

NATION'S Restaurant

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HOT CONCEPTS!

Innovators find great ideas in everyday things

This is the first in a series of seven stories exploring the growth cycles of some of the industry's hottest concepts. Each story will look at a different facet of the evolution of an emerging chain, from conception to financing to expansion into new territories. Future stories also will investigate pitfalls to avoid, ways to stay hot and The Next Big Thing.

BY MILFORD PREWITT

When brainstorming concepts, restaurateurs say they tap the same well of inspiration to conceive their projects that writers, painters, composers, choreographers and preachers do: life, the universe and everything in between.

(See **HOT CONCEPTS!**, page 55)

See the 2008
Hot Concepts! winners' profiles
starting on page 31

The new Portillo's branch in Moreno Valley, Calif., initially scored average weekly sales of \$150,000, but volumes have fallen to less than half that level as the so-called Inland Empire east of Los Angeles has reeled from the record rates of home foreclosures affecting much of California.



Housing crisis poses high hurdles in California

Operators curb expansion plans in Golden State amid job losses, less liquidity

This article is the first in a series of special reports by Nation's Restaurant News on market areas that have been especially hard hit by the nation's economic downturn. Over the next five weeks, NRN will examine restaurateurs' tactics for surmounting severe challenges in such locales as Southern California, Greater Phoenix, trou-

ble spots in Michigan and Ohio, the Miami-anchored South Florida market, and once-booming, now-struggling Las Vegas.

BY LISA JENNINGS

LOS ANGELES — Don't ask Dick Portillo to open any more of his fast-casual Portillo's hot dog

restaurants in Southern California — at least not any time soon.

When the Chicago-based operator opened his first California unit in Orange County three years ago, the restaurant was a hit. So he immediately began looking for a second West Coast location, targeting a region whose epicenter is about 60 miles east of Los Angeles

called the Inland Empire, comprising large parts of Riverside and San Bernardino counties. At the time, it was one of the fastest-growing markets in the country.

New retail centers were popping up throughout the area. Miles of open space dotted with new housing developments promised (See **HOUSING**, page 6)

NRN to honor Golden Chain award winners at MUFSO 2008

NATIONAL HARBOR, MD. — Citing outstanding leadership in challenging times, Nation's Restaurant News will honor six multiunit restaurant executives with Golden Chain awards during the 49th annual Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators conference, MUFSO, to be held here Oct. 12-15.

The 2008 recipients are Jerry



Jerry Deitchle

Deitchle, chairman and chief executive of BJ's Restaurants; James A. Flynn, chief executive of



Jim Flynn



Ken Pendery

Wingstop Restaurants; Ken Pendery Jr., president and chief executive of First Watch



David Pickens



Andrew Puzder

Restaurants; David T. Pickens, president of Olive Garden; Andrew Puzder, president and chief execu-



Joe Tortorice

tive of CKE Restaurants; and Joseph V. Tortorice Jr., founder and president of Jason's Deli.

"In celebration of recent accomplishments and career achievements, the Golden Chain Award is one of the most prestigious in foodservice," said Tom Larranaga, publisher of Nation's (See **NRN**, page 55)

ALSO
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CONSUMER TRENDS:

NPD: Young adult restaurant visits decline across segments pg. 16

NRN EDITORIAL:

In a chilly economy, five concepts run hot enough to make industry notice pg. 19

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Pizza chains stretch profits with gluten-free dough pg. 27

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HOT 2008 CONCEPTS!

Even as the foodservice community grapples with the challenges sparked by the nation's fiscal problems, the recipients of the 15th annual Hot Concepts! Awards are proof that innovation and passion have not been pushed to the backburner while operators wait for the economic storm clouds to pass.

Selected by the editors of Nation's Restaurant News, this year's five distinguished winners reflect the great diversity and entrepreneurial spirit that always have formed the underpinnings of the restaurant industry.

At the same time, the 2008 class of Hot Concepts! winners all possess the desire to succeed at the highest level while delivering the best restaurant experience possible to their guests.

In the following pages you'll have the opportunity to meet a group of expert business operators who have been able to seize upon the latest trends and then shape restaurant concepts that manage to stand out across a highly competitive landscape.

Seattle's Organic To Go, for example, has become the first fast-casual cafe chain in the country to become certified as an organic foods retailer. Another Hot Concepts! winner, Chop't Creative Salad Company, which makes its headquarters in New York City, allows patrons the opportunity to customize their own meals. The Counter, based in Culver City, Calif., also offers customers a "choose-as-you-go" experience that yields more than 300,000 possible burger combinations.

Meanwhile, Jasper's, the high-end restaurant chain created and owned by celebrated chef Kent Rathbun, has been winning over critics and customers alike with its finely tuned American regional menu.

And Vapiano's International LLC, a company launched in Hamburg, Germany, that already has opened restaurants in a dozen countries, recently made landfall in Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Florida with its upscale casual Italian concept, Vapiano's.

This year's five award winners will be honored for their creativity and operational savvy at the Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators, or MUFISO, conference, held at the Gaylord National Resort Hotel & Convention Center in National Harbor, Md., Oct. 12-15.

Congratulations to all of the winners.

2008 HOT CONCEPTS WINNERS

- Chop't Creative Salad Companypg. 32
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- Jasper's Restaurantpg. 36
- Organic To Gopg. 38
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HOT CONCEPTS!

Jasper's Restaurant

Gourmet Texas backyard cuisine and a modern design promote mall-based growth

BY RON RUGGLESS

Jasper's Restaurant, the upper-end casual-dining sibling to chef Kent Rathbun's upscale Abacus in Dallas, is building a unit in San Antonio, taking its "gourmet backyard cuisine" to a fourth Texas market since debuting the concept five years ago.

