

'Za-Bistro!

By Donna Boss, Contributing Editor

An open-flame, stone-hearth oven is the focal point of this upscale, casual neighborhood bistro, the first of the chain's units, located in an Orlando, Fla., suburb. A blast chiller supports cook-chill preparation in a minimal but highly functional back-of-the-house kitchen.



A popular professor at the Rosen School of Hospitality Management at University of Central Florida in Orlando, Christopher Muller, Ph.D., teaches courses on chain restaurants and brand management. In December 2003, he put the theories of success that he espouses to his students to the ultimate test. He and several partners - some of whom are former students - opened 'Za-Bistro! in Maitland, Fla., a suburb located five miles north of downtown Orlando. Today, Muller also carries the title of president and CEO of this new, European-style chain concept.

Selecting an operating theme that is compatible with growing demographics is a key principle for achieving success, according to Muller. The Maitland suburb his team selected has attracted families, as well as single heads of households, one of the fastest-growing groups in America. These suburbanites like to frequent neo-urban town center developments that include sophisticated, yet casual neighborhood restaurants.

Once concept and location have been selected, Muller believes, the restaurant must produce a high-quality menu and provide good service, both of which must be executed flawlessly. In addition, the brand itself must be strong and be reinforced with symbolic imagery, such as the "i" in 'Za-Bistro!'s logo that depicts a flame (the fire from the hearth oven) and a wine glass (a 400-bottle collection is displayed in a built-in wine rack and sold by the bottle and glass).

Modeled after an upscale street-side concept in the United Kingdom, 'Za-Bistro! features a menu of gourmet pizzas, oven-baked sandwiches and entrées prepared in a seven-foot-diameter stone-hearth oven, which is visible from every seat in the dining room. Appetizers, salads and desserts are also featured on the menu and are prepared at least partially in full view of customers, as well.



Menu preparation takes place in full view of customers at 'Za-Bistro!. Undercounter refrigeration and storage allow cooks to have immediate access to ingredients needed for production.

Upon entering 'Za-Bistro!, customers can partially glimpse the dining and exposition kitchen spaces through glass panels that are inscribed with the concept's logo. After passing through a

transition space, guests enter the 121-seat, 1,850-square-foot dining room that encompasses several smaller, more intimate, semi-private dining spaces. "Despite the segmentation of this space, there is no feeling of claustrophobia," explained the project's foodservice consultant, Lee Simon of The General Group/Louis Wohl & Sons Inc. "We achieved this with a combination of half walls, full walls, cased punched openings and other architectural features. There are a number of partial views throughout the dining room, but very few full views, which creates an impression that there is always another space that can be accessed.

"Since four other restaurants had previously occupied 'Za-Bistro!'s space, needless to say, the facility was in dire need of repair and investment," continued Simon. "Not only did most of the equipment need to be replaced and the cooking layout changed, but the seating capacity had to be expanded by 24%. This is because the increased seating, while maintaining the same overhead cost structure, significantly increased the concept's revenue-producing capabilities." Due to the condition of 'Za-Bistro! and the inefficiencies in the design, the interior space was completely demolished.

Facts of Note

Ownership: Privately held by Dr. Christopher Muller and partners; each subsequent restaurant will be owned by the private corporation and a local managing partner.

Founded: Dec. 29, 2003

Headquarters: Maitland, Fla.

Units: One in Maitland, Fla., 5 miles north of downtown Orlando. Four more are expected to be opened by January 2006.

Size: 3,800-square-feet

Seats: 124 inside; 28 outside

Avg. Check: \$18 (This is higher than anticipated, said Muller, due to increased dessert sales.)

Annual Sales: \$1.5 million (anticipated)

Hours: 11 a.m. - 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 11 a.m. - 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Menu Specialties: European-style hand-tossed pizzas, bistro oven specialties, fresh salads, oven sandwiches and extravagant desserts. Wine by the glass, craft beers and specialty coffees and teas.

Staff: 35

Equipment Investment: \$152,000 (includes freight, delivery, set-in place; excludes tax)

In order for 'Za-Bistro! staff to work efficiently while producing a 50-item menu, the equipment package included four main pieces of specialized, high-volume equipment: a seven-foot stone-hearth oven for the front of house, and for the back of the house, a blast chiller, a six-burner range with a convection oven base and a boilerless steamer.

Once products have been received and accepted, they are placed into dry storage, a walk-in cooler or walk-in freezer, all of which are located adjacent to the back-of-house preparation area for easy access. The preparation area itself consists of worktables, sinks and equipment used for cook-chill production.

The steamer is used to prepare entrées and

appetizers that require a moist heat environment. The six-burner range is used to prepare soups, sauces, braised beef and other key menu components. The convection oven base, on the other hand, is used to cook side dishes such as meatballs, pastry items and slow-roasted stocks. Menu items cooked in the steamer, on the range and in the oven are then placed in a blast chiller. "A blast chiller was selected because it supports a unified cooking, chilling, plating and holding process within safe food handling standards," noted Simon.



Some chilled products are then plated in cooking vessels. These products, along with others that aren't plated, are taken to the front-of-house exposition kitchen through a dedicated door.

Gourmet pizzas and oven-baked sandwiches and entrées are prepared in a stone-hearth oven, which is the focal point of the bistro. Cold products can be stored in a refrigerator located next to the oven or in two undercounter refrigerators positioned in front of it.

Traffic flow was also expedited by the placement of a dedicated service bar. A bartender prepares the more labor-intensive specialty drinks, which relieves waitstaff from this time-consuming preparation. Separate bottled beer and wine coolers were provided at the front, with a direct-draw beer six-head dispenser at the rear.

"The areas that must be accessed by servers are all conveniently located adjacent to one another," explained Simon. "The proximity of the beverage and food pick-up stations also ensures that the servers will pass by plated meals in the window on a regular basis, decreasing the time between food preparation and delivery."



When staff members bring food from the back to the exposition kitchen, they place it either at the pizza or cold preparation station. At the pizza station, where pies and several appetizers are prepared, cold products can be stored in a refrigerator located next to the stone-hearth oven or in two undercounter refrigerators positioned in front of the oven. These units are fitted with tray slides for the storage of prepared food items that will be cooked in the stone-hearth oven.

At the front of the pizza area, called The Hearth, is a curved counter with high bar-style chairs. At right is a cold production station that includes refrigerated and frozen storage.

'Za-Bistro! Players

President & CEO: Dr. Christopher Muller

Executive Vice President/Treasurer: Michael Eagen

Operating Partners: David Thompson and Scott Wentworth

Designer & Foodservice Consultant: Lee Simon, The General Group/Louis Wohl & Sons Inc.

Equipment Dealer: Louis Wohl & Sons Inc.

Both the hot and cold preparation stations feed into an expediter station, which on the chef's side

is located at the "corner" of the exposition kitchen. Congestion of servers entering orders was also avoided by placing POS stations in the dining room, closer to the customers.

As a fourth-generation restaurateur, Muller has set his heart on developing neighborhood restaurants in which customers feel they have a stake in the establishment. He admitted that he continues to be "amazed" at customers' response to 'Za-Bistro! With a suitable location, a design that makes possible flawless execution of the menu and service, and an efficient, flexible equipment package, this chain seems to be off to an auspicious start.



The back-of-the-house kitchen is equipped with a six-burner range, convection oven, steamer, worktables, sinks and equipment used for cook-chill production.

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