

# It's Showtime

Sherleen Mahoney

Alamo Drafthouse, a cinema eatery chain created by movie lovers for movie lovers

Alamo Drafthouse is a cinema eatery unlike any other. It's where cinephiles go for an authentic movie experience while enjoying some inventive and elevated fare, such as truffled parmesan popcorn, squash and goat cheese pizza, caramel crème brûlée French toast and banh mi dogs, as well as traditional favorites, such as bottomless popcorn.

"While you might expect freezer-to-fryer menus at the cinema, we focus on in-house scratch-made food," said Bryan Penley, Chief Operating Officer and President of the North Texas and Twin Cities, Minn., Markets for Alamo Drafthouse. "We want people to taste the difference."

With "Drafthouse" as part of the name, there's an expectation of a strong beer program. Beer enthusiasts are not disappointed. Alamo Drafthouse features exclusive local beers as well as signature cocktails and wine. Locations with a rich craft beer scene can have up to 32 beers on tap. Often, theaters host beer events in partnerships with local breweries. Hopped Up Cinema, for example, is an event in which a local brewer and Alamo Drafthouse host a movie, with the brewer on-site to meet patrons. Beer Dinners are popular events that pair a brewery with a special menu and a cult classic. A "Pulp Fiction" Beer Dinner featured four Saint Arnold beers with a specially created four-course dinner that included a Big Kahuna slider, Douglas Cirque steak tartare, pork chops and bacon, and blueberry pie. A "Forrest Gump" Beer Dinner featured Oskar Blues beers with peas and carrots, smoked pork ribs, shrimp and a box of chocolates.

While the high-quality food and drinks are enough to set Alamo Drafthouse apart from its competitors, there's more.

Prior to the movie, guests enjoy a 30-minute pre-show. The creative department curates interesting, funny and relevant clips inspired by the film. It is not recycled or generic content. During the pre-show, guests can talk to the servers about the menu or sample a beer.

Once the movie starts, Alamo Drafthouse ensures a quiet experience. In fact, it's a core value. They have a strict no talking or texting policy and will ask those who don't abide by the rule to leave.

“All of our staff is empowered to give a warning,” Penley said. “We maintain a presence in the theater, and if the disruption continues, we ask them to leave.”

At most cinema eateries, guests press a button to summon a server. Alamo Drafthouse does not employ this method. Guests write their needs on a card that is picked up by stealthy servers. While leadership acknowledges a button would alert servers more quickly, there’s no desire to stray from the writing method. Alamo Drafthouse is meant to be a safe haven for movie lovers, and the goal is to avoid all interruptions for guests.

“The brand ranks the movie experience first and the dining second,” Penley said. “It aims to preserve the movie experience while executing a food and beverage concept. A button requires a follow-up conversation between a server and a guest. This creates a distraction for neighboring guests.”

Penley understands a new guest who is unfamiliar with Alamo Drafthouse’s style of service may initially perceive the lack of a button as archaic and inconvenient, but his more than 10 years of experience with the brand assures him that soon, the guest realizes how quiet it is and begins to understand and appreciate the service model.

“The most flattering compliment we get is when guests order something via the card and the order shows up before they’ve realized the card was picked up,” he said. “The best service we can give you is that you didn’t even know we were there because you’re so engrossed in the movie.”

## DISTINCT DESIGNS

An Austin, Texas, brand would never be formulaic or dull. Each of the 36 Alamo Drafthouse theaters is unique and has a different theme.

“Alamo is not a cookie-cutter concept,” said Daniel Osborne, Construction Project Director at Alamo Drafthouse, formerly the National Facilities Director. He has been with the brand for 20 years. “We have standardized some things, but each theater is different.”

Many theaters are retrofitted into existing buildings, but when they are built from the ground up, some elements can be standardized, such as theater layouts, wallpaper, restroom fixtures and kitchen equipment.

The 1,600-page Design Criteria manual includes all the Alamo Drafthouse requirements.