Launched in Plano, Texas, in 2003, Jasper's features a scratch kitchen that specializes in homemade salads and desserts, wood-grilled pizza, steaks, and seafood. Jasper's opened in The Woodlands north of Houston in 2005, and the third outpost was introduced in Austin last year.

"Jasper's menu reflects high-end items in an atmosphere of casual elegance," Rathbun says. "Our service, style and decor all work together to deliver a five-star meal at affordable prices, allowing for our guests to enjoy an unsurpassed culinary experience." The check average at Jasper's runs about \$45 per person, and the average unit volume is about \$5.5 million. The units range from 9,000 square feet to 9,200 square feet in size.

Food of this quality can be called "backyard cuisine" only if its creator already is a celebrated chef like Rathbun, whose Abacus was a Nation's Restaurant News Fine-Dining Hall of Fame winner in 2005.

"The inspiration came from my childhood memories," Rathbun says. "The majority of recipes are from either my parents or grandparents, and I wanted to recreate those memories for all to enjoy in an upscale atmosphere."

When The Woodlands store opened, Allison Cook, restaurant critic for the Houston Chronicle, said the concept "is whip-smart

for an upscale suburban Texas milieu."

"Gourmet backyard cuisine' may sound too cute," Cook says, "but Jasper's playfully combines aspects of a posh steakhouse, a buffed-up barbecue joint and a glorified plate-lunch cafe in a way that speaks to Texas palates."

As backyards go, few have such inspirations as a noted American artist.

"Jasper's was named after the famous artist, Jasper Johns, who actually helped name my first concept, Abacus," Rathbun says.

Rathbun says his more laid-back restaurant fits into the way Americans are dining, even in a tough economy.



"Jasper's is a nonstuffy approach to fine food, an affordable restaurant for those who enjoy and appreciate chef-driven concepts," he says.

Lunch entrées generally are priced from \$10 to \$15, and dinner entrées range from \$15 to \$30.

Jenny Taylor, activities coordinator at the 34-acre Market Street lifestyle-mixed-use shopping center located north of Houston, says Jasper's is "one of the favorites not only at Market Street but in The Woodlands."

The patio plays an important role at Jasper's, tying in not only the "backyard" positioning but also taking advantage of the Sun Belt's temperate evenings in spring, summer and fall. Rathbun says ample space for patios will be an important component of future Jasper's units.

While originally positioned as an upper-end casual-dining restaurant, the Jasper's outside of Houston and in Austin are more upscale.

"It's definitely one of the finer dining choices here," Taylor says. "They have a unique focus that is very urban-inspired, and the decor is very 'naturesque' inside. That allows for the feeling of dining outside



Chef and co-owner Kent Rathbun says he and his team wanted to incorporate artistic interpretations of natural elements into modern design to highlight Jasper's concept of "gourmet backyard cuisine."

when you're inside."

Rathbun says he's proud of the atmosphere his team was able to create.

"The design, including the kitchen as each focal point, was also very important to me when developing Jasper's," he says. "I wanted to make sure the design was modern, yet comfortable, and the artistic interpretations of natural elements into the overall design scheme exemplify the gourmet backyard cuisine concept."

Critics have fallen for the design.

"The contemporary setting is gorgeous," Cook says of The Woodlands restaurant. "Stone, glass, metal and wood mesh in a moody palette that is as sexy as industrial design gets. The room, which is subdivided by an open fireplace and glass partitions showcasing grasses in silhouette, strikes just the right note of high-style informality. Men will find it manly. Women will find it sleek."

The bar also gets high marks.

"And who could resist the glamorous outdoor lounge, its long, high table lined with flickery hurricane lamps?" Cook asks. "Young Hollywood would eat this setting with a spoon. The Woodlands' young residents — its middle-aged residents, too, for that matter — keep it hopping way past the traditional suburban witching hour of 9 p.m."

Jasper's also was designed to meet the needs of business guests, providing areas

that are private and equipped with high-speed and wireless Internet access for presentations.

But the food is what keeps the customers coming back, Taylor points out. The menu is unique, she says, noting her favorites are the Asian chicken salad and the steaks and prime rib.

Best sellers on the menu include blue cheese potato chips, prosciutto-wrapped shrimp and grits, pan-seared salmon with grilled asparagus risotto, and Texas peach-barbecued pork tenderloin with bourbon-cream corn. The tenderloin was a dish originally created for the menu at Abacus that migrated to Jasper's when it first opened in Plano.

Taylor says she also is impressed with the service, which she calls well trained and very helpful.

Jasper's has garnered a number of "Best Of" awards, including Esquire Magazine's Top 20 Best New Restaurants in America and Texas Monthly's 10 Best New Restaurants in Texas.

But Rathbun says his pride lies in the ability to serve a large number of guests and execute the meals at a quality level.

"I am extremely proud of the fact that each of our locations have the ability to serve a huge volume of guests high-end food," he says. ■

rruggles@nrn.com

JASPER'S RESTAURANT

OWNERS: Jasper's and Abacus Restaurant Group (owners Bill and Claire Hyde and Kent Rathbun)

HEADQUARTERS: Dallas

NO. OF UNITS: three and one under construction

AVERAGE UNIT VOLUME: \$5.5 million

STATE WHERE LOCATED: Texas

TYPE OF CONCEPT: "gourmet backyard cuisine"

AVERAGE CHECK: \$45

YEAR FOUNDED: 2003

WEBSITE: www.jaspers-restaurant.com