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Inspired by Authenticity

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Taco Cabana refreshes its restaurants with the contemporary yet authentic design of Mexico

Taco Cabana, known for its authentic Mexican food, prepared fresh and from scratch, has a loyal following in Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

The successful brand, which has 167 corporate-owned and franchised restaurants, started as a taco stand in San Antonio in 1978. Many of its offerings that continue to differentiate it from its competition originated from its inception.

With its authentic, homemade recipes, Taco Cabana became popular quickly. Fans say it's like eating at abuelita's (Spanish for "grandma's") house.

At that first taco stand, which was formerly a Dairy Queen, guests enjoyed freshly made tacos, enchiladas, fajitas, chalupas and cold margaritas and beer on a patio. It became known as the original Mexican patio café. Patio dining is still an integral part of the brand's identity.

So is its 24-hour service. At most locations, Taco Cabana is still open 24 hours a day, serving breakfast from 11 p.m. to 11 a.m., as well as lunch and dinner. It also still has its full liquor license, serving tequila margaritas and domestic and imported Mexican beers.

And most importantly, the food is still made from scratch daily. The meats are fire grilled in open view, and the tortillas are pressed and grilled by hand in the front of the restaurant. There's also a complimentary salsa bar that features six to eight fresh made salsas.

"The scratch cooking is unusual for fast casual," said Todd Coerver, Chief Operating Officer of Taco Cabana. "We have no jars or cans of foods in our kitchens. At Taco Cabana, you have the freshness and the quality of a sit-down restaurant with fast-food convenience and affordability. We believe we were one of the original fast-casual concepts even before that term was created. At the time, there was nothing else like it and to some degree, there still isn't."

Opportunity Calls

While the restaurants had been well maintained at a high level, the brand had not refreshed or remodeled its facilities in over a decade.

Its opportunity for a refresh came five years ago—after the recession—when the fastcasual market experienced a major shift.

At the time, customers were tightening their purse strings but were not willing to compromise on food quality and ambiance. This motivated fast-casual restaurants to step up their game. Competition grew and brands started to place more emphasis on facility presentation, especially on the dining environment.

Taco Cabana already offered convenience, affordability and great food, but it needed to improve its dining atmosphere to cater to this new breed of post-recession diners.

Coerver was hired to ensure Taco Cabana remain competitive in the fast-casual market for years to come.

Returning to the Roots

To take the brand forward, Coerver posed the question, "What does Taco Cabana of the future look like?"

To answer the question, he led a comprehensive research effort in early 2011. His team spoke to consumers in every market, employees from the front line to leadership, restaurant analysts and industry experts to obtain a 360-degree view of where Taco Cabana is today and where the company can go.

Coerver realized to be successful in the future, Taco Cabana had to return to its roots. The food was already authentically Mexican, and he wanted the restaurants—inside and out—to match. He wanted to embrace a contemporary yet authentic Mexican design, and he wanted to do it the right way.

He took a small team on a week-long trip to the interior of Mexico—Mexico City and Puebla—because that's where the contemporary Mexican food movement was happening. He wanted to discover first hand what "contemporary yet authentic Mexican" means.

There, the team experienced the food, flavors, music, architecture and colors of Mexico.

Coerver said he discovered and fell in love with Mexican architecture, especially the designs of local architect Ricardo Legorreta, who is known as the godfather of Mexican architectural modernism.

He noticed the Legoretta-designed buildings and color palettes were similar to Taco Cabana's existing design. He thought infusing some of Legoretta's design elements would be an authentic and easy way to refresh the restaurants.

"Our restaurants' lines and use of big, bold geometric shapes already matched Legoretta's design," Coerver said. "We just had to simplify the restaurants' presentation, take things off the walls and apply bold colors. It was a way to evolve ourselves quickly and affordably."

Infusing Authenticity

Back in San Antonio, Coerver learned that a local architect, Davis Sprinkle, had worked with Legoretta to design the San Antonio Central Library. He knew he needed Sprinkle to help refresh the existing restaurants and help him design the prototype of the future.

"Ricardo Legorreta and I were friends," Sprinkle said. "His work always influenced me. It's minimal but powerful. When most people think of Mexican architecture, they think of arches and clay tower roofs, which is lovely, but his work is more paired down and abstract; it reaches further back to embrace Mayan shapes, with amazing bright colors and an open feel. His style changed the face of Mexico in the last 75 years. So, when Todd called me, we both agreed that we didn't want to use a fake interpretation of Mexico; we wanted to be unique and authentic."

Since Taco Cabana's patio is so popular, it was important to give extra attention to that area. All restaurants installed beautiful 4x6-foot, silver, laser-cut papel picados (Spanish for "perforated paper") screens that outline and frame the patios. The decorative design is considered Mexican folk art, and the screens add instant curb appeal and a distinctive look.

For decades, customers recognized Taco Cabana by its signature solid pink exterior, but it was time to minimize the color to evolve into a more contemporary color palette. Now, the exteriors boast bold accent colors complemented by a sandy beige.

The landscaping also was changed, from lush green to desert/ xeriscapes with Mexican river rocks and crushed granite, to match the scenery of Mexico.

"We wanted to be sparse with the landscaping," Coerver said. "We wanted a little color, a little warmth, but mainly, we wanted to showcase the building."

Inside, the restaurants needed to be deconstructed. Crews took everything off the walls, such as the patterned Mexican tiles and beer signs; upgraded the finishes; cut out long slit windows, which Legoretta was known for; and painted bold accent colors on the walls.

