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Everyday Celebrations

Sherleen Mahoney

The Melting Pot's unique dining experience and interior designs make dining out special

For life's celebrations—big and small—many people choose to gather at The Melting Pot for its unique dining experience and distinctive ambiance. There's something special about fondue. It's a fun experience that engages everyone at the table, and at The Melting Pot, there's something on the menu to satisfy everyone's tastes.

Guests can enjoy dipping soft pieces of artisan bread into warm pots of melted aged cheddar and Emmenthaler Swiss blended with lager beer, garlic and seasonings; aged Gruyère, Raclette and Fontina cheeses blended with white wine, fresh garlic and nutmeg; and Fontina and Butterkäse cheeses, spinach, artichoke hearts and garlic.

Those with a sweet tooth can dip fresh or dried fruit, marshmallows, pound cake and brownies into decadent pots of warm, melted chocolate that can be topped with crunchy peanut butter, caramel, candied pecans, marshmallows, graham crackers and creamy liqueurs.

And those who prefer savory flavors can cook tender filet mignon and sirloin, all-natural chicken breast and fresh seafood, such as shrimp and lobster, in a variety of broths, including seasoned vegetable broth; Coq Au Vin broth, made with burgundy wine infused with fresh herbs, spices and mushrooms; Caribbean-seasoned bouillon with garlic and citrus flair; and Bourguignonne, a European-style fondue with cholesterol-free/0 grams trans-fat canola oil.

There's also a vegetarian fondue that includes edamame, onion rings, artichoke hearts, baby Portobello mushrooms, and asparagus served with Thai peanut-marinated tofu, spinach and artichoke ravioli and wild mushroom sacchetti.

A variety of flavorful sauces complement and enhance the entrees. They include a mild, yogurt-based curry; a blend of cream cheese, sour cream, onions, chives and parsley; a teriyaki glaze with garlic, ginger and onions; a Gorgonzola port; and a ginger plum sauce.

Though The Melting Pot certainly lends itself to special occasions, such as birthday and anniversary dinners, many people also find it to be the perfect place to gather for everyday celebrations. For example, a family can celebrate a straight "A" report card over a pot of cheese fondue, friends can meet up for a much-needed girls' night out with a pot of chocolate fondue, and a large group can gather for a private party with a four-course fondue dinner.

In fact, The Melting Pot is so beloved that it was voted the No. 1 casual-dining restaurant in Nation's Restaurant News' 2015 Consumer Picks report.

"At The Melting Pot, we make it our priority to go above and beyond to ensure guests have the perfect night out," said Mike Lester, President of The Melting Pot Restaurants Inc. "It's truly an honor to know that so many guests have positive memories and experiences at The Melting Pot. We are excited to receive this recognition."

Embracing Creativity

As soon as guests walk into a Melting Pot restaurant, the beautiful and inviting interior design instantly makes them feel as if they're in for a special dining experience.

The creative mind behind The Melting Pot's interior designs is Design Manager Deborah Ramos. Originally a painter, Ramos has designed high-end residential properties, outpatient surgery centers, living centers and restaurants.

She said restaurant design especially appealed to her because she has worked in them in various roles since the age of 13, and therefore, understands both their form and function.

"The Melting Pot is unique, and understanding what makes us unique is important," Ramos said. "We understand there are a lot of different places guests can go to celebrate, so the ambiance is very important. I want our guests to be delighted and surprised when they walk in; I want them to feel like they're going to have a perfect night out."

While The Melting Pot's Restaurant Support Center sets some design requirements for the restaurants, they are broad, which gives Ramos and the franchisees a lot of creative freedom in choosing color schemes, patterns, artwork and layouts. This means that no two Melting Pot restaurants look alike; they are as unique as the people who operate them.

The Restaurant Support Center requirements include:

- Non-wood, solid-surface tabletops, typically granite, quartz or large-format ceramic, all of which can withstand burn marks
- The number of induction burners per table: one burner to four seats
- Specific table bases that are sturdy enough to handle the cooking
- Carpet tiles, which pop off easily if replacements are needed
- Satin-finish paint for easy wipe-downs because salt from the bouillon can leave a frosty film on the walls
- Vinyl fabrics with stain protection for the seats

As long as these requirements are met, Ramos and the franchisees can let their creativity flow.

