

Golden Age Of Seafood

Sherleen Mahoney

Red Lobster celebrates its 50th anniversary

A half century ago, Red Lobster introduced high-quality seafood to landlocked seafood lovers. Bill Darden's founding vision with the first restaurant in Lakeland, Fla., in 1968—to be where America goes for seafood now and for generations—still remains true.

"The importance of quality, value and service remain part of Red Lobster's DNA today," said Kim Lopdrup, CEO of Red Lobster. "They remain the backbone of our company and the engine of our success."

As the world's largest restaurant purchaser of seafood, Red Lobster is well known as a seafood specialist. The company prides itself on its long-term, face-to-face relationships with trusted suppliers who source the best traceable, sustainable and responsible seafood.

"We are able to get the best-quality seafood at an affordable price because of the volume we buy and the relationships we have with our suppliers," Lopdrup said. "Our trusted suppliers know and uphold our standards and ensure only the best product comes to our restaurants."

Quality and value are just part of the equation for success. Bill Darden always understood the crucial link between the company's success and the quality of its people. Joe Lee, who served as the manager of the very first Red Lobster and led the company for a number of years, also reinforced this relationship.

"Red Lobster was founded on a belief that our people are our most important asset," Lopdrup said. "We continue to believe that, and today, our core values of Respect, Integrity, Genuine Caring, Hospitality, Teamwork, Excellence and Fun serve as the guiding light for all that we do. This includes empowering and inspiring our team members to lead and giving them the tools necessary to develop in their careers, which is evidenced by our very low employee turnover rate."

Better Than Ever

Since becoming an independent company in 2014, Red Lobster has made tremendous progress. Lopdrup sees opportunities for growth in four key areas: acquiring market share, opening new units domestically and internationally, off-premise dining with takeout and delivery, and new occasions to enjoy seafood.

"As consumers continue to eat more seafood, we have the opportunity to gain preference from those who may have previously chosen a non-specialist restaurant as well as from other seafood chains that are not growing like us," Lopdrup said.

Red Lobster has always been a favorite destination for celebrating special occasions, but recent customer insights suggest guests want to enjoy seafood more often—not just for special occasions. They want opportunities to visit Red Lobster for date nights, quick bites and casual family meals. To meet guests' needs, the company introduced a new menu with Globally Inspired entrées and Tasting Plates.

The Globally Inspired entrées feature flavors from around the world, including Dragon Shrimp, crispy shrimp tossed in spicy dragon sauce; Yucatan Tilapia and Shrimp, fresh, wood-grilled tilapia and jumbo shrimp roasted in chili-lime butter with caramelized pineapple; and Southwest-Style Tacos, tacos filled with grilled shrimp, chicken, tilapia or lobster meat, topped with house-made fire-roasted corn, avocado salsa and jalapeño ranch.

The new Tasting Plates, which are ideal for those looking for small bites with big flavor, or for group sharing, include Loaded Seaside Fries, seasoned fries with Monterey Jack cheese, clam strips and creamy clam chowder, topped with green onions and Shrimp Potstickers, fried dumplings topped with spicy dragon sauce and green onions.

"We have to continue to be creative and inspired in the kitchen so our guests are inspired and hungry for more," said Dustin Hilinski, Director of Culinary at Red Lobster. "I like to say my team and I play with food all day, but the truth is we are always innovating and looking for new flavor-forward trends. We do that in a variety of ways, including traveling the world with our supply chain team to find new and interesting seafood types and preparations to introduce to our guests. Our guests expect us to give them exciting ways to enjoy their seafood favorites—and discover new things. Fortunately, seafood's versatility and broad global appeal provide unique opportunities for us to create innovative seafood options for our menu."

In addition, a wood-grilled 6-ounce filet mignon has been added to the surf-and-turf offerings, and the garden salad has been upgraded to include mixed greens, slivered onions, grape tomatoes and shredded carrots, topped with croutons and cheddar cheese.

All the menu items are served on new, custom-designed artisan plateware that brings out the natural beauty of the seafood.

For busy guests on the go, the restaurants now offer online ordering nationwide, and select locations are testing delivery with a variety of services including Door Dash, Grubhub, OrderUp and Amazon Restaurants.

"Our vision is to be where the world goes for seafood, now and for generations," Lopdrup said. "We're making investments to continue to grow and achieve that vision."

New Home

The brand's independence has paved the way for some transformational changes.

In the process, the facilities team became strong and dynamic contributors who act as advisors and strategists on behalf of the company. The team consists of 19 full-time employees and three contractors. Jack McNertney, CRFP, Vice President of Development, Facilities and Asset Management, leads a team that includes a project manager, 11 field-based facility managers, a real estate manager, a site design manager and four support team members.