Sprinkle and his team also redesigned the salsa bar, which has always been a huge part of Taco Cabana's success. It is now more modern, has better lighting and is a centerpiece of the dining room.

String lights were hung inside the dining room and on the patio. Decorative clusters of estrella (Spanish for "star") pendant fixtures were installed, and the ceilings were painted a dark color to make guests feel like they're outside at night.

Accent walls were painted hot pink, cobalt blue, deep plum, bright burnt orange and lemon yellow.

Gorgeous 4x4-foot photographs by Rick Hunter, a San Antonio photographer who spent months in Mexico, capturing the street life, adorn the walls. There are colorful photos of festivals, food markets, food carts and genuine moments of life in Mexico.

"The photos depict the authentic life on the street," Coerver said. "It's not always perfect or pretty, but it's real, and that's what makes it interesting and compelling."

"The photographs are outstanding," Sprinkle added. "They really make the space pop and feel dynamic."

Coerver also enhanced the restaurants' music. He wanted it to match the authentic food and décor as well.

"I didn't want any standard, off-the-shelf music," he said. "I wanted contemporary authentic interior Mexican music."

His music vendor was excited by the new direction and dug deep into Mexican music. The restaurants now play a variety of Mexican music, everything from instrumental to Mexican pop. The morning playlist is relaxing and soothing but as the day progresses, the music becomes more energetic.

"Now, everything reflects the interior of Mexico, and no one else is doing that," Coerver said. "Our look perfectly frames the quality of the food we serve."

To design the prototype, Sprinkle and his team used similar elements in the refreshed restaurants. But because they were able to work with a blank slate, they had more freedom to explore different ideas, especially with the exterior. His team enhanced the outdoor patio and landscaping and added a shade element by the drive through that complements the building's architecture.

"It was fun working with Todd," Sprinkle said. "I'm from San Antonio, so I grew up going to Taco Cabana. I went to the first one in high school, so it was a fun experience refreshing this San Antonio based brand."

"If you went on a contemporary architecture tour in Mexico City, you would see that it looks a lot like Taco Cabana's restaurants," Coerver said.

Lastly, Coerver changed the style of service. Instead of calling out a number over loudspeaker for guests to retrieve their food, guests now place their order and are given a table tent number and servers deliver the orders to the tables.

Getting it Right

The guest response to the refresh has been overwhelmingly positive.

"We have lots of Mexican nationals who come to San Antonio, and they make up a big portion of our audience," Coerver said. "For them, we represent a little bit of the comfort of home. We've received some really nice feedback from those folks. They think it's neat that we took the time and effort to go into their country to extract those unique elements and import them back to Texas."

Coerver says sales in refreshed restaurants have increased by 4 to 5 percent on average and the numbers hold. He's also seeing continuous sales growth every year since the refresh program was launched.

"People are excited to see new life breathed into Taco Cabana," he said. "It feels better to walk through the doors."

The same holds true for the corporate headquarters in San Antonio, which was also refreshed to match the restaurants.

"We used the same photos on the walls and injected the same vibe, and people love it," Coerver said. "There's a greater sense of pride now. It's amazing what aesthetic changes can do to impact employee culture."

With the refresh of all restaurants complete, Coerver looks back on the project fondly.

"I've never had more fun in my career," he said. "Reinventing a 35-year-old brand so that it can move forward was an exciting exercise to be a part of. It was fun to learn about the interior of Mexico. It has reinvigorated our company culture."

Coerver says everything now feels right and is operating at a higher level.

"We raised our game across the board evenly," he said. "And I don't want us to ever go that long without a refresh again. So, every five years, we'll do a minor refresh. We'll add fresh paint and any thing else that needs updating so we don't ever fall behind again."

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.

Working as a Family

Corey Shildmyer, Regional Facility Manager for Taco Cabana, has been with the company for more than 13 years. He began his career as a Maintenance and Equipment Technician, but quickly worked his way up to Facilities Supervisor and then on to his current role as Regional Facility Manager. Shildmyer credits his longevity and loyalty to Taco Cabana to the exceptional company leadership demonstrated by Todd Coerver; Chris George, Director of Facilities; and John Todd, Chief Development Officer.

He says Taco Cabana operates like a big family, especially within his own facility team. He currently has nine technicians strategically positioned throughout the Dallas, Houston and Oklahoma markets. Shildmyer's counterpart, who is based in San Antonio, John Dyer, leads the facilities efforts there with seven technicians covering all remaining Taco Cabana locations in the San Antonio, Austin and El Paso markets.

Their success relies heavily on the Corrigo Work Order Network System, a software platform that helps the facility managers with managing work order requests as well as invoice processing for the 167 Taco Cabana locations.

Shildmyer's team members have been with him ranging from five to 10 years. When Shildmyer hires a new facility technician, he isn't just looking for the ideal candidate

with the most experience and best background; he is also looking for someone who will fit right in with the rest of the team and adopt the Taco Cabana culture.

Shildmyer was particularly excited about the refresh; it was something that was much needed.

"It resolved a lot of my headaches," he said. "We went from new construction, to maintaining the restaurants for 18 to 20 years to reimagining."

Management of a refresh program for existing restaurants was a challenge as most locations are open 24 hours a day. The company did not want to close any restaurants while work was being completed, so the schedule and hours of work had to be delicately balanced as to not negatively impact the restaurant staff and operations.

A compromise was struck: To complete the work, the main dining room was closed but guests could pick up food at the drive-through.

A typical refresh lasted two to three weeks, which Shildmyer says was very fast for all the work they were doing.

All the restaurants were completed in three years.

Shildmyer and his team will maintain the new look while looking ahead to another refresh in five years.