

Midas Touch

Sherleen Mahoney

Fox Restaurant Concepts is a brand incubator for Sam Fox's restaurant ideas

Sam Fox, the visionary behind Fox Restaurant Concepts, finds inspiration everywhere. It may happen while he's traveling to a new city, stumbling upon a great space, discovering a new ingredient or meeting a great chef that inspires his next big idea for a restaurant concept.

Since 1998, he has created more than 20 successful restaurant concepts. His name carries weight in the Phoenix food scene. His fans have come to expect an elevated experience— fresh and innovative dishes served with warm hospitality in beautiful dining spaces.

The company's eclectic portfolio includes Mexican cuisine (Blanco Taco + Tequila), Italian cuisine (North Italia), burgers (Zinburger Wine and Burger Bar), the live music and bar scene (Culinary Dropout), American cuisine (Olive & Ivy, The Greene House, The Henry, Wildflower and The Arrogant Butcher), seafood (Little Cleo's), healthy offerings (Flower Child), and a banquet hall (The Showcase Room). Some are thriving single locations while others are expanding within Arizona and across state lines. Growth markets include California, Florida, Georgia, Nevada and Texas.

"The company's emphasis on growth is carving out so many opportunities for current and potential employees," said Allie Marconi, Brand Manager at Fox Restaurant Concepts. "It's also a really exciting time for our guests who have been waiting for us to expand into these new markets."

When inspiration strikes, Fox is never impulsive or impatient. He takes a deliberative, experimental approach. He designs and builds one local restaurant to test its viability before he considers growing the brand. Most importantly, he relies heavily on guest feedback to help him on the concept.

His latest concept is Doughbird, a pizza and rotisserie restaurant that opened in Phoenix in March 2017. It quickly built a loyal following, becoming a local dining hot spot.

True to his word, one recent improvement he made was changing the sandwich bread to a heartier variety that holds up better.

"Sam really listens to guests—what works and what doesn't, and taking those tidbits and turning them into reality," Marconi said. "Any feedback does not go unwarranted."

Fox isn't interested in global brand domination. His company's purpose is to innovate new restaurants. When a brand reaches maturity, a similar-minded partner takes ownership of the brand and continues growing it as its own. This create-develop-sell cycle frees up space for Fox's next restaurant concept ideas.

"We never want 100 locations of any one brand," Marconi said. "That's not who we are. We want to be a brand incubator— around 50-60 restaurants is our sweet spot. We consider ourselves innovators and want to stay in that space."

True Food Kitchen, a healthy, chef driven, seasonal-inspired restaurant brand, was recently part of the portfolio, but when the concept opened its 20th location, the majority owner partner, Center Bridge, took over a larger part of the brand.

The next brands poised for growth are North Italia, which serves modern Italian fare, and Flower Child, a convenient health conscious brand. The Cheesecake Factory, who has a minority stake in the brands, has invested for growth. Fox believes The Cheesecake Factory's culture of scratch cooking and focus on guests and team members align with his values, and the partnership will focus on national growth over the next several years.

Designing Fox's Vision

Sam Fox aims to build beautiful restaurants that make everyone feel welcome and comfortable. His restaurants are meant for everyday dining, where couples can enjoy a romantic date night, girlfriends can gather for a girls' night and families can enjoy a fun night out. It's important to him that disparate groups feel comfortable in the same space.

The company does not rely on prototypes for any of its concepts. Each restaurant has a unique design, and Fox plays a large role in the process. He provides the initial vision and direction, and the design team works to make it a reality. He is known for his great design eye and meticulousness in choosing everything from fabrics and curtains to chairs and even soup bowls.

The design team is drawn to unique elements, especially for furniture and lighting. They source directly with multiple vendors for each concept, always keeping an eye out for custom and handmade pieces that align with the design. Over the years, they have formed great partnerships with local craftsmen for custom pieces, steelwork, detailed mill work and lighting.

While durability and longevity are considered when selecting materials, the team does not shy away from selecting items that may require additional maintenance in order to ensure the design is right.

For the recently opened North Italia in Plano, Texas, the design team partnered with Testani Design Troupe. The restaurant is located in the new Legacy West urban village, an upscale destination with fine retail, dining, residential, hotel and office spaces.

The design team wanted North Italia's design to convey an upscale yet approachable dining experience. They accomplished this by placing high-end materials in a clean and simple way and emphasizing architectural elements. For example, large eye-catching glass globe lights line the bar area, grand brass mirrors layered with potted plants are affixed to the walls, and booths with table lamps form the center of the space to create a comfortable ambiance.

