

Noodles World Tour

Sherleen Mahoney

NOODLES & COMPANY IS COMMITTED TO SERVING REAL FOOD WITH AUTHENTIC FLAVORS

The simple perfection of noodles has made them a beloved global staple for centuries. Noodles, alone, are unpretentious. But when they dutifully soak up the delectable flavors they are paired with, they shine. This fusion of texture and flavor creates delicious, satisfying and crave-worthy meals.

Noodles & Company has tapped into the undeniable universal appeal of noodles. Under one roof, guests can enjoy the world's favorite noodle dishes, such as Pad Thai, Spaghetti and Meatballs, and its most popular dish, the Wisconsin Mac and Cheese.

The menu features flavors from America, East Asia and the Mediterranean. In total, there are 25 unique dishes, including sandwiches, salads and soups, and eight different types of noodles.

Each customizable dish is made to order, using only the freshest ingredients that are free from artificial preservatives, flavors, colors and sweeteners.

Noodles & Company has made a commitment of serving fresh, real food. This includes organic milk, tofu and tea; cage-free eggs; and naturally raised, hormone-free and antibiotic-free proteins. Fourteen fresh vegetables are prepped throughout the day.

"There's enough variety for everyone," said Erin Murphy, Director of Communications at Noodles & Company. "This really sets us apart in the fast-casual segment. There's such a wide variety of flavors that there is something on the menu that every palate can enjoy."

A FOCUS ON AUTHENTICITY

To serve the world's most crave-worthy noodle dishes, authenticity is paramount. The culinary team is constantly refining and perfecting its recipes and looking for the next great flavor to add to its menu.

"We consider ourselves a world kitchen, which is not limiting," Murphy said. "Our culinary team explores the ends of the globe to find the next big flavor."

This year, they reengineered the Pad Thai and introduced gochujang sauce, a popular Korean condiment.

The Pad Thai now features scrambled cage-free eggs and bean sprouts, and the new sauce is more balanced.

Gochujang sauce caught the team's eye. They noticed it on several fine-dining menus, but it was not offered in the fast-casual market. They loved the flavor and its heat and thought it would perfectly complement the new meatballs shareable plate that was about to be released.

The team worked with a gochujang sauce supplier to perfect it for Noodles & Company. That meant fine-tuning the flavor and removing artificial flavors and preservatives. The company tested the dish in several restaurants for months before it was launched nationwide.

"Noodles & Company is the first national restaurant chain to introduce gochujang sauce, and the feedback was terrific," Murphy said.

Authenticity also means partnering with the best noodle suppliers. That's why the company has been buying its udon noodles from the same family-owned supplier in Brooklyn, N.Y., for the past 20 years.

Twin Marquis Inc. (TMI Trading Corp.) was co-founded in 1989 by two brothers, Joseph and Terry Tang, and named after Joseph's twin sons, Lawrence and Christopher Tang, Vice President of Sales and Product Manager, respectively.

"What differentiates our udon is the extra ingredient of passion in our noodles," Lawrence Tang said in a company video. "We don't make our noodles just for the sake of making noodles. We want to make our noodles fantastic, and what makes things fantastic is passion."

Noodles & Company works with two other suppliers for its other noodles. Dakota Growers and Zerega make the cavatappi, elbow, penne, spaghetti, egg noodles and whole-grain wheat pasta.

Dakota Growers, one of the largest pasta manufacturers in North America, is based in North Dakota, a region known for producing highquality durum wheat and pasta. And for more than 160 years, the fifth-generation, family-owned Zerega has been a leading producer of custom pasta. The company produces 250 million pounds of dry pasta each year in more than 300 varieties.

Just as important as authenticity is perfection.

The culinary team spent two years finding the besttasting gluten-free fusilli noodles.

They sampled more than two dozen different glutenfree noodles, but still, none of them were the right choice. They finally found the perfect noodle in a local Denver grocery store.

The team contacted the Italian company that makes the rice and corn blend gluten-free fusilli to ask them to produce it in bulk for Noodles & Company.

The persnickety nature of the culinary team means noodleloving guests can rest assured they are enjoying the best noodles.

This summer, Noodles & Company released some new dishes. One is the new Spicy Korean Beef Noodles, made with naturally raised steak.

