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## Breaking new ground in West Chester

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Shawn Foster, owner of Foster's Grille

Foster's Grille, a fast-casual restaurant offering a family atmosphere and its famous "2-big-for-2-hands" half-pound Charburger, has chosen West Chester as the location for its first restaurant above the Mason-Dixon line and east of the Mississippi River. The northern Virginia-based franchise, founded in 1999, already has locations in several Southern states and is beginning to expand north.

"The idea of this franchise came from founder Shawn Foster, who grew up in Buffalo, N.Y., and used to visit a small burger place every so often with his dad," said Tom Palazzo, Foster's vice president of franchise development.

"That is the kind of family atmosphere that we strive to capture. After we did demographic studies and research, we felt that similar suburban areas in Pennsylvania and upstate New York would be compatible with Foster's restaurants." And why West Chester, when there are thousands of rural developments scattered throughout the Northeast?

Palazzo said West Chester is close enough to the national office to provide easy training and support to the new franchise owner.

In addition, the West Chester area provides the community feel for which Foster's is looking, showcasing a variety of families, singles and professionals living in an area with growth potential, along with a certain set of demographics.

Foster's franchises require locations with an average household income of \$50,000 and up, a population of 75,000 in the territory and at least 50 percent of the population between the ages of 21 and 60.

Franchise requirements are for a minimum net worth of \$500,000 and minimum liquid capital of \$100,000, according to the company Web site. The franchise fee is \$35,000 and royalty rate is 5 percent based on monthly gross revenues.

Although Foster's has not yet chosen an exact location, it is considering about five that match a certain set of criteria.

The franchise tends to look for an end-cap building within a shopping center or a strip mall, preferably one that also houses anchor companies such as grocery stores, movie theaters or bookstores.

A restaurant like Foster's Grille has an advantage in a struggling economy. It requires about half the square footage of some other fast-casual chain restaurants and it does not employ wait staff, so customers don't pay for tips. Rather, clients fill out a menu and pay up front.

"Our founder has a strong culinary background, and all of the food we serve is fresh and made-to-order; we do not use frozen products," said Palazzo.

Palazzo projects the new restaurant will produce 15 to 20 new jobs, several of which usually go to local residents and the teenagers of clients. The franchise is scheduled to open sometime in the next three to five months.

Foster's Grille is committed to opening three to five new stores, one per year, in the West Chester area.

The franchise itself follows a geographic "triangle strategy," a growth plan that draws a triangle from Boston to Chicago to Miami and inside of which new company-owned and franchised locations will open in future years.

The restaurant chain has 23 working stores and has been opening about one new store per month. The company has signed a contract to open more than 100 stores in 13 states over the next five years, with Pennsylvania being one of those states.

"We're very excited to start doing business in West Chester specifically, and we're looking forward to bringing many Foster's Grilles to many of the communities in Pennsylvania," said Palazzo.

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