



Nations's restaurant News taps Hot Concepts! winners for 2002

Galvin Design Group developed and designed the concept for Stonewood Tavern and Grill.

CHICAGO - Nation's Restaurant News selected as its 2002 Hot Concepts! And Hot! Again honorees six innovative, on-the-rise concepts and a 52-year-old chain that reversed its fortunes.

Now in its eighth year, the Hot Concepts! Program honors organizations for developing cutting-edge operations with strong consumer appeal. This year's winners are Brio Tuscan Grille, Fresh City, Genghis Grill, Pallino Pastario Co., Stonewood Tavern and Grill and Yard House. The Hot! Again winner is Whataburger.

Those companies will be honored May 19, as Tyson Foods Inc. presents the Nation's Restaurant News Hot Concepts! Awards during the ceremonies here at the John G. Shedd Aquarium. The Hot Concepts! Program is managed and produced by Nation's Restaurant News with Tyson Foods.

"Hats off to these organizations for their creativity, energy, and can-do spirit that is so typical of the great foodservice industry." Said NRN publisher Alan Gould. "It will be a pleasure to honor these companies and their leaders during the Hot Concepts! Celebration in May."

John Tyson, chairman of Tyson Foods Inc., said, "We are proud to promote the Hot Concepts! Program because it fosters and celebrates the creation of ideas that keep our restaurant industry fresh and growing."

The 2002 Hot Concepts! Winners are:

Brio Tuscan Grille is a higher-end Italian concept from Bravo! Development Inc. of Columbus, Ohio. Launched by brothers Chris and Rick Doody in 1999, Brio features authentic Tuscan cooking methods, such as wood-fired ovens for pizza, fish and meats and a wood-burning grill for steaks and chops. The five Brio units average \$7.4 million per unit and are located in Atlanta; Birmingham, Ala.; Columbus, Ohio; Newport, Ky; and Winter Park, Florida. The company anticipates two to three additional stores opening this year and possibly four more in 2003.

Fresh City is a fresh-food marketplace restaurant featuring a series of stations, including salad wraps, Asian noodles, cookin' wraps, sandwiches on Fugassa flat bread, smoothies and a juice bar. Founded in 1997 by Larry and Bruce Reinstein, owners of the Souper Salad chain, the six-unit Fresh City concept offers breakfast, lunch, dinner, day parties and catering. The units are located in Boston; Hartford, CT; Philadelphia, Newton, and Woburn, MA. Average sales run between \$1 million and \$1.6 million for Fresh City, which is owned by Fresh Concepts, which is based in Newton.

Dallas-based Genghis Grill promotes itself as a Mongolian barbecue, where guests "build their

own bowl" of stir-fries from fresh meats, oils, vegetables, sauces and spices. After putting a bowl together, the customer hands it to a grill master, who cooks it up in moments. Founded in 1998, Genghis Grill has four company-owned stores, located in Addison, Dallas, Southlake, and Fort Worth, Texas. Each seat up to 120 and averages \$1.5 million in unit sales. Eight franchise units are set to open this year, prompting founder and chief executive Jeff Sinelli to say the chain is poised for national expansion.

Pallino Pastaria owes much to the game of Bocce, according to founder and president Harry Roberts, who watched his family play the game and enjoy meals afterward. "Pallino Pastaria is named after the small clay ball [pallino] used in Bocce," he said of his quick-service Italian concept that serves homemade fresh pasta on demand. Founded in 1999, the Pallino Pastaria Co. has seven locations, all in the state of Washington, including three in Seattle and one in Sammamish, where the company has its headquarters. An eighth unit is under construction in Brussels, Belgium. Average sales at the 80-seat stores are \$2.7 million.

The aptly named Stonewood Tavern and Grill is a casual, upscale restaurant featuring an interior of stacked stone and rich mahogany wood. Operated by the Stonewood Restaurant Group of Ormond Beach, Florida, the concept was launched in 1999 by the restaurant group's president and chief executive, Doug Sullivan, with Gale Lemerand and Steve Papero. It now has nine locations in Florida and North Carolina with the average unit sales of \$3 million. A 10th store will open in Tampa in August, and three more are projected for 2003. Topping the Stonewood menu are chef specialties, such as rack of lamb, salmon, grilled steaks and fresh seafood.

Southern California's Yard House restaurant chain features an eclectic menu of American fusion cuisine combined with one of the world's largest selections of draft beers. The restaurants take their name from the early Colonial tradition of serving beer in 36-inch-tall glasses – or yards – to weary stagecoach drivers. Today's drivers will find Yard House restaurants and their yard-long-beer-glass option in Costa Mesa, Irvine, Long Beach and Rancho Mirage, Calif., with a fifth location scheduled to open in San Diego later this year. Founded in 1996 and based in Irvine, the concept enjoys average unit sales of \$8 million.

In 1993 things looked bleak for Whataburger, Inc., the Nation's Restaurant News "Hot Again" honoree. The Corpus Christi, Texas, chain, founded in 1950 by Harmon Dobson, had seen sales drop for six straight years. Franchisees were in revolt, and bankers were at the door. Then Tom Dobson took the helm and placed day-to-day operations back in the founding family's hands for the first time in nearly 20 years. It was "back-to-basics" as the chain streamlined its menu to focus on its core product, the Whataburger. Today the 560-unit, \$600 million operation has set numerous sales records while racking up same-store increases of more than 50 percent over the last seven years.

The Editorial Board of Nation's Restaurant News selected the 2002 Hot Concepts! Honorees with input from the Council of Sizzle, the Hot Concepts! Advisory board. That group includes chain leaders Tilman Fertitta, chairman, president and chief executive of Landry's Seafood Restaurants Inc.; Larry Levy, chairman and chief executive of The Levy Restaurants; Richard Melman, chairman and founder of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc.; Laurence Mindel, chairman and founder of Il Fornaio Corp.; Drew Nieporent, president of Myriad Restaurant Group; and Philip Romano, creative partner of Brinker International Inc.