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Stories

gatti town
Eat up the fun!™

How do you revive a 35+ year-old brand? If you're Gatti's Pizza, you install a dedicated new management team with vision, freshen the look of your stores, build a new flagship unit in your home town to serve as a shining example of your corporate philosophy, and above all give your customers even greater value.

The chain got its start in 1964 when Colonel John Eure opened a pizza parlor called The Pizza Place in Stephenville, Texas. Four years later, Colonel Eure moved to Austin, opened a new Pizza Place, and held a contest a year later to rename the restaurant. He entered his own contest, putting his wife's maiden name in the hat, and won.

Mr. Gatti's Pizza became known for quality pizza, using real cheese never imitation, freshly made dough and a tangy, signature sauce, at a great value. Within another five years, the fledgling chain had grown to 13 restaurants in and around Austin, and Colonel Eure sold them to a group of investors to enable the concept to expand more quickly through franchises.

To continue its tradition of value, the growing chain added an "all-you-care-to-eat" buffet to its stores in the 1980s to provide an affordable alternative to generic fast food restaurants. The company also recognized an opportunity in the 1980s to combine its popular menu and value proposition with family entertainment. Taking advantage of the new trend in "eatertainment," Mr. Gatti's opened the first of several Gattilands, a 20,000-plus square-foot restaurant and entertainment center that featured games, rides and arcade fun for the whole family.

In November, 2004, Blue Sage Capital acquired Mr. Gatti's, and the new management team has quietly turned the chain around.

The first order of business was "re-imaging" the company's 23 corporately-owned stores, according to J. Dean Satchwell, vice president, supply chain and logistics. The

company updated the look of its buffet restaurants and tweaked the name from Mr. Gatti's to Gatti's Pizza. Now the company has 12 new stores and is encouraging all its franchisees to upgrade their facilities and incorporate the new look. Eventually, the chain plans to consolidate all its buffet and carry-out restaurants under the Gatti's name.

Gatti's also developed a new strategy for its big-box Gattiland stores and opened a new 40,000 square-foot flagship in Frisco, Texas, outside Dallas. The new concept, called GattiTown, is designed to further differentiate Gatti's family entertainment concept from others in the market. Wedging itself firmly between concepts like Chuck E. Cheese that cater to young children and Dave & Buster's, which attracts an adult bar crowd, GattiTown features a fun alcohol-free, smoke-free environment that the whole family, not just kids, teens or adults, can enjoy.

A destination entertainment center, the price of admission to GattiTown is simply the single all-you-care-to-eat meal price. The amusements, of course, cost what typical arcade games charge. The company expects to generate average volume of \$3.5 million annually from GattiTowns, but says that growth will come from its regular pizza buffet restaurants.

At the same time Gatti's has changed its look and tweaked its pizza buffet, big-box and take-out concepts, it has continued to focus on the key to its original success—great food in a family atmosphere at a great value. "Our focus



*Pictured left to right:
Bill Dickie, Bill Dickie & Associates;
Mike Glenn, Director of Corporate Operations,
Gatti's Pizza
Charlie Kaminsky, Director - Product Quality &
Development, Gatti's Pizza;
Craig Weber, Director of Design & Const., Gatti's Pizza;
Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago, Inc.;
Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago, Inc.;
Dean Satchwell, Vice-President of Supply Chain &
Logistics, Gatti's Pizza.*

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is still on pizza, but we're different because customers pay just one price for all you care to eat or drink," Satchwell says. "That includes pizza on many crusts with any toppings, pasta dishes of all kinds, a full salad bar, desserts and drinks."

The typical Gatti's Pizza restaurant is around 5,000-6,000 sq. ft. In addition to original crust and thin crust pizzas with a variety of toppings featuring Hormel meats and provolone cheese, stores offer seven prepared pasta dishes plus two plain pastas with a choice of marinara or meat sauce. The chain has 12 prepared pasta recipes altogether, including customer favorites such as lasagna, so stores can rotate some items on and off the serving line.

"We've always been a pizza chain," says Charlie Kaminsky, director, product quality and development, "but guests consistently want more variety in their dining experience, so we expanded, adding pasta and salad bars to give value to our customers."

Stores mix their own dough from scratch each day and roll it out the next morning. The bulk marinara and meat sauces are proprietary recipes



Gatti's Pizza "All-you-care-to-eat" buffet includes pizza on many crusts with any toppings, pasta dishes, a full salad bar, deserts and drinks.

produced by Heinz, but sauces for all the other pasta dishes are prepared in batches from scratch in the restaurants. Salad prep also is done in the back of the house.

Items on the buffet are held for only 20 to 30 minutes before being replenished, so forecasting essential to prevent food waste. "Because of our value proposition," Kaminsky says, "food cost and labor are variables we have to watch constantly."

To control those costs food prep is key, according to Kaminsky.

"We have to be ready to cook a lot of pizza and pasta in a short time, so we try to prepare today for tomorrow or today for tonight."



Originally, the company designed units to require as little equipment as possible—a pizza oven and two-burner warmer in some cases. But as the menu has expanded, equipment has been added to handle the volume. A typical pizza buffet restaurant now will have a triple stack of conveyor "impinger" type ovens for baking pizzas. Pasta in many stores is prepared right behind the eight-well pasta buffet line in front of customers. Equipment includes a convection oven, reach-in, two-burner stove, cold bain-marie, prep table, four-well steam table and a Keating pasta cooker.



The Keating Custom Pasta Workstation was specially designed to fit Gattitown's business demand.

Gatti's Pizza buffet restaurants typically go through more than 120 lbs. of dried pasta a week, and the volume in a GattiTown can exceed 400 lbs. of dried pasta a week. Weekends are invariably busier than weekdays, so the pasta cooker has to turn out a lot of pasta on a Saturday night.

"To be able to handle the amount of volume and do it consistently, we turned to Keating," Kaminsky says. "We're very pleased with the performance of Keating equipment. We have a unit in our original Gattiland that's still working great after 10 years."

"We specified Keating for a number of reasons," Satchwell echoes, "one of which is the performance of Keating equipment in the past. But Keating also offers the flexibility to customize equipment to our needs. What we put in GattiTown is not an off-the-shelf piece of equipment. It's great to work with a company that has the flexibility to do that. And Keating really delivers in regard to price."

At Gatti's Pizza, food, fun and value are adding up to a winning combination.

Michael W. Sherer writes frequently about food and the foodservice industry.



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