

For The Love Of Biscuits

Sherleen Mahoney

Bojangles' Famous Chicken 'n Biscuits wins over hearts with scratch-made Southern recipes

The alluring scent of Bojangles' warm and flaky buttermilk biscuits has been enticing and delighting customers for four decades. Handmade from scratch every 20 minutes by certified biscuit makers, using a proprietary 48-step process, these famous biscuits are the cornerstone of Bojangles' success.

They can be enjoyed plain, with melted cheddar cheese, smothered with savory gravy or as breakfast sandwiches, such as the popular Cajun Filet Biscuit or the Bacon Egg and Cheese Biscuit, which are served all day long. For something sweet, the company recently brought back the fan favorite Cinnamon Biscuit, topped with warm, buttery cinnamon and icing.

The biscuits are paired with more than 80 percent of the menu items, including the favored Cajun fried chicken, which is never frozen, marinated for 12 hours and hand breaded.

The company's commitment to freshness and scratch-made Southern staples has made Bojangles' a popular and enduring brand.

Mastering the Art of Biscuits

As a core menu item, perfecting the buttermilk biscuit is very important to the brand. As such, every summer, Bojangles' holds the Master Biscuit Maker Challenge.

"Our Master Biscuit Maker Challenge was created to ensure that our customers receive the very best biscuit all day, every day," said Kenny Avery, COO of Bojangles'.

In 2016, Bojangles' celebrated the 20th anniversary of the competition.

The competition begins with the recertification of more than 1,500 Bojangles' biscuit makers. They take a written exam on the Bojangles' biscuit-making process. Then, they compete locally and then regionally to make the best biscuits.

This year, nine Master Biscuit Maker finalists from company-owned restaurants and eight from franchised restaurants were invited to compete in the final round at the Research & Development Kitchen at the Bojangles' Support Center in Charlotte, N.C.

They received the VIP treatment. They were driven to the Support Center in a Bojangles'-branded vehicle and welcomed with a red-carpet event.

During the final round, each finalist prepared a batch of biscuits that adhere to Bojangles' strict specifications, while Support Center team members cheered them

on. Judges from the Support Center, comprised of longer-tenured team members, scored the biscuits on a variety of factors, including appearance, color and taste.

"The competition is always a fun time for us," said Cliff Cermak, PR and Media Relations Specialist at Bojangles'. " It really is a wonderful showing of strong culture and team unity."

This year's winners are Sonya Lewis of Greensboro, N.C., named the Master Biscuit Maker Champion representing Bojangles' company owned restaurants, and Taylor Butler of Jefferson City, Tenn., who was awarded the honor for Bojangles' franchised locations. Both winners received a \$2,500 cash prize, a championship trophy, a spot on the Wall of Fame at the Support Center lobby and bragging rights for a year.

Additionally, all finalists received a \$250 cash prize and a trophy.

"We are very proud of all of our menu items at Bojangles', but for us, it always starts with the biscuit," Avery said in a press release. "I personally want to congratulate Sonya and Taylor on earning this prestigious award. We're proud to call them our Bojangles' Master Biscuit Maker Champions."

An Eye on the Future

To ensure Bojangles' remains highly relevant with its loyal customers and appeals to new ones, the brand will soon open its newest restaurant design concept in Greenville, S.C.

"Any brand that wants to be relevant for the long haul must have an eye focused on the future, specifically on what's changing from a customer demographic and how customers want to experience the brand," Avery said. "We're happy with our current building, but we can't stay here if we want to be relevant. That's why we've spent the past 18 months working on this redesign. We don't want to wake up one morning to find we're no longer a vibrant, thriving and growing brand."

The existing 10-year-old restaurant design of brick and EIFS exterior with towers and arches, and interior with tile and carpet in an open-floor dining room, will be replaced with a new 3,900-square-foot restaurant with features designed to enhance customer experience.

Bojangles' partnered with San Francisco-based strategy, retail and guest experience design firm Tesser to create the new concept. But before an RFP was sent out, Bojangles' analyzed the current concept: What did they like? What didn't they like? And what was the competition doing? This gave them a starting point for designing the new concept.

Tesser consultants visited the restaurants, met with the executive team, operators and customers in various markets: Charlotte, (an established market), Atlanta (a growing market) and Nashville, Tenn., (a relatively new market) to gain an understanding of what makes Bojangles' such a special brand.

Based on their findings, Tesser proposed several concepts for review.

A multifaceted team from facilities, marketing, operations, franchising, construction, as well as several franchise operators split into three groups to review the designs.

One group tackled the exterior, one discussed the dining room and restrooms, and the other group reviewed the kitchen and frontline.

