

# Fired Up

## Sherleen Mahoney

### ELEVATES THE TAQUERIA EXPERIENCE

Tacos are serious business in Texas. The many variations of savory fillings conjure deep love. And competition comes from all sides—chains, local haunts, food trucks and even gas stations—claiming to offer the best-tasting, most-authentic tacos. In such a competitive market, brands need to stand out and sway cravings.

Torchy's Tacos was created by Mike Rypka in 2006. He hit the Austin, Texas, streets with a food trailer. When customers didn't come to him, he approached them with salsa and chips to tempt them to try his green chile pork tacos and fajitas. The tactic worked, and soon, customers were exclaiming, "Damn! These tacos are good!" "Damn Good" became the company's mantra.

With its reputation for serving innovative and unconventional tacos, the brand has earned an almost frenetic following in Texas. It has grown to 61 restaurants in Texas, Colorado and Oklahoma. Next year, restaurants will open in Arkansas.

An Austin brand wouldn't be complete without a food truck. With a full kitchen, the food truck hits the road almost every day with a staff of up to six able to serve 3,000 guests for an event.

"We expanded to other cities that fit Austin's demographic, vibe, energy, personality, art and music scene, and quality of life," said Jeremy Smith, Senior Director of Design and Construction at Torchy's Tacos.

Before a new restaurant opens, it throws a big preview party with free food and drinks and entertainment for the community. The most loyal guests have been known to drive hundreds of miles to attend these events.

"A Houston family drove up to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for its preview party in February," Smith said. "They had attended the last three openings and didn't want to miss it."

Torchy's believes its success is rooted in pushing the limits with its food, design and hospitality. The delicious tacos are made with fresh, high-quality and traceable ingredients. The interior design

includes stop-in-your-tracks elements. And the warm and friendly hospitality goes above and beyond to make every guest experience memorable.

“We don’t have a direct competitor; we don’t have anyone doing exactly what we’re doing,” Smith said. “There are similar concepts, but you’re not going to walk into any of those concepts and get the visual aesthetic, the amazing food with a full bar and our hospitality.”

## DISTINCTLY AUSTIN

While there is much contention about where breakfast tacos originated, all parties can at least agree that mornings are better with one in hand. Better yet, Torchy’s offers them all day. Guests can order breakfast tacos with scrambled eggs, cheese and a choice of bacon, chorizo, jalapeño sausage, potato, beef fajitas or brisket.

“Our brand was born in the land of breakfast tacos,” said Stacey Floberg, Director of Marketing at Torchy’s Tacos. “We are proud to have been voted Best Breakfast Tacos in all of Austin. There were more than 260,000 votes from the Austin community and consumers.”

A brand that prides itself on championing diversity and individuality shows its personality in many ways, including fun menu names. There’s the Dirty Sanchez, Topsy Chick and Trailer Park, which guests can “Get it Trashy”—that means the lettuce is removed and queso is added. Guests can even order tacos based on their political affiliations. The Democrat has shredded beef barbacoa, avocado, cotija cheese, cilantro, onions and tomatillo sauce. The Republican has grilled jalapeño sausage, pico de gallo and cheddar jack cheese with poblano sauce. The Independent has hand-battered and fried portobello mushroom strips with refried black beans, grilled corn, escabeche carrots, cotija cheese, cilantro and avocado with ancho aioli. Tacos transcend party lines, though. There are no trends that indicate guests care to mix politics with tacos—they just want a “Damn Good” taco.

“Our menu item names are just as untraditional as our tacos,” Floberg said. “They are fitting with the brand and culture.”

There’s also a secret menu that was launched in 2013.

“With so many daring combinations, it was only a matter of time before we announced one ‘Damn Good’ secret,” Floberg said.

Each month, a unique and untraditional taco is featured as the Taco of the Month. November featured the Turkey Mole, a taco filled with turkey breast with Oaxacan mole sauce, Mexican rice, avocado, cotija cheese and cilantro. Some memorable ones include the Roscoe with a crispy waffle, a fried egg, fried chicken, a slice of bacon and syrup; a Billy Idol-inspired taco with grilled shrimp, cooked cabbage slaw, chopped bacon, grilled pineapple, jack cheese, guajillo and garlic fried onion straws, BBQ sauce, cilantro and chipotle sauce; The Maine Squeeze is filled with chilled lobster salad, truffle oil, mango, fresh avocado, cilantro and lemon aioli; and The Tokyo Drifter has fried wonton strips, teriyaki glazed BBQ pulled pork, a sweet and sour veggie slaw, and sesame Sriracha mayo.

“All our Taco of the Month offerings have a soft spot in our guests’ hearts,” Floberg said. “No matter the month, our guests are clamoring for their favorites to be put on the permanent menu and in fact, some of those favorites have been added to the menu over the years. All of them are unique and infamous in their own right.”

A portion of the profits from every Taco of the Month goes towards causes the brand is passionate about, including cancer research at MD Anderson, childhood enrichment at Make-A-Wish Foundation and addiction recovery at Phoenix House.

“Torchy’s donates tacos, time and resources,” Floberg said. “We believe in leaving the world better than we found it.”

Torchy’s understands ingredients make the meal. That’s why the brand responsibly and ethically sources every single ingredient, from the proteins to the jalapeños and coffee beans.

“We work with suppliers who have the same commitment to quality, sustainability and corporate citizenship as we have as a brand,” Floberg said.

Torchy’s also protects the environment by only stocking napkins, cups and cutlery made from 100-percent renewable resources. Even the used cooking oil is turned into fuel for cars.

“Behind every delicious, freshly made taco is a crew of fiery, taco-crazed foodies fueled by hot sauce and a shared passion for ‘Damn Good’ food,” Floberg said. “We make the freshest, most delicious meal ever, cooked to order, just the way our guests like it.”

