

CharBurger Franchise To Expand In Loudoun

By Erika Jacobson

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When it comes to Foster's Grille, Jeremy Topper was a fan first. He and his wife went to dinner at the Foster's Grille in Haymarket all the time, he said. When the restaurant began to offer franchising opportunities in 2005, Topper, a long time restaurateur, knew he wanted in. He and his wife, Melissa, bought into the franchise in October 2005 and knew immediately where they wanted to locate.

"We used to live up here in Loudoun," Topper said. "We knew it was going to be a home for Foster's."

Topper teamed with family friend Geoffrey Willis in the summer of 2006 and the two opened their first Loudoun Foster's Grille in Ashburn in November of that year.

"Jeremy convinced me," Willis, an Ashburn resident, who also works in medical supplies sales, said. "I saw it was a good concept. And I bought it hook, line and sinker."

When Topper originally bought his franchise deal, he bought the rights to all of Loudoun County, and soon those rights will come to fruition. Topper and Willis will open two more restaurants in Loudoun within the year, one in Leesburg's Potomac Station and one in Cascades. The duo also owns the Foster's Grille in Chantilly, just over the Loudoun's county line.

"When we inked the original deal, we signed with Potomac Station," Topper said. "It's actually going to be our fourth location, but it was the second one we planned."

Now the Leesburg location is tentatively scheduled to open during the first quarter of 2009, but Topper said he does not doubt it's ability to succeed once it does open.

The Ashburn restaurant is seeing somewhere between 8,000 and 11,000 guests each month, Topper said.

"We have people who come out here [to Ashburn] from Leesburg, Lansdowne and even Purcellville," he said. "So there is a customer base out there."

The Cascades Foster's Grille is targeted for a late summer or early fall opening, Topper said. The Cascades restaurant will be located on Cranston Street, behind Northern Virginia Community College.

"The Cascades restaurant is going to have a large outside seating area, and a larger game area for kids," Willis said.

As Loudoun has grown, so have the number of dining options, but many individually owned restaurants have closed soon after opening. Topper and Willis credit their success to the family atmosphere of Foster's Grille and their commitment to the communities their restaurants reside in.

"We're a place where the kids can come and run around," Topper said.

"We get a lot of sports teams in here," Willis said. "And we do a lot of charity events with the schools."

Indeed, Foster's Grille in Ashburn has held fund-raisers for Briar Woods High School basketball team and has sponsored teams through Game Day magazine. When one of their employees had a family member whose house burned down, they banded together to raise money for the displaced family.

"The best way to make sure we are a part of the community is to make sure we are involved in the community," Topper said.

Willis said the two are also working on a Web page to tell residents about the different events and fund-raisers going on at each of their stores. "We want to be able to get out there and make it easier for people to find out what we are doing. We're not just here to be a restaurant."

Foster's Grille's food also sets it apart from other restaurants in the area, particularly when it comes to their signature charburger, Topper said.

"It's that cook-out burger that you grew up with," he said. "Cooked on an open flame. That's hard to find."

It is that quality that the duo is focusing on as they prepare to open their next two stores. "Right now our goal is making sure each restaurant we open up is serving the best food," Topper said.

And if that means pushing back opening dates for the new stores, it is worth it. "We want it slow and steady and to build a good foundation," Willis said.