

# Fresh Start

Sherleen Mahoney

Newk's Eatery treats guests to a scratch-inspired menu and warm hospitality

After selling McAlister's Deli in 2004, father-and-son team Don and Chris Newcomb, along with family friend Debra Bryson, founded Newk's Eatery. Applying the lessons they learned from operating McAlister's, they set out to create a new fast casual brand with a culinary focus. After many months of thoughtful menu and restaurant design, Newk's was launched, bringing the trio a second round of success.

Don Newcomb still wanted to focus on soups, salads and sandwiches, but also introduce new options, such as pizza. "We are like three brands in one; we're a triple threat," said Mike Snyder, Senior Director of Design and Construction at Newk's Eatery.

The Newcombs, who love to cook, created Newk's, based in Jackson, Miss., to return to their scratch-cooking roots. They set a high standard for sourcing the best ingredients from around the world. Together, they created a culinary-driven menu, served with warm, Southern hospitality.

The menu even includes some Newcomb family recipes, such as the Newk's "Q" sandwich, made with grilled chicken, bacon, Ammerlander Swiss cheese and Don Newcomb's signature white BBQ sauce; the Debra pizza, made with grilled chicken breast, ripe Roma tomatoes, house-shredded mozzarella and grated Parmesan cheese over basil pesto sauce; and the pimiento cheese sandwich, made with aged yellow and Vermont white cheddar cheeses and tomato. The chicken salad, the pepper jack crawfish and loaded potato soups, as well as the sauces, salad dressings and marinades are all family recipes that were perfected in the Newcombs' family kitchen.

Chris Newcomb knew exactly how the kitchen should flow. Prior to the design phase, he drew his vision on a napkin. The operationally efficient design includes two parallel cooking lines: one for assembling and baking the pizzas and pastas and one for the hot sandwiches. Four TurboChef conveyor ovens allow the restaurants to prepare a variety of meals. The salads are assembled along the front perimeter of the kitchen. The completed meals end at a singular point for serving efficiency.

Newk's restaurants feature an open-kitchen design showcasing its colorful, fresh ingredients and culinary focus. The kitchen is the focal point of the restaurants and guests are encouraged to watch their food being prepared. Some locations also have counter seating along the kitchen's perimeter, adding up to 15 additional seats.

Presently, the imported sandwich meats and cheeses are sliced and the proteins are grilled in the back of the house.

"We're showing the production of the pizza, sandwiches and salads, but we're not showing how we're getting to that point," Snyder said. "I want guests to see the beautiful rare roast beef being sliced and how we grill the Atlantic salmon."

A new restaurant prototype, proposed by Snyder, that brings those processes into guest view was recently approved.

"We will be moving the slicing, dicing, grilling, and mixing into the open kitchen," he said. "The back of the house will contain food storage, dish-washing, portioning and walk-in refrigeration only."

Rachael Myrick, Building and Design Project Manager at Newk's, will create renderings that reflect the new layout and look of the prototype.

"Rachael possesses vision and creativity that allows us to develop a 'stage kitchen' design," Snyder said. "This design will bring forth key elements that truly differentiate Newk's from our competition."

To offer guests added value, Newk's restaurants feature The Roundtable, a complimentary condiments and garnishing bar loaded with bread and butter pickles; roasted garlic; grated Parmesan; jalapenos imported from Turkey; croutons; hot cherry peppers; capers; pepperoncini; breadsticks imported from Italy; olive oil; sea salt and course black pepper; Sriracha, Tabasco and Cholula hot sauces; balsamic, sherry and red wine vinegars; and crackers.

There's also a grab-and-go counter that is unique in the fast-casual market. It is stocked with fresh salads, sandwiches and pimiento cheeses. Guests can use the Newk's app to pre-pay and pick up their orders.

## Cruising in Texas

Newk's first food truck, built by Cruising Kitchens, first hit the Austin, Texas, streets in June 2017.

"Austin was chosen for the food truck's pilot program because it is The Food Truck Capital of the World," said Todd Jackson, Franchisee at CKJ Eateries. "There are so many great festivals we can access from this hub."

The truck will also service Houston, San Antonio and Dallas.

As a test truck, the Austin team is noting what works and what needs to be improved or changed. If this pilot program proves to be successful, other regions may receive their own food truck in the future.

The massive truck is built for volume, intended to serve large weekend festivals and private corporate events. The truck's interior is very similar to a restaurant's kitchen. There are two TurboChef 1618 conveyor ovens, each with a hood, as well as plenty of under-the-counter refrigeration and a custom-built soup thermalizer. The truck is powered by a 45-kw generator or can be plugged into shore power. The all-electric kitchen equipment means there are no propane tanks on board and allows the truck to run in indoor environments with no carbon monoxide exhaust.

"The truck's generator is the largest the builder had ever used, which was a challenge, but we saved some space with not having to store propane tanks," Jackson said.

Presently, it is in service an average of three days a week.

The menu varies. It is tailored to each event. For kid-friendly events, it may offer more pizzas. For late-night music festivals, it may be loaded up with macaroni and cheese. The menu for corporate events can be customized. In full vending mode, it carries the most popular sandwiches, pizzas and salads, such as the Newk's "Q" sandwich, pepperoni and sausage pizza, Newk's Favorite Salad, and the pimiento macaroni and cheese.

"The food truck can serve several thousand guests," Jackson said. "In fact, we are hosting a private event next week, where we anticipate up to 1,500 people in a two- to three-hour timeframe."