The culinary and innovation team draws menu inspiration from different cultures and flavors from Central America. They travel the region, leading with their hearts, to find new flavor profiles. Rypka

is still actively involved with the culinary team. They strive to push the culinary boundaries to provide the best-quality ingredients.

“We believe a great taco is a testament to the pursuit of happiness,” Floberg said. “That’s why we’re constantly pushing ourselves to the culinary edge of ‘Damn Good’ food.”

## DIABLO DESIGN

The Torchy’s restaurants built between 2012 and 2016 have a similar design. Common design elements include fun ways to display the “Damn Good” mantra, Spanish tiles, upholstery, custom lighting, red and white road reflectors, and the red, black and grey color palette.

“Most of our stores use road reflectors as a wall finish,” Smith said. “It is a unique design element that no one else is doing.”

Last year, Smith had heard through the industry grapevine that a restaurant concept in Denver was emulating Torchy’s interior design. While imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, he knew his team had to innovate.

“We had to do something different. We had to take our design in a different direction,” he said.

Over the next six months, the team traveled to Dallas, Chicago, Las Vegas and New York to research exciting, new and fun design trends.

“We came back with a pallet of materials, colors and photos of things we really liked,” Smith said.

The team partnered with Kim Lewis Designs in Austin, Texas, to secure a new sophisticated interior design for the new Arlington, Texas, restaurant. Kim Lewis was the lead designer for ABC’s “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,” and her designs have been featured on HGTV, TLC and National Geographic.

“We wanted to be more mature, comfortable, exciting and relevant but not deviate from the brand,” Smith said. “The Arlington location is right across from Cowboys Stadium, so we wanted to make a statement.”

Kim Lewis Designs created a look that includes Torchy’s iconic elements—the Spanish floor tiles and the color palette—and added elegant crystal chandeliers, a gorgeous brass trellis over the bar area,

pitch fork door hardware and giant marquee “TORCHYS” letters that are perfect for Instagram photos. The location was the brand’s first shift from the previous industrial modern design to a more sophisticated one.

The firm also designed the Highlands Ranch, Colo., restaurant, which has a beautifully intricate ceiling design and a whimsical pinwheel for the Damn Good sign.

“Our guests feel very connected to the brand. They expect us to try new things, such as put chandeliers in a taco joint,” Smith said. “The leadership also wants us to take risks. There’s a lot of freedom and trust there to build out this brand to its full potential.”

The latest bold move involves a New York City graffiti artist named Jerkface, who specializes in cartoon art installations. The vision is for Jerkface to create a large mural outside of the Round Rock, Texas, restaurant.

Going forward, the design team will keep innovating and pushing the limits.

“We’re going to take elements we like from the traditional stores and the new design and create our next look,” Smith said. “We will strive to create something new each time and do it to scale.”

## DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Maintaining more than 60 restaurants, each with a different design and materials, is a challenge, but Mel Smith, Senior Manager of Facilities at Torchy’s Tacos, says it’s fun because there’s never a dull moment.

“It’s always interesting to walk through a new store and look at all the new elements and decipher how to maintain them,” she said.

All new restaurants go through an audit process for inventory purposes, which greatly helps the facilities team keep track of what is in each location. “Our department strives to ensure that all aspects of the store represent our brand, from ensuring functioning kitchen equipment with preventive maintenance and timely repair work to keeping the ‘Damn Good’ food coming and the designs of the stores are being maintained to provide the best experience for all our guests,” Mel Smith said.

When issues arise that jeopardize operations, Eric Turner, Critical Projects Manager at Torchy's Tacos, gets involved. He is on point for issues that can close a restaurant or complex projects that involve multiple trades. During Hurricane Harvey, for example, when the Kingwood, Texas, restaurant was flooded with over 8 feet of water, Turner coordinated a full demolition and abatement and helped reopen the restaurant in six weeks, the first business to reopen in the strip mall.

Expenses are not spared throughout the brand, which includes the facilities side of the business. Silikal flooring in the back of the house gives the kitchen team a more robust floor system. ServiceChannel was recently brought on to aid the 14-member facilities team as the brand continues to grow.

"Our previous work-order platform was functional when we had 20 stores, but we needed an automated solution once we hit 60 stores," Mel Smith said.

As the design team continues to push the limits, they keep the facilities team in mind.

"The design and construction side want to do really creative things. Sometimes that's not the most functional for facilities," Jeremy Smith said. "For example, we thought it was a great idea to put wooden panels on every single wall and paint them a matte black. But it's not easy to maintain and clean so that's probably something we'll never do it again. We also have glass-top tables with bases that say, 'Damn Good,' but we'll never do that again because operators don't like glass-top tables. It's about finding that balance between aesthetic finishes and functionality."

"We provide feedback to both construction and operations on best materials and best practices, respectively," Mel Smith added. "We have a lot of conversations. The departments are very close."

## SPREADING THE LOVE

It all started with a food trailer and a promise to deliver "Damn Good" food. Though the original trailer closed in March 2018, the unwavering love of tacos remains.

The brand is preparing for healthy growth—20 to 30 percent— over the next five years. In this growth phase, parent company Success Foods Management Group recently hired G.J. Hart as CEO, Ryan Moore as CFO and Joel Ross as COO. Hart previously served as president, CEO and executive chairman of California Pizza Kitchen. Moore most recently served as the vice president of finance for Taco Bell, and Ross served as president of Ultra Steak Inc., a franchisee of Texas Roadhouse and

Little Caesars. Additional recent hires include a Chief People Officer, Elizabeth Baxter and a Chief Marketing Officer, Scott Hudler.

Torchy's will continue to deliver on its promise to loyal fans, and as it grows throughout the U.S., it will capture the hearts and cravings of new ones.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.