"We want our guests to feel like they're in our home," said Meredith Ogden, General Manager of the North Italia in Plano, Texas. "We take really good care of them. And of course, the food is delicious. We have had dishes on our menu for years because our guests love them so much and we can't take them off."

The open kitchen showcases chefs busy cooking from scratch. As guests dine, they can watch the kitchen staff chop crisp vegetables, make fresh pasta and pizza, and prepare savory meatballs.

"Our pasta extruder is from Italy, and someone stands by it for eight to 10 hours a day making handmade pasta," Ogden said. "We are truly a scratch kitchen. Being proud of the product you put out is really important to us."

Since Legacy West is an urban destination with high foot traffic, North Italia also has a great bar area and outdoor patio.

Ogden and her team take pride in their restaurant. Their passion and commitment are reflected in how they treat guests, the high and consistent food quality and how they manage the restaurant.

"The store's management team owns responsibility for everything," Ogden said. "We're responsible for the financials, taking care of the restaurant, the facilities and hiring the team. So, it's like running your own business, with the support of the company."

Flower Child, the company's first healthy, fast-casual restaurant, originally opened in Phoenix in 2014.

Its newest location in Dallas' In wood Village opened in March 2017.

The design team noted the shopping center's distinct neighborhood feel and sourced decor from local antique shops for the restaurant. There are also a number of gyms and Pilates and yoga studios nearby, which is the perfect location for a health conscious brand that sources proteins from ethical and responsible ranchers and organic produce from local farmers.

The team wanted guests to feel welcome and for the decor to emulate the high-quality fast-casual food.

"We want to make our guests feel happy when inside, as well as pay homage to the community," said Thomas Stainbrook, General Manager of Flower Child in Dallas.

The exterior is painted an inviting garden green. Inside, green also is a prominent color. Honey wood tones and colorful wall murals and tiles create a bright and vibrant atmosphere. Wicker chairs and potted lemon trees give the space a natural feel.

"We love that the Flower Child in Dallas has a bright and simple design with elements that were planned for just that location," said Marji Arnon, Vice President of Design and Development. "For instance, the 'Radiate from within' mural and the beverage counter tile can only be found at that location. It was also the second location where we used the green store front, which really helps it pop from the exterior."

The open kitchen includes a prep counter and island, double stacked ovens, grills, soup kettles and an open-flame pizza oven. There are no freezers, fryers or microwaves. The staff comes in every day at 6 a.m. to prep, cook and bake. The restaurant opens at 11 a.m.

"We do all the prep work and cooking for all to see," Stainbrook said. "We want everyone to know we're not hiding anything. It's real, honest and true food. What you see is what you get. A guest had asked to have her soup warmed up. I told her I'd bring her a fresh bowl, and she said, 'You don't have to do that; just pop this bowl in the microwave.' I told her, 'We don't have microwaves here!'"

Stainbrook said Fox stops by the restaurant when he's in Dallas. "He'll come in and have lunch and say hi to everyone," he said. "You wouldn't think an owner of a company would do that but he's very personable, and it's very cool to see him interact with the team members."

Stainbrook also challenges his team to go above and beyond to make guests feel welcomed and valued.

He recalled a couple who was in the restaurant for a date night. After dinner, they had planned to purchase their movie tickets. A team member went to the theater to purchase the tickets for the couple so they didn't have to rush through their meal.

"The wife broke down in tears," he said. "She told me they hadn't had a date night in eight months. It was a great idea to do that for them and that they appreciated the gesture so much."

What makes Fox's restaurants so successful is the constant strive towards perfecting design, service and food.

Keeping It Fresh

As a nimble restaurant company, there are minimal standard processes for maintaining the 42 restaurants within the 14 concepts. Yet, the spontaneous method works for the company.

And with no prototypes, the equipment, furniture, materials and finishes are not only different between the concepts but also different between the individual restaurants within the concepts.

"It's hard to streamline what we do," said Kory Kilmer, Facility Manager at Fox Restaurant Concepts. "It's common for specs to be changed frequently. We have an ownership and leadership group who are very hands-on and passionate, and we want to always make things better or want to freshen things up with a new spec. It may be challenging to source items and keep everything organized, but it keeps everything fresh and cool, and that approach has helped us be as successful as we are."

As an example, Kilmer said within a year and a half, North Italia has changed its dining room chairs twice and refresh plans of older restaurants tend to change during the refresh process.

Kilmer, a former general manager for Culinary Dropout, and John Steen, Director of Facilities for Fox Restaurant Concepts, make up the two-man team that runs the facilities department. Together, they bring 40 years of restaurant experience to the table.

