

# Fun On A Bun

Sherleen Mahoney

## RED ROBIN GOURMET BURGERS AND BREWS GROWS UP ALONGSIDE ITS GUESTS

For nearly five decades, Red Robin Gourmet Burgers and Brews has been a popular destination for burger-loving families. It's where kids are free to be kids, and the whole family can enjoy unique, high-quality hamburgers and bottomless fries.

The extensive menu offers more than 30 innovative burgers. Guests can enjoy inventive flavor pairings, such as the Banzai Burger, which combines teriyaki sauce and grilled pineapple; the Bee's Knees chicken-and-waffles burger; and the award-winning Billion Dollar Baby, a Black Angus beef burger topped with peppered bacon, a fried potato cake, a truffle-flavored cheese blend and melted Fontina cheese. Last year, Red Robin released the buzzworthy Red Ramen Burger for a limited time; the bun was made of soft ramen noodles.

"You see fried egg on a lot of burgers now, but we've actually had that on our menu for quite a while," said Missy Robinson, Marketing/ PR Manager at Red Robin. "Our guests know that as crazy or off-the-wall our burgers may sound, if we're offering it, it's going to be pretty amazing, and they're going to try it. That's the trust we've built with our guests."

Red Robin takes pride in its high-quality ingredients and its customizable offerings.

The gourmet burgers are handmade with half a pound of fresh, never-frozen premium Black Angus beef. The all-natural, cage-free chicken breasts have no hormones or steroids and are sourced from 100-percent family-owned farms. The pork is humanely and domestically raised. All salad greens are from GMO-free family farms. Additionally, every burger on the menu can be substituted with a turkey burger, BOCA vegan burger or Gardenburger veggie burger, and lettuce can be substituted for buns.

"We can substitute and customize just about anything you ask for," Robinson said.

Red Robin has even won awards for its allergy-friendly menu. For four consecutive years, the brand has been recognized by AllergyEats, a leading guide to allergy-friendly restaurants, as a Top 10 Most Allergy-Friendly Restaurant Chain in America. On Red Robin's website, guests can select the allergens they want to avoid, which populates a list of safe options. Restaurant servers also are trained on how to guide allergen-sensitive guests on choosing safe menu items. The entire team follows strict guidelines to ensure food safety. The back of the house also receives an alert to ensure special precautions are taken when preparing orders.

Embracing Americana

Red Robin fans have fond memories of enjoying great family meals at their local restaurants. As the kids got older, however, families felt as if they were growing out of the brand. Red Robin doesn't want to remain a fond memory; it wants to be relevant for the young as well as the young at heart.

So, in 2015, Red Robin created a prototype that allows the brand to grow up with its customers.

"We often heard guests saying, 'I used to love Red Robin when I was a kid.' We understand that these guests want a different experience now that they are older," Robinson said. "The prototype is perfect for a guys' night out, as well as a family coming in for a meal after a soccer game. Even though the kids are grown, we want to tell our guests, 'We're still here for you, and we still have the great food you remember.'"

The company has designed a beautiful and trendy space for adults who grew up loving Red Robin to come back, as well as reimagining a fun area for families. The décor embraces nostalgic American pop culture themes.

The Red Robin on Presidio Vista Drive in Fort Worth, Texas, which opened in October 2016, is the first of these new locations. This year, 17 more locations are planned nationwide.

The exterior features an eye-catching multicolor wood tower.

"If you apply the squint test when looking at the exterior of our competitors, they start to blend together," said Troy Griffin, Creative Design Director at Red Robin. "We came up with the wood tower to set us apart."

Inside, the inviting space is divided into three sections.

The gorgeous bar area is for guests age 21 and older. Warm wood tones complement the sea blue and taupe color palette. A whimsical beer-bottle pendant chandelier and a stylish back-lit U.S. map made from craft beer labels from around the country accent the room. And of course, there are plenty of televisions.

"We've closed off the bar area to keep it separate from families," said Mark Gomolla, CRFP, Director of Facilities at Red Robin. "It targets guests who want to enjoy watching sports and sharing stories through dinner. Another area closer to the bar is set up as a gathering area where there are finer dining tables and chairs for our guests to relax while enjoying a quiet meal."