“It’s how we put together an Alamo Drafthouse,” said Richard Weiss, President of Weiss Architecture, who has worked with Alamo Drafthouse for 20 years. “It provides an idea of how we want things to look. While each location has a unique bar, element or theme, we want people to know they’re in an Alamo Drafthouse.”

Weiss also partners with the franchisees to facilitate the realization of their projects. They have access to all his ideas and resources.

After acquiring the blueprints and the seat count, the first step is designing an efficient layout. Then the personality is infused. Weiss collaborates with Alamo Drafthouse and any associated design teams. He identifies what is special about the area and creates a design that accentuates it. The team also employs local craftsmen and artists to achieve a distinct neighborhood feel.

While each Alamo Drafthouse is a prime destination for movie lovers and a proud representation of the brand, there are some stand-out favorites.

The New Mission theater in San Francisco was a grand movie palace in the 1920s. It was named a historic landmark in 2004. It had become neglected over the years, but Alamo Drafthouse brought it back to its full glory thanks to a multi-million-dollar restoration in 2015.

The Raleigh, N.C., theater was the first to feature a free video rental store in its lobby. The Video Vortex idea came from CEO Tim League, who is very creative and a wellspring of ideas. There are 70,000 DVDs, 5,000 VHS tapes and VHS players for rent. The lobby also includes posters and memorabilia that pay tribute to B movies, 7-foot-tall DVD clamshell cases and VHS-shaped coffee tables with screens that play actual VHS tapes. The new Los Angeles location, set to open in Spring 2019, will have a similar theme, but it will be catered to the Los Angeles movie scene.

“Alamo Drafthouse’s credo is never be satisfied and to continually push design to the next level,” Weiss said. “We do that with every project—we do something better and accommodate new ideas each time.”

The Brooklyn, N.Y., theater features a collection of life-size medical wax figures from an 1870 German traveling exhibit. The realistic displays of anatomy, pathology and anthropology inspired the bar to be aptly named House of Wax. There also is an archive of movie posters from different countries that span the history of cinema. The more than 1,000 large-format posters measure up to 7x7 feet and are sorted by theme, genre, actor, size and more.

The new Staten Island, N.Y. theater, slated to open in late 2019, will pay homage to the Wu-Tang Clan with The Flying Guillotine, a Kung Fu-inspired bar. Video Vortex will be on-site, along with an archive of Kung-Fu film memorabilia and posters.

The Alamo Drafthouse Cedars in Dallas features a “Robocop” theme, which was inspired by the technology companies that are headquartered in Dallas and because “Robocop,” though set in Detroit, was filmed in Dallas.

“The area is so different now than when we first looked at the site,” Weiss said. “There’s a vibrancy in the area, and it’s nice to have been part of the transformation.”

“We’re in Brooklyn, San Francisco and Los Angeles, which have a lot of traditional theaters, but Dallas/Fort Worth has the most competition,” Penley said. “It wasn’t groundbreaking to offer full-service dining in your seat in D/FW, but it’s because of our culture that we are successful.”

“It’s a dream job,” Weiss said. “Alamo Drafthouse is usually one of the highest-producing restaurants in its respective city. It can sell up to 800 tickets every three hours, which is incredible in terms of volume. We build efficient restaurants and theaters with the highest-end technology. We take pride in adapting to the latest technologies and providing guests with the highest-quality presentation.”

“Richard Weiss and I have collaborated on the design and construction of 35 of the 36 Alamo Drafthouse locations,” League said. “That constitutes lots and lots of design adventures. Richard and I consider architecture as a vital, tangible extension of the customer experience and are always working up new ideas to improve upon and bring innovation to our facility design. Some recent fun examples have been Video Vortex and our work in designing gender-neutral bathrooms in North Carolina.”

Weiss’ favorite location is on Austin’s South Lamar Street. It opened in 2004 and was expanded in 2014 with a new lobby and the addition of three theaters. The Highball bar features seven karaoke rooms, a ballroom dance floor and stage, a lounge area and an outdoor patio. There’s also a “Shining”-themed photo booth and carpet that eerily blends into the wall.

