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Living the Good Life

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Zoës Kitchen's purpose, food and culture embrace the Mediterranean lifestyle

The Zoë behind Zoës Kitchen is Zoë Cassimus. Her vibrant personality is reflected in the restaurants' bold and colorful décor; the menu resonates with her personal food philosophy; and the company's mission, "Delivering goodness from the inside out," was inspired by how she lives her life and the impact of her simple, wholesome and delicious food on guests.

Zoës family is from Corfu, a small Greek island in the Ionian Sea. Though she was born in Alabama, to which her Southern charm can be attributed, her Greek heritage has always been a big influence on her life. It has shaped her ideas on food, the need to live an active lifestyle and the importance of gathering with family and friends to savor meals.

Zoë believes food should be real. "If it wasn't food 100 years ago, it isn't food today," she would say. She believes in using close-to-the-garden ingredients and whole foods. This is how she has cooked all her life. She makes every meal an occasion—she uses cloth napkins and china—because they are opportunities to gather with those she loves.

Zoë and her husband Marcus opened Zoës Kitchen in Homewood, Ala., in 1995, to share Zoës family recipes and the Mediterranean way of life with others. Her food resonated with people. A loyal following grew and eventually spurred the opening of 164 restaurants across 17 states.

Zoës Kitchen makes healthful food that's craveable, and best of all, there are no feelings of guilt after a meal.

"When we asked our guests, what we heard most was that eating at Zoës Kitchen made people feel good about their food choices and, by extension, their health," said Lauren Butler, Director of Brand at Zoës Kitchen.

"If you feed your body with the right foods, you feel great. And when you feel great you can be your best self," added Rachel Phillips-Luther, Vice President of Marketing at Zoës Kitchen. "You live your best life when you find a balance between those indulgent moments and eating what's good for you. Zoës Kitchen strikes the perfect balance."

This guiding principle of delivering goodness and living your best life defines everything about Zoës Kitchen—in the restaurants and in the home office in Plano, Texas.

Good Eating

Zoës Kitchen is uniquely Mediterranean. The menu features lots of fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs, along with lean proteins. Glutenfree, vegetarian and vegan options are also available.

Menu items are made from scratch and predominately additive- and preservative-free. There are no fryers or microwaves in the kitchens, and chicken is never frozen. The ingredients are delivered daily at the peak of freshness.

There's scientific evidence that touts the benefits of a Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes eating more vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains and nuts; eating less red meat and more fish and poultry; and using olive oil instead of butter or margarine. The Mediterranean diet is recognized by the medical community as a heart-healthy regimen. It lowers cardiovascular risk, as well as reducing the risk of diabetes, Parkinson's disease, certain cancers and cognitive decline.

According to a 2013 study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, approximately 30 percent of heart

attacks, strokes and death from heart disease can be prevented in people at high risk by eating a Mediterranean diet.

A Culture of Goodness

The people behind Zoës Kitchen are hesitant to call the Mediterranean diet a diet. It is more of a lifestyle, one they adopt in the restaurants, in the home office and in their personal lives.

The home office is designed with the same bold colors, lighting and accents as in the restaurants. It is a lively and modern environment that encourages employees to be their unique selves. The offices and conference rooms have glass windows and doors to promote accessibility and transparency. The cubicles have glass window cutouts, too, so employees don't feel closed in. There are comfortable couches and collaboration spaces that bring people together to create big ideas. There's also a test kitchen where Antonio Iocchi, the Vice President of Culinary and Beverage Strategy and Innovation, can create new menu items.

"If you give people a place they can be inspired, they'll inspire you," Phillips-Luther said.

Finding the right people who naturally live the Zoës creed is also a critical component to the company's success.

"We make sure we hire the right people," Phillips-Luther said. "The interview isn't about skillset but what kind of person you are. When was the last time you delivered goodness? What is your personal goodness? How do you believe you can change the world? You can teach anyone to do anything, but you can't teach someone to be a great person."

They hire people like Manny Moreno and Raney Noeun, the General Manager and Shift Leader, respectively, at the Castle Hills Zoës Kitchen in Lewisville, Texas.

Moreno started working at Zoës Kitchen as a host. He was promoted to shift leader, to manager and then to general manager. He said before working at Zoës Kitchen, he didn't know what hummus was. Now, he's a fan of Zoës' entire menu. What he loves most is interacting with the guests and making food recommendations.

