

## Eclectic, pro-business climate puts the 'Big D' in restaurant R&D

**E**specially since the late Norman Brinker pioneered the casual-dining segment with the opening of the first Steak & Ale in 1966 in Dallas, the city has been known for restaurant innovation.

"Dallas is a pro-business town," says Jamie Green, director of the Greater Dallas Restaurant Association. "Entrepreneurs really seem to thrive here."

Green says she believes a lot of the city's appeal for industry innovators lies in the fact that so many people from other parts of the country work in the area.

"If you ask anyone on the streets of Dallas if they were born and raised here, you find very few," Green says. "You have an international palate with people from all over the world and all over the United States who are now here making Dallas their home. It's a good place for people to try new concepts and get a feel for how it might go over in other parts of the United States."

Concepts with roots in Dallas-Fort Worth represent many segments and ethnicities.

Larry Lavine started the Chili's Grill & Bar casual-dining chain in Dallas, which became the foundation for Brinker International. Philip Romano started Eatzi's Market, a home meal replacement concept, in Dallas' Oak Lawn community. Jeff Sinelli expanded and then sold the fast-casual Genghis Grill chain. He later started fast-casual Which Wich, and most recently launched his Hispanic-rooted Burguesa Burger concept. Antonio Swad expanded Pizza Patrón, a quick-service concept also aimed at the Hispanic market, from Dallas. And Wingstop Restaurants Inc. was launched in the area.

More recently, fine-dining chef Stephan Pyles and his partners announced plans to open this month a new "international small plates" restaurant in downtown Dallas. Pyles, one of the pioneers of Southwest cuisine at the now-closed Routh Street Café and at his current Stephan Pyles restaurant, says the 70-seat restaurant, called Samar, will feature the cuisines of India, Spain and the Eastern Mediterranean in a 2,800-square-foot space.

Other entrepreneurs are expanding existing concepts by experimenting with new venues.

Gina Puente-Brancato, chief executive of Puente-Brancato Enterprises Inc. of Fort Worth, has drawn attention with her plans to replace an existing McDonald's unit at the Dallas County Parkland Memorial Hospital with the health-oriented UFood Grill and modern-taqueria Urban Taco concepts.

Her company, one of the larger ones owned by a Hispanic woman in the region, has units of both concepts at the DFW International Airport already.

"Given the success of our current UFood Grill and Urban Taco locations, which serve a menu of healthier food items, we are excited to open two new locations in one of the country's finest and largest public hospitals," Puente-Brancato says.

Even though the recession has made the restaurant business difficult, she says, "we will be generating more than 100 new jobs for the local economy."

Stalwart innovators like Romano continue to expand. He and partner Joseph Palladino in the past year expanded their Nick & Sam's steakhouse holdings with the addition of the nearby Nick & Sam's Grill, offering a lower-priced version of their upscale experience.

And hotel restaurants in Dallas also have exhibited innovation. J.W. Foster, executive chef for the Fairmont Hotel in Dallas, has planted and tends more than 2,000 square feet of gardens on the hotel's rooftop terrace to supply fresh products for the hotel's Pyramid Restaurant & Bar.

— Ron Ruggless



**Samar, an "international small plates" restaurant developed by Stephan Pyles, was set to open in Dallas this month.**