“That was our first ground-up location, and I have a special place in my heart for that one,” Weiss said. “It’s also the one I live closest to and visit the most often. Each Alamo Drafthouse has something unique and vital that makes it special. The theater designs are inspired by movies. We want to take you on a journey, which begins when you walk into an Alamo Drafthouse.”

## BRAND CHAMPIONS

The family culture and leadership's practice of promoting from within have kept folks like Osborne and Penley at the company for 20 and 10 years, respectively, and partners like Weiss for 20 years.

"Talking to Tim and Karrie League is natural," said Martin Salomon, National Director of Facilities for Alamo Drafthouse. "The first question at every meeting is, 'How's the family doing?' and not about business."

Penley was originally on the corporate side of the business, but when the company began franchising five years ago, he, along with several corporate members, became franchisees to build out the brand.

"We know Alamo Drafthouse and have its interest at heart," Penley said. "Most of us were fans of the brand before working here, and we wanted to be part of it."

## TWO-PART FACILITIES MISSION

Alamo Drafthouse theaters range from 10,000 (Austin Ritz) to more than 60,000 (Kansas City, Mo.) square feet. No two theaters are alike.

Facility management is divided into two programs: kitchens and theaters. It's like managing two different businesses under one roof. The team works to ensure theaters are never down, seats are never lost, and the kitchens are operating at the highest efficiency.

The nine-member facilities team includes Salomon, a project manager and a facility manager who oversees six in-house technicians—three in Austin and three in San Antonio.

Salomon was previously the Austin-based facility director. In his new role as national director of facilities, he has been working to create visual guides with photos and diagrams and documented processes and procedures for the theater managers. He wants to arm them with the knowledge to fix basic issues without calling a vendor. He will visit each corporate location to inspect the space, meet with vendors and contractors, and ensure everyone understands the brand standards and the high expectations. He's also implementing long-term solutions, reviewing contracts, evaluating expenses and instituting more standardization.

The team conducts quarterly checks to ensure brand standards are being met and presentation is maintained at the highest level. The technicians complete up to 95 percent of the work while specialty vendors are relied upon for complex theater issues. The screens, projectors, light and sound are managed by a separate projections department.

“The theater maintenance industry is small,” Osborne said. “We need both audio/visual and restaurant technicians. We need techs who can take apart a theater recliner and fix low-voltage table lighting and rebuild a mixer. Few can do both. It’s two almost entirely different skill sets.”

Both Osborne and Penley agree that maintaining both sides are equally challenging.

“When we had chairs that were just bolted down, the restaurant side was harder, but now with mechanical recliners and digital technology, it’s equal,” Penley said.

“If you include the electronics side, I agree it’s equal, but the kitchens have more assets and moving components,” Salomon said. “The kitchens have different equipment that are used at very high temperatures and are pushed to the limits all day long.”

When facility issues arise, even if it is an easy fix, theater managers submit work orders through Corrigo. Salomon’s team reviews all of the work orders and provides best practice advice and troubleshooting steps before dispatching a technician or a vendor.

“I want the managers to use Corrigo for everything, even to replace a light bulb because it’s all data we can use to spot trends to uncover larger underlying issues,” Salomon said.

The team also leverages Corrigo for asset management, and there’s an in-house system for blueprints, specifications and manuals.

The theaters are occupied almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. This makes scheduling a challenge for the facilities team.

“We follow school schedules,” Osborne said. “When school is in session, we draw back on daytime shows. When school is out, on weekends and on holidays, we’re open 10 a.m. to midnight. Most of our buildings are occupied 24/7 between janitorial and repairs and maintenance. When other businesses are closed for the holidays, that’s our time to shine.”

The facilities team is growing with the brand. As gaps are identified, more team members will be hired to improve efficiencies. Salomon will also reassess processes in a few months to determine if in-house technicians should be hired to support the east and west coasts theaters.

#### AUSTIN AT HEART

Alamo Drafthouse was created by movie lovers for movie lovers. As the brand expands across the country, it strives to preserve its unique Austin culture. After all, it's the culture that is at the root of Alamo Drafthouse's success. That and the truffled parmesan popcorn.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.