"I can talk to people about food for hours," he said.

He especially likes when he meets guests who aren't familiar with hummus or Zoës' orzo tabouli.

"I'll say, 'just try it', and offer them a sample," he said. "I like to see their reaction when they taste something new and discover that they like it."

One way Moreno lives his best life is working for a company he identifies with and believes in. He has found that with Zoës Kitchen. Since he is very health conscious—he doesn't eat fried food or drink alcohol—his lifestyle aligns closely with Zoës Kitchen's philosophy, which makes him feel personally invested with the company.

The same is true for Noeun. Her bubbly and helpful nature embodies what "Living Zoës" is all about.

"Everything is fun here," she said. "I love working with the guests and giving them an experience that makes them want to come back. The vibe here is bright and energetic. Look around; you just can't be anything but happy in this space."

Working at Zoës Kitchen has also benefitted Noeun's health.

"I've been here for six months, and I've lost more than 50 pounds just by eating Zoës food every day," she said proudly. "It has really transformed my life."

An integral part of the Mediterranean lifestyle is physical activity. This is why the home office hosts a recess once a month, when employees participate in team play. Popular games include football, kickball and dodgeball. There are also workout classes provided three times a week.

Living Mediterranean is also about coming together to eat healthy meals. The home office provides free lunch every day, catered by the nearby Shops at Legacy Zoës Kitchen restaurant in Plano.

“The culture is fun and exciting,” said Phil Byers, Director of Facilities for Zoës Kitchen. “It’s a workplace and everyone works hard, but we also have fun, and the people are always so friendly. When we bring visitors to our office, the first thing they notice is how relaxed the atmosphere is. And I still can’t believe the company provides lunch for us every day.”

“We come together to eat every day,” Phillips-Luther added. “It feels more like a familial setting than a traditional corporate office.”

Working for a purpose-driven company that seeks to improve the way people eat and make them feel good about it is rewarding work.

“Even on a hard day or a grueling week, I feel like I’m changing the way Americans eat and live,” Phillips-Luther said. “We’re on a mission to help educate people about fueling their bodies with the kind of food that they need to be active and feel their best self. I get to change the world by helping people embrace a lifestyle that will help them feel better. That is very powerful.”

Becoming Zoës

From a humble beginning in the mid-1990s in Homewood, Ala., Zoës Kitchen has risen to a leader and worthy competitor in the healthful fast-casual market.

The first Zoës Kitchen occupied only 750 square feet, served a limited menu and was only open for lunch Monday through Friday. Branding and design took a back seat to serving great food with a warm smile.

“We launched the brand with no design intent in the 1990s,” said Archie Andrews, Vice President of Construction and Design at Zoës Kitchen. “We had a limited bank account, and we had to make do with what we could afford at the time. We hung our hat on the menu.”

The original lunch-only concept was expanded to include dinner and weekends, more of family recipes were added to the menu, and the cafeteria-style of service was changed to counter ordering and self-seating. Finally, the footprint was increased to 2,800 square feet.

In 2003, a design firm was hired to create a brand image for the company.

The firm visited every restaurant in Birmingham, met with the Cassimus family, the employees and the customers. After thorough research, it created a new logo, and the first iteration of brightly colored interior, including the now-classic colorful stripes, and an architectural design.

“We wanted the restaurants to feel bright, warm and inviting,” Andrews said. “The food, the music and lighting all had to be vibrant.”

As popularity grew and more restaurants opened, the company caught the interest of Brentwood Associates, a private equity firm with a keen eye in identifying emerging businesses that leverage macro trends. At the time, consumers were starting to demand transparency in food, and the concept of eating whole foods was gaining momentum. Brentwood Associates predicted a strong future for Zoës Kitchen, so in 2007, the company bought a majority ownership stake.

The investment allowed Zoës Kitchen to become what it is today. Though more prototypes were built, the company has never strayed from those core elements that were first established in 2003, such as the colorful stripes, though the colors have changed over the years.

Fans of Zoës Kitchen have come to associate a certain look with the brand, and the company is cognizant of always staying relevant to its guests.

Facilitating Goodness

Zoës Kitchen’s Facilities department manages the more than 160 corporate-owned restaurants, the home office and the test kitchen. They handle all repairs and maintenance, including asset protection, waste management and capital

projects. They also work closely with the real estate department to resolve landlord issues.