The décor in the family-friendly area has everything a kid would want. There are giant LEGO-shaped burger, fries and shake and large Rubik's cubes. On the ceiling is an artwork gallery. The wall art includes Pac-Man mosaics, collages made from 8track and VHS tapes, and Warholesque framed prints.

"Nowadays, everyone is looking down at their screens," Griffin said. "What I love about the new design are all the conversation starters. For example, I grew up with 8track tapes, but my kids didn't. So, when a kid sees them on the wall, he or she may ask a parent about them."

Large, honey-colored wood planks divide the space while maintaining an open feel.

“Red Robin started as a tavern, and over the years, has alternated its focus between serving families and bar guests,” said Crystal Boudreau, General Manager of the new Fort Worth location. “The new design allows us to have the best of both worlds: We can cater to our bar guests as well as to families.”

“We recognized we wanted to target adults more and allow them to enjoy themselves, too,” said Amanda McAllister, Director of Capital Purchasing at Red Robin. “With the new design, Red Robin is more grown up. We’re still very family friendly, but with a more modern design.”

The prototype was built in collaboration with the Facilities team.

“With every material we chose, whether it was the carpet or the fabrics, it’s a collaborative effort between Design, Capital Purchasing and Facilities,” Griffin said.

Griffin admits flooring is a challenge. Carpet provides a welcoming feel and absorbs sounds well, which are key elements in the new design, but it is difficult to keep clean. As such, the Design team is currently testing stained concrete and drop ceilings in upcoming projects.

### Humming Along

To keep operations humming along, the Facilities team employs six regional facility managers who are charged with 75 corporate restaurants each. There are 465 corporate restaurants and 82 franchises.

The company relies on a work-order system to handle small repairs and maintenance items. Work orders are dispatched to vendors, who reply with an estimated time of arrival.

The facility managers are responsible for larger repairs and maintenance work, any issue that may jeopardize operations and incur possible down times, and preventive maintenance. Preventive maintenance items include HVAC/R, grease trap pumping, hood cleaning, fire suppression and broiler maintenance.

“We put the onus on the operators to maintain their own buildings from a small repair and maintenance threshold, but the facility managers are closely tied to their restaurants to ensure the operators have the support they need,” McAllister said.

“We also set up training programs with the operators to create efficiencies,” Gomolla added. “We give them the tools to help themselves.”

The franchisees are multi-unit, multi-concept owners so they mostly have their own facilities teams and programs.

Almost five years ago, Red Robin's culinary team recommended a change to the cooking platform. The restaurants were using a conveyer broiler, followed by an electric cheese melter. The team wanted to replace the cheese melter with a chargrill. Testing and market research indicated this adjustment produced a better-tasting product. An unintended outcome, though, was the production of more grease.

"We knew this method would produce more grease, so we started exploring solutions right away," Gomolla said.

The Facilities team was correct. They began seeing grease accumulation on the roofs, and the filters were becoming dirtier faster.

The team increased hood cleanings from four to six times a year—from quarterly to every other month. They also installed a more concentrated hood filter and upgraded the exhaust fans to maximize the removal of grease.

This tactic, aided by the Capital Purchasing team's product sourcing, successfully helps the restaurants manage the extra grease production.

"Amanda researches and orders the best products that benefit operations," Gomolla said.

"Facilities' input is huge when we make any spec changes," McAllister said. "They are the ones who have to maintain it, so they have to be on board with the capital decisions."

So far, approximately 60 percent of the restaurants have the upgraded fans and filters installed. When fan replacements are needed, the Facilities team will upgrade them to the new specification.

Another major initiative is the current rollout of energy management systems (EMS). The company started testing EMS in 2010, before it was mainstream.

"We try to be innovative," McAllister said.

"We completed an LED swap out when it was still considered advanced."

The EMS pilot involved 40 restaurants. After one year, the ROI became apparent, and another 40 were installed.