This was certainly true for the Hatala family who owns The Melting Pot in Arlington, Texas, which opened in 2009. Dave Hatala and his parents have always loved to fondue.

"We've been fonduing since I was a little kid," he said. "My parents always hosted fondue parties, and even when I grew up, my family would meet once a month to fondue. It's always been a part of my life."

When the family decided to turn their love of fondue into a career, they chose to franchise with The Melting Pot because of the consistent quality of the brand. And when it came time to design their restaurant, they did it together.

"As a family—my parents, my wife and I—flew down to Tampa and sat down with the design team to create our restaurant," Hatala said. "It was a great experience. They recommend things, but it comes down to what you feel is best for your restaurant."

The Hatala family chose a cool-toned palette with blue, beige and white, for their restaurant.

"Texas is hot, so when guests walk in, I want them to feel relaxed and like they're in a cooler setting," Hatala said.

For artwork, the family chose framed black-and-white photographs, two of which are gorgeous landscape photos taken by Hatala's wife, Kelly.

"We picked out 95 percent of what you see in our restaurant," Hatala said.

The fact that the Hatalas had, and continue to have, so much control in designing and maintaining their restaurant makes it even more personal and special to them. They keep it in impeccable shape and are vigilant about providing guests with friendly and attentive customer service and high-quality meals.

"I left a 9-to-5 IT desk job to become a restaurant manager," Hatala said. "I work crazy hours, but I enjoy what I do. I'm a people-person, so my staff and my customers are the reasons why I come to work every day. We consider our restaurant as something we can have in our family for a long time, and everything in it reverberates the pride we feel about it."

Designing a Vision

The Melting Pot, an affiliate of Front Burner Brands, a restaurant management company headquartered in Tampa, Fla., is a leader in the polished-casual market. To Ramos, "polished casual" means creating an atmosphere that makes guests feel like they're having a fancy night out but in an unintimidating way, because fondue is meant to be fun.

She says one of the most important facets to a restaurant's ambiance is the lighting.

"Lighting is an easy way to capture guests' attention," she said. "You can create a lot of drama and sparkle with lighting, which is why we are careful about lighting levels. I like focusing a beam of light or pendant directly over the burner so people's attention is drawn to the cooking and the food. I also like large lighting fixtures for drama."

Artwork is another element that adds drama. Ramos likes large-scale, gallery-wrapped canvas prints, and she even works with a vendor that custom colors the prints to match each unique restaurant's palette.

One unique design challenge is the tables can't be moved around as needed because of the embedded induction burners. This challenges Ramos to devise ways to still give franchisees ultimate flexibility and creativity.

There's also the long dining experience to consider. The average guest stays two to three hours, which is why Ramos goes to great efforts to ensure the seating is as comfortable as possible and the restaurants have interesting and beautiful elements for guests to admire.

Born and raised in California, Ramos is naturally green-minded. Whenever possible, she chooses environmentally friendly products, such as carpet tiles made with recycled yarn, low VOC paints and LED lighting.

Currently, she is experimenting with layouts. Many restaurants still have compartmentalized designs, with large private dining rooms in the back and an intimate section for couples called Lover's Lane, a U-shaped aisle of private two-top tables with high backs.

Ramos' new restaurant designs are more open. She's finding ways to incorporate large parties in the main dining room to avoid the wasted space of empty party rooms. She's also leveraging partitions that can pop up and down to create more private settings when needed and adding table extensions to accommodate larger parties. Lastly, instead of closing off couples in small, separate compartments, she's bringing them into the dining area as well, but still creating a sense of privacy for them using different design elements.

Staying Current with Trends

To keep the restaurants looking new and fresh, The Melting Pot's Successor program updates the restaurants approximately every nine years.

All franchise agreements span 10 years, and 18 months before the 10-year mark, Ramos and Scott Evans, Director of Construction and Design of Front Burner Brands, work with the franchisees to bring the restaurants up to current standards, which allows the contracts to be renewed for another 10 years. It's important to note, however, there are never mandates on upgrades.

"We work with the franchisees," Evans said. "We weigh financial conditions, and if the numbers don't work out, we won't require certain things or will give them extensions. We don't want to mandate changes that will affect their bottom line."

