



ONES TO WATCH | BY RITA CONNELLY

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Foster's Grille

Attention to detail and fabulously fresh ingredients equal success for this neighborhood restaurant chain. When Shawn Foster opened the first Foster's Grille in 1999, he brought with him a wealth of experience as a chef in high-end restaurants. "We'd been doing it for a lot of other companies. We decided to do it ourselves," he says. The "we" included him and his wife, Nancy, who also had a lifetime of experience in the restaurant industry. "We wanted it to be fast-casual, a little neighborhood bar and grill. I'd never thought it would become more than one unit."



Soon, through comment cards, they discovered that customers wanted one of those friendly neighborhood spots in their own neighborhoods. The Fosters responded. "Over the course of five years I opened six stores," he says from the company's headquarters in Haymarket, Virginia. Today there are 23 units—16 are franchised—operating throughout the eastern part of the country. Plans to open 15–20 stores per year through 2010 are all a part of what Foster calls "controlled growth."

Foster's Grille is known for both a fun and casual atmosphere and delicious food. All menu items are made fresh to order, with the claim to fame being the proprietary Charburger. The burger is a half pound of beef topped with the freshest of ingredients. Another customer favorite is the grilled hot dog.

Other items include a chicken sandwich, which Foster says is almost as popular as the Charburger, roasted beef and turkey sandwiches, a garden burger, salads, chicken wings, and a kid's menu. All meals include hand-cut french fries and a choice of freshly squeezed lemonade or one of the famous Foster's extra thick milkshakes (units also sell tap beer, which is extra). The cost of an adult meal is \$6 to \$9. Kids' meals are about \$4.25. Homemade dessert offerings include cookies and cake and costs begin at just \$1.

"Everything we use is fresh and of great quality. It's simple, but great." Foster says. This concept can be found companywide with great results. Franchises have won numerous awards in their respective communities, including Best Burger, Best Hot Dog, Best French Fries, and Best Family-Friendly Restaurant.

When diners walk into a Foster's Grille, they find an open warehouse look. The dining rooms are decked out with exposed brick walls, open industrial-style ceilings, wainscoting, and an eclectic mix of advertising signage, mirrors, and similar vintage items. In each unit the body of a stock car can be seen hanging from the ceiling. Foster's has sponsored three such cars over the years. Customers are involved from the minute they arrive. They fill out their own order slip, circling the toppings they want. They hand in the order slip, which is then given to the kitchen. When the order is ready, their name is called out, they raise their hands and the food is brought hot and sizzling to the table.

Community plays an important role at every unit. The company has a Dining for Dollars program that allows local charities and nonprofit groups to share in the profits. For example, a Little League team will sign up for a specific night. Diners then drop their receipts in a jar with the name of the group on it and 10 percent of the evening's receipts are donated to the group.

Foster's Grille

President and CEO: Shawn Foster

HQ: Haymarket, Virginia

Year Started: 1999

Annual Sales: \$10 million

Total Units: 23

Franchise Units: 16

www.forstersgrille.com

“It doesn't matter if you're a businessman or woman, student, construction worker, with kids. The look of the warehouse, it's already scratched and dented, antique. It's relaxed. I can put my feet up and be myself, be comfortable. It doesn't have that sterile tiled look,” Foster says. “It's a very special, unique atmosphere that Shawn created here,” says Tom Palazzo, vice president of franchise development.

That family-friendly feeling is also extended to franchisees. Foster calls the restaurants a “Chef-driven concept.” And although he points out someone doesn't have to be a chef, he says, “If a person owns it, they become a restaurateur.”