"It's a no brainer at this point," McAllister said. "The cost of systems has come down so significantly."

The EMS system-wide rollout will be completed in the first quarter of 2017.

"The savings are real, and we're already seeing it on a larger level," McAllister said.

The Facilities department prides itself on the standards and best practices it has in place.

"I'm constantly surprised by how buttoned-up we are," McAllister said. "There are six people keeping their eyes and ears closely attached to these buildings and working really hard every day to ensure they are maintained properly."

Still, the team is always trying to improve and learn new and better ways to solve problems.

"We're not content with the status quo," Gomolla said.

This is why Gomolla has been an active member of RFMA for so many years.

The Facilities team goes to every annual conference and comes back excited and recharged.

"It's amazing how much information and how many ideas we come back with every year," Gomolla said.

### The Value of Fun

Red Robin attributes its enduring and successful brand to its strong B.U.R.G.E.R. culture: Bottomless fun, Unwavering integrity, Relentless focus on improvement, Genuine spirit of service, Extraordinary people, Recognized burger authority. It's why many employees span their entire careers at Red Robin and guests have been so loyal over the years.

"We really take care of each other," McAllister said. "We have a community and family feel at work, and fun is a core value."

One way employees support each other is by donating to the company's Giving Fund. Twice a month, employees donate a small portion of their paychecks to the fund, which can be used by team members for emergencies and times of need.

"Small donations add up quickly," McAllister said. "The Giving Fund has contributed in a huge way to people's lives."

The corporate team often participates in charity campaigns that benefit the Giving Fund.

Last year, the home office participated in No-Shave November. For a small entry fee, participants were given the opportunity to spin a Mustache-for-Cash wheel. The wheel included all types of mustaches, from pencil-thin mustaches to major beards, chops and sideburns. The spinner was required to copy the mustache style he landed on for 30 days. More than \$800 was raised for the Giving Fund.

"It was so entertaining," McAllister said. "A team member in finance grew such a crazy beard that he renewed his license to memorialize it for 10 years."

Since 2007, the fund has granted \$6.6 million to help more than 4,000 team members.

Red Robin's leadership has always seen the value of cultivating a culture of fun. Recently, CEO Denny Marie Post proved how beneficial some lightheartedness can be.

Last summer, Post made a bet with the operations team. She proposed a challenge: If the corporate restaurants could improve guest ratings by a certain metric by the end of 2017, she would get her first tattoo.

The operators agreed, and by consistently providing a high level of customer service, the goal was achieved a year early.

During the 2017 Leadership Conference, held in early February in Las Vegas, Post held up her end of the bargain. She showed off her new shoulder tattoo of Billy the Burger on the last day of the conference.

It is this willingness of the leadership to have fun at work that spreads contagious enthusiasm and motivation throughout the team, as well as result in greatly improving guest experiences.

### A Song for Tomorrow

With the beautiful prototype, Red Robin is primed to welcome back its former guests, delight its current fans, as well as attract new ones. And though the look has changed, the bold flavors guests remember and have come to expect, and culture of fun and exceptional service will never waver, ensuring that Red Robin will surely keep bobbin' along.

### Fun Fact

Red Robin Gourmet Burgers and Brews was originally owned by a barbershop quartet singer named Sam. He had opened Sam's Tavern in Seattle and was frequently heard singing the iconic 1920s song, "When the Red, Red Robin (Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along)" by Harry Woods. He loved the song so much that he changed the name to Sam's Red Robin. When the restaurant was purchased by a local entrepreneur in 1969, it became known simply as Red Robin.

### Where the Magic Happens

A mile from Red Robin's home office in Denver is the company's test kitchen, also known as Yummm University. It is a replica of a restaurant and where the culinary team creates inventive menu items. Prior to the test kitchen, which opened five years ago, the team was testing creations in the field, which was challenging for operators. The test kitchen gives the team the space it needs to create the next favorite burger. To identify the next big ingredient, the team looks to small, independent restaurants and gastropubs to spot trends before they become mainstream. The creation process also includes inviting the public to participate in sensory programs where they try new dishes and offer feedback.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.