The teams pulled different elements from these concepts to create one design. The concepts were tested on focus groups in several cities. Based on the feedback, the team fine-tuned the design to arrive at the final concept, a design that everyone felt very satisfied with and excited about.

The new restaurant design features a distinctive and contemporary exterior that combines materials such as brick, tile and steel canopies. Bold graphics of "Famous Chicken 'n Biscuits" and "Made from Scratch Since 1977" celebrate the brand's heritage. Soft lighting and landscaped planters alongside the building and in the drive-thru lane give the restaurant a warm and welcoming feel.

When customers enter the restaurant, they'll encounter the "Biscuit Theater," where they can watch the biscuit makers bake fresh biscuits every 20 minutes.

"We learned customers in newer markets find it difficult to believe we make biscuits from scratch," Avery said. "That's the reason we included the Biscuit Theater. We are going to put our dough where our mouths are: We're going to let people watch us make biscuits."

The queue area also was improved by adjusting the location of the doors to create a longer, yet natural queue area with line of sight to the menu boards.

"Customers did not like the idea of a queue line; they felt like they were in an amusement park," Avery said. "They wanted a different waiting experience; a queuing area that doesn't feel like a corral."

Colorful crocks replaced the stainless-steel warming trays, and the increased use of glass gives the food display area added appeal.

"Customers said they liked seeing the food upfront; it gave them an impression of quality and freshness, but they didn't like the stainless steel," Avery said.

customers, especially young families, expressed a preference for more private areas. So, the new design offers various seating experiences. There are tucked-away areas, high-top community tables, counter seating and even Adirondack chairs. The dining room also features Wi-fi and multi-device charging stations.

New uniforms for all Bojangles' team members complete the updated look.

With the help of an outside consultant who focuses solely on kitchen layouts and design, the back of the house also was redesigned. The consultant conducted time-in-motion studies to design a kitchen layout that focused on food flow and efficiencies.

A top-down analysis of all the equipment also was conducted.

"Going through this process allowed us to ensure we had the best equipment in place, not only in cooking and food preparation, but also the holding of our product," said Jeff Wells, Senior Director of Facilities at Bojangles'. "We were able to remove and add different pieces of equipment we felt worked best."

The new layout ensures production efficiencies and allows the staff to deliver the freshest food.

"Our customers are going to see Bojangles' as we see the brand through our eyes," Avery said. "We hope they will become even more loyal fans. For us, this project is all about the longevity of the brand."

The company plans to incorporate elements of the new design into a remodel of three existing Bojangles' restaurants in Charlotte in 2017.

Welcome to RFMA

Bojangles' facilities department is charged with maintaining more than 300 company operated restaurants. This includes restaurants more than 30 years old and the new concept buildings.

Led by Avery and Wells, the team consists of 24 technicians and two facility managers. The team plans to grow in 2017 by adding three more technicians and a third facility manager.

At Bojangles', facility managers wear many hats. They are responsible for hiring, developing and supervising the technicians. They also schedule preventive maintenance, dispatch vendors to assist with needed repairs, assist with turning over new restaurants to the operations team from the contractors, facilitate one-year inspections of new stores with general contractors and the construction department, identify and source new vendors in new and emerging markets, and review and analyze current spending to look for ways to reduce costs.

"We have such a hard-working, dedicated and loyal team," Wells said. "It's like one big family. People have their own strengths and everyone always pitches in to help each other."

When restaurants require assistance, the restaurant operations staff emails the facility managers who assign the work to technicians or to third-party vendors. In the near future, the company will implement a self-service portal, where the process will be automated and service tickets will be tracked through completion.

"We are very excited about rolling this out to our stores and believe this will result in significant efficiencies for Bojangles' and our team members," Wells said.

Wells, who has been with Bojangles' for eight years, is relatively new to the facilities industry. He spent seven years in operations and the past year in facilities.

While in his new role, a colleague gave him an issue of Facilitator magazine, which introduced him to RFMA.

"I said to myself, 'This is something I should be a part of because it will help me find the resources to help me do my job better,'" he said. "I won't have to reinvent the wheel; instead, I can capitalize on those great ideas that are already out there. I know RFMA is going to give me ideas that will help me do my job even better."

He joined RFMA a few months ago and has already passed the CRFP test, tying the record for the highest score. He attributed his CRFP success to his work experience.

"When you've been in restaurants all your life, you pick up a lot of knowledge along the way," Wells said. "Equipment fascinates me; it always has. Transferring from operations to facilities was easier than I thought it would be."

He's looking forward to the annual conference in Orlando, where he will connect with peers, network, discover resources and achieve a better understanding of RFMA.

Random Acts of Bo

Through social media, Bojangles' learned that customers visit the restaurants to celebrate happy occasions, as well as when they need to be cheered up during difficult times.