Hatala can attest to this, as well.

"The company doesn't act like a dictator, but more like a partner," he said.

Typically, the refreshes include color and fabric updates, as well as a conducting a thorough check of everything inside and outside the restaurant.

Evans says this process is relatively easy for a number of reasons. First, unlike a typical restaurant, The Melting Pot's back-of-the-house is a prep kitchen, with refrigeration, a dish machine and stainless-steel prep tables; it is not a cooking kitchen, as the cooking is done at the tables. This makes the back-of-the-house easier to maintain.

Secondly, the franchisees take exceptional care of the restaurants, minimizing wear and tear.

"Many of our franchisees have built good relationships with their own service vendors," Evans said. "Some of them will even get their tools and dig into problems themselves. It's refreshing to see that they get involved to that level."

Hatala is one of those hands-on franchisees. He acts as a manager, a server, a greeter and a handy man. He says when maintenance issues arise, he's the one who rolls up his sleeve and gets to work.

"I'm the maintenance guy here," he jokes. "I personally feel that the best franchisees get really involved with their restaurants."

Hatala says he's thankful that the induction burners are well built and last a long time.

"Many of our burners are the originals," he said.

But to prepare for problems, he has purchased five to six extra burners and keeps them at an offsite office. He also has an agreement with the manufacturer that allows him to swap a burner in need of repair for a new one.

Lastly, the company sends franchise business consultants to perform regular inspections to ensure the restaurants are meeting quality standards.

For new franchisees, Evans hosts a biannual four-day training class to teach them everything they need to know about maintaining their restaurants. Part of the class involves visiting an actual restaurant to familiarize them with each of the different aspects.

For the most part, the franchisees operate independently, but they will call Evans when they have questions or want to verify that something they're doing is correct. The most common questions Evans usually receives are about HVAC, mold/mildew and water heaters.

Next-Generation POS

A handful of Melting Pot restaurants across the country—in California, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Missouri and Utah—have upgraded to the NorthStar Order Entry

System. It is a tablet-based omni-channel ordering system developed by Custom Business Solutions Inc.

The company had wanted to upgrade its existing point-of-sale system for some time, and when they came across the NorthStar Order Entry System, it met the company's needs well.

Using iPad Minis with the new system, the franchisees say it is more efficient, and because it is a Wi-Fi-based system, no major rewiring is needed to upgrade, which makes it less expensive. And if an iPad Mini breaks, it can be replaced immediately with a quick trip to the Apple store.

The new system is being adopted rapidly. The company expects all restaurants to be upgraded by the end of 2017.

"Clearly, CBS's NorthStar Order Entry had the most checks in the 'yes' column of our list," Lester said in a press release.

The Future of Fondue

The Melting Pot looks forward to growing its unique brand domestically and internationally.

In the United States, the company is interested in expanding in Anchorage, Alaska; Dallas; Hartford, Conn.; Los Angeles.; and Memphis and Chattanooga, Tenn.

Internationally, the company wants to open restaurants in Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan and South Korea. In fact, this year, the company opened its first restaurant in Jakarta, Indonesia, and also has plans to open restaurants soon in Dubai, United Arab Emirates; and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

As new restaurants open, and more guests discover what makes The Melting Pot truly special, there will be a dedicated team at the ready to support the new franchisees in designing, operating and maintaining their distinctive restaurants.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.

Happy 40th Anniversary, The Melting Pot

The Melting Pot first opened in April 1975 in Maitland, Fla., and it served only three items: Swiss cheese fondue, beef fondue and chocolate fondue.

This year, the company turned 40, and it is celebrating by offering a 40 percent discount on the franchise fee to new franchisees. This is an \$18,000 savings on the domestic and Canadian fee of \$45,000.

"Over the past 40 years, The Melting Pot has evolved from a single restaurant into a global franchise," President Mike Lester said in a press release. "We owe much of our success to our loyal network of franchisees that has been an integral part of our brand's development. Combined with our recent operational and menu enhancements, the reduced franchise fee provides a great incentive to invest in the brand and encourages future development. We've never done anything like this before, but we've also never been 40 before. There's truly never been a more exciting time to become a Melting Pot franchisee."