

REGIONAL GROWTH CHAINS

Burtons Grill puts new polish on casual dining

Upscale-casual chain targets lucrative baby boomer market with quality American cuisine and a relaxed decor

By Susan Holaday

WAKEFIELD, MASS. — After years of working in casual-dinnerhouse operations, Kevin Harron is moving more upscale, so to speak, with a fledgling chain designed to give baby boomers an affordably luxurious experience.

Called Burtons Grill, the concept aims to deliver the lucrative baby-boomer market the quality, consistency and change they're demanding as they begin to express boredom with the concepts they've grown up with, explains Harron, president of Burtons Grill. Harron has worked for such chains as Outback Steakhouse, Carrabba's Italian Grill and Legal Sea Foods.

Boomers, after turning away from quick-service concepts, grew up with today's casual-dining chains, he explained. But now that segment is overbuilt because many casual-dining chains are publicly held, "a slave to Wall Street," Harron said.

"They have to grow and are competing against themselves for seats, for locations, for products," he added. "They're trying to reinvent themselves by broadening their appeal."

Now the boomer generation wants a better experience than those chains are giving them, he said, "so we are in a middle ground."

"We are seeing a very consistent trend," Harron said. "People now are going for the better wines and liquors, the more upscale branding and quality."

Burtons Grill offers contemporary American cuisine such as New York strip steak, filet mignon, seafood casserole, chicken cordon bleu and barbecue ribs, with an emphasis on seasonal availability.

"They're not complex recipes," Harron said. "We try not to over-reach."

The same menu is in place all day with sandwiches priced from \$10 to \$13, salads from \$7 to \$13, soups and appetizers from \$6 to \$13, and entrées from \$17 to \$29.

He estimates his all-day check average is around \$55. At lunch, it's \$35, he noted, while dinner tabs are \$65.

According to Harron, display cooking is the focal point of the dining room, which seats around 220, including 45 seats in a separate bar area. The interior design is a blend of the classical and contemporary with warm, neutral colors. The ambience is relaxed,

without the noise levels of other casual operations, he said.

"People want better quality, fresh ingredients, food made before their eyes," Harron said. "They like consistency and the traditional. We call it upscale-casual American cuisine."

With three units up and running in the Boston suburbs of Hingham and North Andover and the Hartford, Conn., suburb of Windsor, the company plans to open in Boston's Fenway area early next year and already is eye-

ing a powerful cadre of businessmen, including Donald Burton, managing general partner of several private investment funds based in Tampa, Fla.; Peter Lynch, board member of Fidelity Group of Funds and vice chairman of Fidelity Management Research; John "Brian" McCarthy, chief executive, president and an owner of Kelly's Roast Beef Inc.; and John Doyle, chief financial officer of Kelly's Roast Beef.

The group has plans to open 12 to 15 units in its first five years and 30 in 10 years, said Harron, who most recently was chief operating officer of Kelly's, a five-unit Saugus, Mass.-based quick-service chain specializing in roast beef sandwiches and seafood. Before that, he was a regional director for Carrabba's Italian Grill, one of Tampa, Fla.-based OSI Rest-

aurant Partners' concepts. able income and is a group that is "in the driver's seat" when it comes to bolstering restaurant sales growth, he said.

Boomers, about 78 million strong, represent a \$46 billion market, according to a recent study by Information Resources Inc.

Harron noted that wealth today is concentrated in the boomer generation, "and we see a transfer of this to their kids over the next 15 years."

Nonetheless, he said, "it's a good time to not be big."

"We've tried to learn from the great companies," he added. "The economy expands and it also contracts. We expect rougher times ahead and more contraction. Today,

in and Outback's new Blue Coral seafood concept, and it's an emerging market that's doing better than casual dining," he said.

Joe Pawlak, vice president of Technomic, points to The Cheesecake Factory as a concept

CHAIN FACTS

NAME: Burtons Grill
HEADQUARTERS: Wakefield, Mass.
MARKET SEGMENT: upscale casual
MENU: contemporary American cuisine, grilled meats and seafood prepared in a display kitchen, plus sautéed items, fresh salads and sandwiches
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNITS: 3
AVERAGE UNIT VOLUME: \$5 million
ALL-DAY AVERAGE CHECK: \$55
LEADERSHIP: Kevin Harron, president
YEAR FOUNDED: 2004



Wakefield, Mass.-based Burtons Grill targets the lucrative baby boomer market by offering an upscale-casual dining experience with such contemporary American cuisine as New York strip steak, filet mignon, seafood casserole, chicken cordon bleu and barbecue ribs.

ing other markets in the Mid-Atlantic and Florida.

Burtons Grill is intended for the suburbs and, in particular, upper-middle-class locations with average household incomes of around \$100,000.

Burtons Grill has the backing

of other markets in the Mid-Atlantic and Florida.

Harron said he believes Burtons Grill, which was named for partner Burton, has legs to grow.

His target market, well-educated people in their 40s and older, has above-average dispos-

everybody is self-evaluating. We are conservative and controlled."

Ron Paul of Chicago-based Technomic Inc., a restaurant industry consulting firm, agrees that the upscale-casual, or polished casual, segment has potential.

"It's the category Fleming's is

offering higher quality in a casual setting.

"After 9/11," he said, "a lot of higher-end restaurants in San Francisco began coming in with more casual concepts, changing their approach."

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Burtons Grill's interior design is a blend of classical and contemporary styles, with warm, neutral colors and a relaxed, quiet ambiance.

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Harron and his partners emphasize that Burton's Grill has the flexibility to change with the times.

"We want a commitment to quality," Harron said. "Every day you start over again. It's about value, consistency, quality and the culture you create. I benchmark myself every day."

Restaurant broker Charlie Perkins, owner of Boston Restaurant Group in Boxford, Mass., calls the concept similar to "taking a Houston's and putting it in the 'burbs."

David Maida of Allied Restaurant Brokers in Newburyport, Mass., and a broker for Burton's Grill, said that the chain's acceptance has surprised even its founders.

"People today want concepts that are more grown-up [than casual dining] when they go out to meet friends for a drink or dinner," he said. "It's a step up from casual dining."

The chain, he said, may open its fifth unit next year in northern Virginia or Pennsylvania.

Franchising does not appear to be in the picture for Burton's, he added, noting that down the road the chain might follow the Outback pattern of joint-venture partnerships.

Harron said he sees the real focus for operators today as "one of building a strong organization that understands the

importance of building a team behind it."

Where the publicly held casual-dining chains have come up short, he said, is in their failure to "replace the human capital as well as they should."

The biggest difficulty in the foodservice industry today is

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PRESIDENT, BURTONS GRILL

"finding the right people to participate," he said. "It's a people business and we need passionate, driven people."

The real question for all operators, he said, is to determine where the next 25 or 30 years are heading.

"People today are tired of the casual-dining concepts," he said. "They grew up with them. Their kids grew up with them. Now they want a better experience." ■