For the past year, the facilities team has relied on Service Channel to help them manage work orders.

The three franchise locations have the flexibility to manage the restaurants as they see fit, including sourcing their own vendors.

Prior to Service Channel, repairs and maintenance were decentralized and managed by the general manager of each restaurant. They used third-party outsourcing vendors as well as local vendors selected by the restaurants. Now, Service Channel allows the facilities team to have more control in sourcing vendors, more effectively review the cost of services across all locations and develop more consistent expectation of the services. The solution also tracks assets and the repair expenses to maintain them.

The restaurants can review the status and cost of each work order and process invoices electronically, which ensures vendors are paid more efficiently and on time.

Work orders for recurring services, such as pest control, fire protection inspections, hood cleaning and grease trap maintenance, are now prescheduled to ensure the services are performed at the appropriate times and the proper documentation is submitted and retained.

Service Channel has also helped the team develop a warranty program for the refrigeration and cooking equipment. It keeps track of each asset and its warranty. If a work order is submitted for an asset, the warranty is automatically checked, and if the warranty is still valid, the work defaults to the warranty vendor.

“We’ve had Service Channel for a year, and it’s working great,” Byers said. “The restaurants really enjoy it, and it allows us to have more information and more history and to track our assets better.”

The facilities team also partners with City Lighting Products, the sole supplier of lighting to Zoës Kitchen, to keep track of every light bulb in each location. The restaurant staff can order replacement bulbs through a web-based portal that is site specific.

As the number of restaurants increases, the team is interested in installing energy management systems for the HVAC and for refrigeration control and monitoring. They are currently researching and testing various products and solutions.

Good Initiatives

Zoës Kitchen has some exciting design plans for the future. Currently, the company is refreshing some of its older restaurants.

“Every five to seven years, we like to cosmetically update the restaurants,” Andrews said.

The refresh brings the older restaurants to the new Modern Mediterranean theme, which incorporates the colors of the Mediterranean and wind-swept materials such as concrete and wood planking.

“We’re bringing the cultural and regional feel of what it’s like to be in the Mediterranean to life, but we’re doing it in a way that’s sophisticated, clean and modern,” Butler said.

The refreshed restaurants receive new paint, wall coverings, new fabric for soft seating, tabletops, countertops, millwork and possibly new lighting and furniture.

The design team is careful to select materials and finishes that do not contradict or contrast the existing design and will also tie into the future prototype design.

The prototype will be a completely new building that includes all aspects of the interior and exterior design. It will retain the Modern Mediterranean theme, keeping the region’s azure sea and crisp breezes in mind. The design will be light and bright, yet warm and inviting. The team will review everything from finishes and materials to lighting and furniture.

“I’ve traveled throughout the Mediterranean—the French and Italian Riviera; I’ve been in homes on the coast of Capri and Positano; I’ve seen villages built into cliff sides. The colors and mosaic tilings all have been big inspirations on how I want to guide the project,” Andrews said. “Longtime customers will still feel like they are in a Zoës Kitchen, but it will be a breath of fresh air.”

Another initiative is patio design. The team is considering installing covered patios that can be enclosed during cold and inclement weather. In keeping with the Mediterranean-inspired theme, they may add large potted plants, olive trees and stamped/stained concrete. There may be opportunities for banquet seating, instead of loose tables, and fans, heaters and misters are being explored for different regional needs.

“If there’s a possibility to have a patio, we’re going for it,” Andrews said. “But to what extent? We don’t know yet. We have to determine to what level do we want to bring the patio experience to life. We have to ask ourselves if we are an inside-dining brand or patio brand? The patio discussion is a numbers game. We’re in different climates so we have to discuss many variables.”

As long as the team designs around the core principles of the brand, they have the creative freedom to make their ideas into reality.

“We get blank canvasses, and we get to create beautiful restaurants,” Andrews said. “We don’t have cookie-cutter situations; everything is custom. It’s very motivating when we have a chance to do that on a daily basis. But we don’t have the huge budgets. So, we have to create these experiences with some limitations, but that challenge is exciting.”

Craving Goodness

Zoës Kitchen is a brand that embodies the way people seek to eat and live. Simple, fresh and wholesome ingredients can taste great—even crave-worthy.

Zoë Cassimus has known this all her life. Now, guests across the country can enjoy her family’s recipes and live their best lives.