"This dish is another great way for guests to enjoy the rich flavor of gochujang," Murphy said. "It can also be made vegan by removing the steak and substituting rice or gluten-free noodles for the ramen, opening up the flavor to even more people."

Ramen will also be offered for the first time.

"We love introducing new noodles to the menu — we consider each dish, its flavors and ingredients, before choosing the noodles for it," Murphy said. The Spicy Korean Beef dish was perfect over a bed of ramen and we are thrilled to have a new noodle on the menu for guests."

There also are two new salads: The Chicken Veracruz Salad and the Napa Market Salad.

"These salads are so popular with guests that they will stay on the menu indefinitely," Murphy said.

BUILDING TRUST

For the past year, Noodles & Company's facilities team has been on a mission to rebuild trust.

The previous team experienced challenges with workflow and being responsive with operations and individual restaurants.

"A year ago, we weren't doing a good job responding and reacting to issues," said Michael Ulm, Vice President of Design, Construction and Facilities at Noodles & Company. "The team wasn't well directed and didn't understand the importance of building relationships with operations."

Ulm's biggest focus last year was to regain the lost trust and prove to operations that facilities was there to support them.

"Operations was taking on a lot of the work themselves," he said. "Their job is to support the internal team and make sure guests are being served the best food possible; they should not be fixing refrigerators—that's our job."

Ulm's first step was to find a strong and skilled facility leader to fill the newly created position of facility director to spearhead this crucial initiative. He hired Kristin Karmazyn, a facilities professional with 20 years of restaurant experience.

"I knew I couldn't make a mistake and had to bring in the right person," he said. "Kristin was the most solid choice I could make."

"I started my career as a waitress at an Applebee's franchise with Steve Grove, the Founder of AppleGrove Restaurants," Karmazyn said. "He saw my potential and put me through school. I learned about new construction, remodels and procurement from Steve and Stuart Wagner, the former CEO of Applebee's International. They are two of the toughest guys in the industry and two of the best."

After a careful analysis of the landscape and taking a hard look at the operational gaps, Karmazyn identified some areas for improvement.

"No one was held accountable—not facilities, service providers or the manufacturers under warranty," she said.

"There were no processes in place," added Nadine Rodriguez, Director of Procurement and Services. "Operations felt more comfortable turning to their own leadership to make decisions, so there was a disconnect between the facilities team and them."

"Additionally, the team wasn't responding in a consistent manner," Ulm said. "Operations became unsure of their responsibilities because the facilities team wasn't responding the same way with every request."

With the challenges identified, Karmazyn planned a strategy for success. First, she had to rebuild the team.

She hired five seasoned facility managers, each with a master skillset, to support approximately 475 corporate restaurants.

Don Puduski, a master electrician, manages the East Coast region. His colleagues depend on his expertise on electrical and mechanical issues. He will also be instrumental when the company rolls out an energy management program next year.

Frank Molinaro is an expert in operations and training. His strength is in building relationships with service providers. He manages the central region and takes the lead on presentations to operations and with all facility-related operations training.

Jon Pate's previous experience includes working as a service technician for many years. He serves the West Coast region and has an aptitude for identifying repeat equipment issues, applying warranties and resolving part delays with manufacturers.

Jim Russell is an expert in automated facility management systems. He manages the West Coast region and continuously develops tools that benefit operations with their facility needs.

Steve Meyer, who manages the east region, has the longest history with Noodles & Company. The team relies on his vast in house experience.

The team's first order of business was to ensure all the restaurants were fully operational.

"Some restaurants were dealing with refrigerators that had unresolved problems for years," Karmazyn said.

Karmazyn also met with each vendor to review their services and scopes of work.

"In the past, some of our vendors may not have been the best qualified," she said. "Everyone we use now is certified. Our facilities managers are only as good as the people they can depend on."

The restaurants rely on Service Channel to manage work orders. When a ticket is created, an alert is sent to the designated facility manager, who is involved in every

step of the process. He ensures there is a response and it is the correct one, action is taken and a resolution is reached.

In addition to fixing and managing issues, the facility managers are forecasting projects. As they visit their restaurants, they are noting the issues that need to be solved today, in six months and next year.