Steen has been with Fox Restaurant Concepts since the beginning. He started his career as a server at Wildflower in 1998 (Fox's first concept) while attending the University of Arizona College of Engineering and Mines and serving in the U.S. Army Reserves 208th Transportation Company. In 2001, he helped open a concept called Bloom. While serving and bar tending there, he earned a sommelier certification and managed the wine program. He became the general manager of The Greene House in 2005 and soon became an area manager for a number of Scottsdale restaurants. He was promoted to regional manager for North Italia in 2009. In 2013, he transitioned to the director of facilities position.

"My time in operations helps me understand what is important on the facilities side to keep restaurants running well, with great food, service and ambiance," Steen said. "It has helped me make better decisions with regards to equipment purchasing, maintenance as well as maintenance schedules. Coming from the operations world, I understand where the deficiencies are with our teams when it comes to education on equipment and building care. I was the type of manager who asked the repair tech questions to further understand why something failed and if there was anything we could have done at the store level to prevent it. It also has helped in the ability to be sensitive to the budgetary needs while not taking a pass on any needed repairs or maintenance."

Steen and Kilmer work well together, communicating frequently and supporting each other.

"The good thing about it being just the two of us is working 15 feet from each other so we don't need formal meetings, and if one of us travels, the other will be in the office," Kilmer said. "We don't travel as much as our peers because the nature of what we do is more about coordinating, which is easier to do from the office."

When facility issues occur, the restaurants use Service Channel to initiate work orders, which are dispatched to vetted vendors. Emergency issues requiring immediate assistance are also submitted to the work order management system. The regional manager also is notified, as well as Steen and Kilmer, if needed. A vendor will call the restaurant with an estimated arrival time. If equipment is still under warranty, Service Channel will connect the restaurant with the manufacturer.

"About half of the restaurants are within Arizona, so we're the biggest restaurant entity in the state," Kilmer said. "This gives us leverage and benefits in establishing great vendor relationships. As we expand nationwide, we will continue establishing more of those great relationships."

The restaurant staff is trained to be self-reliant and to handle issues the best they can. They will reach out to the facilities department if they need extra guidance and expertise with finding resolutions. Additionally, the facilities department handles small capital spending projects and restaurant refreshes.

It is a busy time for Kilmer and Steen. The company is set to grow by almost 50 percent next year. They plan to open three new restaurants by the end of 2017 and 18 are planned for 2018, mostly in new markets. They are also building a North Italia and remodeling a Bar North in Scottsdale and updating a North Italia in Kansas City, Mo., with new paint and flooring.

"My peers may have hundreds of restaurants that are the same, and they can plug and play, whereas we do a lot of stuff on the fly and figure things out," Kilmer said. "It's not a science, but it keeps things interesting. I can't fault anything either because everything Sam Fox touches turns to gold. It's an exciting environment to be in. We may not build easy-to-maintain restaurants, but we build beautiful restaurants."

Part of the Community

With each restaurant that opens, Fox and his team understand the importance of being part of the community.

Fox Restaurant Concepts is committed to charitable giving through its Feed the Soul program. The program partners with No Kid Hungry and the Association of Arizona Food Banks to raise awareness for hunger-related issues and nutritional education programs.

The company also donates resources and funds to more than 400 organizations every year. Additionally, the restaurants host benefit nights for sports teams, schools and organizations; staff volunteer on holidays such as Earth Day and Thanksgiving, participate in local culinary events and donate gift cards at fund raising events. Some of the company's major partnerships include St. Vincent DePaul in Phoenix and The Boys & Girls Clubs of Tucson, Arizona.

"Every week we have something going on," Marconi said. "It may be a benefit night for a school or a little league, or a pretzel drop at a church. We are serious about being part of a community."

A goal for 2018 is to give each brand a charitable identity focused on helping children.

"Sam is a big family guy; family means the world to him," Marconi said. "To help families, specifically children, is what matters at the end of the day."

Ideas Aplenty

Sam Fox's mind is a wellspring of culinary ideas. All his traveling and observing, the tasting and listening, the networking and studying will bring forth his next great idea. And with the company's growth, it will be more than Arizonians who will be anticipating what comes next.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.

Beautiful Bohemian

For Flower Child, Sam Fox wanted to create a healthy and convenient restaurant concept. "We wanted to create a restaurant that made eating healthy easy and accessible, a place where someone would want to eat every day. We saw so much success with pizza in the fast-casual space with Sauce that we knew an opportunity existed to create a health-food concept in that same atmosphere. Flower Child makes you feel happy the moment you walk through the door, and even happier when you get your food quickly and onto the rest of your day."