The company, along with its advertising and digital agency, launched a campaign called Random Acts of Bo, in which team members surprise people in less-than-enjoyable situations.

The first random act was at the Charlotte Douglas Airport in September 2015. Passengers waiting for their luggage at the B2 baggage claim were surprised when 180 boxes of Bojangles' meals with "Take Me Home" tags flowed by on the conveyor belt. They were delighted when they saw Bojangles' chicken, biscuits and iced tea inside.

"Once we saw people's reactions to the Big Bo Boxes coming out of the baggage claim conveyer, we knew this was a special campaign," said Colby Anderson, Digital Marketing Manager at Bojangles'.

Since then, the company has continued the campaign by building a Bojangles' vending machine in The Wash House Laundromat in Charlotte. Bojangles' employees hid inside the machine. When patrons pressed a button, arms emerged to deliver free meals to delighted customers. Bojangles' employees also visited the University of North Carolina's Charlotte campus to reward students who finished their final exams. The most recent random act took place at Dorman High School in Spartanburg, S.C. Bojangles' employees surprised the Friday night football game workers with free meals and gift cards to thank them for their behind-the-scenes work.

The campaign is ongoing so more Random Acts of Bo are being planned and setup for the near future.

A Culture of Respect

Bojangles' owes its enduring success to its commitment to high quality food and the company's culture of trust and servant leadership. It's a culture that was deliberately and carefully crafted to guide the brand forward.

"We believe that when we care for, respect, trust people and serve their needs, they will become more engaged, and if they are more engaged, they will serve our customers at a higher level," Avery said. "We've gone to painstaking efforts to ensure people are respected and view ourselves as servant leaders first."

Since communication is essential to a strong culture, the company releases an internal video series called "In the Loop." Videos share upcoming marketing promotions, exciting company news, community engagement initiatives, and thank-you messages during the holidays.

There are also leadership conferences, regional restaurant rallies and management team meetings to hone leadership skills and keep employees motivated and engaged.

An important part of the company's culture is giving back to the communities they serve. Bojangles' partners with a wide variety of nonprofits, such as Toys for Tots, Red Cross, Muscular Dystrophy Association and the Special Olympics.

Locally, an organization that is near and dear to Bojangles' is South Carolina Future Minds. For the past seven years, Bojangles' has hosted an annual Teacher Appreciation Breakfast for the state's 80+ District Teachers of the Year. Since 2010, the company has raised more than \$140,000 in support of the state's public school system and donated more than 20,000 books to teachers.

Through it all, Bojangles' leadership never takes the contribution of its employees for granted.

"It all starts with our folks in the restaurants," Avery said. "These team members are on the front line each and every day. We call them the real heroes of our business. We often say it's all about the biscuit, but from an operations perspective, it's all about the people who make and serve the biscuit."

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.

Sonya Lewis, Greensboro, N.C. 2016 Master Biscuit Maker Champion for Company Restaurants

Sonya Lewis celebrated her 10-year anniversary with Bojangles' in January 2016. She loves to bake, especially cakes for her family. During the competition, she was confident she would do well; she has reached the final round five times and even tied for the Master Biscuit Maker win in 2012. She was so excited to clinch the title this year. She attributes her win to hard work and practice. She starts work each day at 4 a.m. and is always willing to help train other biscuit makers.

Taylor Butler, Jefferson City, Tenn. 2016 Master Biscuit Maker Champion for Franchise Restaurants

Taylor Butler has worked at Bojangles' for three and a half years. She always has had a love for baking, especially cookies and cakes. She was very excited to attend the finals. Being welcomed at the Support Center with a red-carpet event made her feel very special. She did not think she would win the competition because she is fairly new to biscuit making for Bojangles'. She was shocked when she was declared the winner. She attributes her win to her unit director for encouraging her to enter the competition and to all the people who encourage her every day.

Back by Popular Demand: The Cinnamon Biscuit!

In November 2016, Bojangles' added a popular item back to the menu at participating restaurants: its Cinnamon Biscuit, topped with warm, buttery cinnamon and icing.

For years, fans wrote messages to the company, asking for the Cinnamon Biscuit to return.

"If I had known the last time I ate the Cinnamon Biscuit was the last time I would ever eat it, I would have never stopped eating. Please, please bring it back wrote Griffin R.

"Bojangles', when are you going to bring the Cinnamon Biscuit back?? I've been waiting for over seven years." wrote Jahron Love

The company listened and brought it back as a permanent addition to its menu.

"The Bojangles' Cinnamon Biscuit brings together the sensational aroma and flavor of the best cinnamon, with the freshness of our delicious made-from-scratch hot buttermilk biscuits and the result is simply wonderful," said Mike Bearss, Senior Vice President of Research and Development at Bojangles' Restaurants, on the company's website.