"That allows us to have a good sense of our repair and maintenance dollars," Ulm said. "With that knowledge, we can reinvest our savings and lower costs in the future."

With a talented and committed facilities team in place taking care of the restaurants, Karmazyn focused her attention on improving in-house practices and relationships within the Central Support Office.

"I wanted to learn how the facility department interacted with other departments," she said.

Rodriguez introduced Karmazyn to other company directors so she could meet with them to learn about all the processes currently in place.

Based on the conversations, Karmazyn determined her main focus was on accounting.

She worked closely with Tara Cronin, Director of Accounting Operations, to ensure the team was maximizing the partnership with ServiceChannel. They took numerous training classes to learn everything ServiceChannel had to offer, developed new accruing procedures and began using the work order management system's analytics to forecast more accurately, identify high maintenance locations and repeat equipment issues.

"We mandated all service providers to be active in ServiceChannel in order to perform services in our locations," Karmazyn said. "When they invoice through ServiceChannel, we can track actual costs and pay all vendors in a timely manner."

Karmazyn wanted ServiceChannel to be the central repository for contract pricing, preventive maintenance pricing and schedules, warranty terms and parts costs. With the data, the team can provide best practices training to the operations teams to keep the restaurants operating at their full efficiency.

"We're paying attention to what is covered under warranties and holding manufacturers accountable," Rodriguez said. "Before, we were doubledipping and spending money unnecessarily."

Rodriguez and Karmazyn reviewed thousands of invoices and created a more formalized process that is managed by the facility and procurement departments. They categorized the invoices by department and all contracts were assigned an owner.

"We have already seen improvement in services and reductions in cost because our new process allowed us to hold everyone accountable," Karmazyn said.

Lastly, Karmazyn worked with the leasing department to establish procedures to easily identify landlord and tenant responsibilities, which is critical to managing cost and keeping the buildings in pristine condition.

In the first six months, the new facilities team was in reactive mode. Now that a strong team is in place and proven processes have been established, they're moving to a more proactive approach.

A year later, there have been great improvements, but there is still much work that needs to be done.

"We're succeeding now because of our facility's team's strengths and great communication," Karmazyn said.

"The restaurant managers all know who their facility managers are, and they tell me what a great job they're doing," Ulm added. "We're really turning things around. Our job isn't done yet, but we're making a difference and operations is trusting us again."

KITCHEN MAKEOVER

Noodles & Company is in the early stages of designing a prototype for new restaurants.

The interior design will be more contemporary, applying darker wood stains and brighter, more chromatic colors.

Modern pendant light fixtures will focus the light on the dining tables, where guests are enjoying their meals and engaging with their dining companions. The new lighting package and color palette will create beautiful and inviting spaces.

Accenting the new design are black-and-white framed photographs that capture the brand's promise of delivering real food, real cooking, real flavors. Frosted glass art defines the meaning of a "world kitchen."

Design and facilities are working together to choose products and finishes that will ensure durability and longevity.

"Although we consider the initial upfront costs, we know the biggest factor is the cost to maintain items from a maintenance standpoint," Rodriguez said. "This is now part of our operating model."

The new design incorporates seamless kitchen floors to eliminate tile and grout problems. Additionally, the new stools are virtually indestructible. To demonstrate the durability, the stool supplier sent one to Ulm, without any packaging and just a shipping label, through FedEx.

"We installed them in our new restaurants, and they look great," Ulm said. "Our old stools lasted one to two years; the seat might last one year. The new stools' seats are made from solid wood. If one wears out, we can take it off, sand it down 1/16th of an inch and put it back on."

The initial test markets for these prototypes are in Colorado, California and Oregon.

Ulm expects to have the final prototype determined in a few months.

The final package will determine the look and feel of new restaurants, and certain elements will be applied to existing restaurants through a remodel program.

THE KITCHEN IS OPEN

The facilities team is diligently working to rebuild the trust with each restaurant one at a time. Every service ticket is an opportunity for the team to prove their skills and commitment. Hiring the best facilities professionals ensures the restaurants are maintained at the highest level and the settings in which guests enjoy their favorite noodle dishes stay comfortable and beautiful for years to come.