If supplies run low or the truck is serving multiple events in a day, refrigerated catering vans deliver ingredients to the truck.

The sheer size of the truck grabs people's attention.

"The builders did a great job incorporating the brand attributes into the design, in both graphics and style," Jackson said. "An inflatable Newk's cup is on top of the truck. It is lit from four directions to illuminate it at night. We also have up/down lights to highlight the graphics. There's also a real 'Newk's Eatery' sign; the same one used on the restaurants."

And the unique menu items are a welcome respite from traditional festival fare.

"A lot of people don't want corn dogs; they would much rather have a high-quality sandwich or a fresh salad, and we can accommodate that," Jackson said.

## Fighting Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer research is a cause that is embraced by the Newk's family—from leadership to restaurant staff. Chris Newcomb's wife, Lori, has been battling stage MIC ovarian cancer since 2013.

In 2012, Lori started experiencing some vague symptoms, such as tiredness and not feeling well. She knew something was wrong, but the holidays were approaching, so she postponed visiting her doctor to focus on her family. She tried to address the symptoms but not the underlying problem. During her annual gynecological exam the following year, she shared her symptoms with her doctor who listened and took her concerns seriously. He ran some tests, which confirmed a diagnosis of stage INC ovarian cancer.

Lori's important message to all women is to listen to their bodies and to take care of themselves. Don't ignore vague symptoms; go see the doctor.

The diagnosis has emboldened Lori to help make a difference in the fight against ovarian cancer. Newk's Cares was created for this initiative. Its goal is to improve the rate of early diagnosis by funding research and creating greater awareness about the early symptoms of ovarian cancer. When ovarian cancer is diagnosed at an early stage, the survival rate exceeds 90 percent.

Year round, the restaurants donate 10 cents for every water bottle sold, and employees participate in the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund Alliance's (OCRFA) Ovarian Cycle every September. During this year's National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month in September, Newk's restaurants will ask guests to round up their bill at the register, with the remainder benefiting OCRFA.

Since 2014, Newk's has raised more than \$500,000 for OCRFA. The fight for this important cause continues today.

"At the start of Newk's Cares, none of us could have predicted we would be passing the \$500,000 mark two years in and have had the opportunity to engage hundreds of women and their loved ones in a conversation that has life-saving potential," said Chris Newcomb in a press release.

### Online Training

Newk's Eatery launched its Online Academy in September 2014. It is a social, mobile, cloud-based learning management system that educates team members about the company's culture, standards and core processes.

Instructional video topics include ordering accuracy, staff friendliness, upselling protein, taste of food, quality of food, hand-washing, hospitality versus service and guest interaction. There's also hands-on training, coursework and tests. Managers can closely monitor training progress.

The Online Academy, used by more than 5,000 employees, was one of three winners in the Crew-Facing Tech category in QSR Magazine's 2016 Applied Technology Awards.

### Facilities Takes Shape

As a franchise-driven company with 100 franchise locations and 20 company-owned restaurants, Newk's Eatery currently does not have an established facilities department. However, strategic conversations are taking place to determine the best way to implement one.

The restaurant managers handle minor repairs. Once repairs exceed a \$1,000 threshold, the area director gets involved to source multiple bids. Kevin Anderson, Vice President of Operations at Newk's, and Snyder review the bids and execute them. The vendors then work directly with the restaurant operations team to complete the work.

The conversations surrounding establishing a facilities department involve timing and structure. When is it time to create a facility department? What are its functions?

As a 14-year-old brand, approximately half the restaurants will need updates, and the average equipment lifecycle is six years. Snyder advised taking a proactive approach to facilities management to leadership.

"We're committed to our facilities," said Mike Clock, President and Chief Financial Officer at Newk's Eatery. "Our presentation to guests includes our service, atmosphere and ambiance. We're weighing costs and efficiency to determine the best approach."

Clock said he is leaning towards hiring a dedicated person who is focused 100 percent on facilities. With the company's aggressive growth initiative, he expects this facility professional to source preferred vendors, establish national maintenance contracts and perform repairs for regional restaurants. He envisions the position will support company restaurants as well as franchisees to ensure all restaurants receive the same level of service and cost efficiencies. The program will be piloted with the company restaurants first. Once it is perfected, it will be extended to the franchisees as a service and a benefit.

"We'll make the business case and show the franchisees what we've learned and the savings and efficiencies we've achieved," Clock said. "And if franchisees see the benefits, we'll make it part of the franchise agreement."

## Bounding Success

The Newcombs' second restaurant venture is another success. As the brand enters new markets, it is gaining the favor of new customers. More people across the country are discovering what the southern region already knows: Newk's commands a loyal following with its fresh, great-tasting food.

The industry has also taken note.

This year, Chris Newcomb was a recipient of the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association's (IFMA) Silver Plate Award in the Chain Limited Service category. Silver Plate winners are nominated by IFMA members and industry leaders. A distinguished panel of national trade press, foodservice experts and past Gold and Silver Plate award winners choose the winners.

Last year, Newk's was included in National Restaurant News' Top 200 Chains. It was also recognized as the fifth fastest-growing chain in the second 100. It also made FastCasual.com's Top 100 Fast Casual list. The winners were judged on growth and sales and innovation across several categories, including technology, design, customer experience, sustainability and menu offerings.

Its commitment to scratch cooking with high-quality ingredients, along with its welcoming and attentive service, makes Newk's Eatery a serious contender in the competitive fast-casual market.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.