing.

Some franchises fail because they expand too quickly. Is that a concern for you? We did not start this company as a franchise concept. We did not set out to open 100 restaurants. We are growing at an aggressively controlled pace. Our sales, franchisers, support and training pieces need to stay in sync. If one of those gets out of balance, the company will suffer. That said, we are constantly looking internally to add mechanisms, to add staff to support and grow the company.

It must be hard to grow a franchise when food costs are rising. We are aggressively looking at ways to improve our products without having to raise costs for the customer. We are looking at different products, comparable items, such as butter, chicken, turkey or fish, that can come at a lower cost to us. Obviously, however, if prices continue to pressure us something will have to happen.

Is there a perfect demographic for you? That's hard to say. We are opening up a lot in lifestyle centers [open-air malls with a big-box anchor], so we get everybody. There are families with children, seniors, construction workers, people with laptops. We really focus on providing a family-friendly atmosphere.

What is your passion within the business? Cooking, grilling, the business side? The most fun and passion that I have is cooking. I enjoy it a lot. I still do to this day. In the restaurants we have open kitchens, so that was a transition for me to have to deal with the public. We get pretty busy, but when I can take 10 or 15 minutes, I still like getting back there and cooking with the guys.

What business would you like to emulate? There isn't really one. Our business is a navigation. It's constantly evolving, so there isn't one business we're trying to emulate.

What's your signature dish at home? My family loves linguini and clam sauce. That's a dish that we make all the time. My children are very good at it as well. My kids can really cook. All four of us share the responsibility. Well, not the responsibility, the fun. Cooking isn't a responsibility in our house.

What's your favorite restaurant around town? Coastal Flats is one of them. I'm going to a place called Brio tonight that I was introduced to about six months ago, and I've been there three times.

What do you do in your spare time? I'm an avid Harley-Davidson rider. And I love sport fishing too. It keeps me sane.

What is your long-term vision for Foster's Grille? As long as our customers continue to get a great product, I will grow at a controllable pace. It has always been a chef-driven enterprise for me. If we take care of the customer and grow sales everything will turn out fine. I was happy when we opened one restaurant, and when we opened 10. Would I like to see 100? Yes.

Anything else to add? Franchise opportunities are available.