The team supports 704 corporate-owned restaurants in the U.S. and Canada. The facility managers oversee complex repairs and maintenance in the restaurants, including planning, fielding proposals and bids, and setting up contracts with a large group of local, regional and national vendors. When a restaurant experiences a minor issue, the staff is empowered to call an approved vendor who is dispatched to the site, completes the work and invoices the restaurant.

After Red Lobster became independent, the facilities team's first major initiative was the locating, planning and designing of the new corporate headquarters in downtown Orlando for close to 300 team members.

The Restaurant Support Center occupies four floors in the 14-story CNL Center I building. The location was chosen for its proximity to great restaurants, performing arts centers and sporting events. Working with all local vendors, including the architectural firm, the facilities team oversaw the complete transformation of approximately 100,000 square feet of office space. The carpet was removed; walls and ceilings were replaced; break rooms, glass offices, conference rooms, training suites and a state-of-the-art test kitchen with tasting rooms were built; and new lighting and furniture packages were purchased and installed.

Three floors highlight a thematic design that embraces the company's three key areas of focus: Great People, Great Seafood and Great Results.

The facilities team partnered with a local interior designer to bring the concepts to life. Décor includes photos of employees, guests, and crab and lobster fishermen. From there, the team oversaw work with a local architectural firm that took the concepts and imagery and determined where they would make the most impact.

Each level of Red Lobster's Restaurant Support Center features a floor-to-ceiling vinyl wall-covering that reflect the theme of that particular floor. The eighth floor represents "Great People." It's a space for working, collaborating and meeting. It features "The Galley," where team members can enjoy lunch and events and gather for brainstorming sessions and more. The 11th floor, representing "Great Seafood," is the main reception area. The acorn-brown-and-white reception desk that resembles a boat blends nicely with the light-colored stacked stone wall and honey-colored wood ceiling. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide an abundance of natural light. Bold red and blue accent colors set against white quartz tables and wood accents create a lively space. A large-scale Wave of Innovation mural captures the brand's rich history and exciting future. The 12th floor, representing "Great Results," is for the executive team and other departments. The floor's theme comes to life through its Lighthouse Wall, which recognizes the company's Lighthouse Club award winners, Red Lobster's most prestigious award recognizing the restaurant teams that perform in the top 5 percent of the company in a variety of categories.

The 18,000-square-foot Culinary Development Center, located on the ground floor, features a test kitchen, tasting room and training center. It replicates what's in the restaurants but is larger to accommodate menu innovation and testing of new equipment.

"It's not easy to inject a kitchen into a commercial structure," McNertney said. "It requires a lot of ventilation, both from an exhaust perspective and makeup air. Since we are on the ground floor, we couldn't penetrate the building's footer, so we had to elevate the kitchen's floor to facilitate positive drainage from floor drains, sinks and water-generating equipment such as dish and ice machines."

The lease was signed in July 2014, and the team moved in February 2015.

"It was a labor of love," McNertney said. "We worked around the clock to give our team a new home."

Red Lobster is the largest employer in downtown Orlando. And the team's hard work and dedication resulted in the Restaurant Support Center winning Orlando Business Journal's 2016 Coolest Office Spaces award.

Kitchen Investments

Another major company initiative was a \$51 million investment to upgrade all of Red Lobster's 704 kitchens in North America to support a new menu and menu innovation.

The first phase was upgrading to lobster and crab pots. The pots use a water-bath cooking process that helps seafood maintain moisture, cooking it perfectly. About the size of a gas fryer, a pot measures approximately 22 inches wide x 36 inches deep x 42 inches high. The second phase was the installation of six-burner sauté units. The units required exhaust hood enhancements, fire system upgrades and coordination with local authorities.

"Each restaurant had to be individually surveyed to determine what would fit," McNertney said. "Any time you touch 700-plus restaurants of varying vintages—we have restaurants that are four to 40 years old—and different municipalities, cities and townships have different requirements, you have to handle each restaurant as an individual entity."

The new kitchen equipment is specifically designed to cook seafood perfectly and deliver fresh, piping-hot meals to guests.

Latest Prototype

With insights gleaned from customer research, which indicated a desire for a more contemporary dining experience, with lighter and brighter settings and more flexible seating, Red Lobster recently opened a new, ground-up prototype in Columbia, Mo.

Cream and taupe-colored walls complement blue accents and the beautiful wood floors to convey a refreshed and contemporary atmosphere. Wooden oar-shaped banisters and fishing net space dividers create a fun and unique setting. Trim and under-counter lighting and a TV wall call attention to the redesigned bar, which is made from walnut and Silestone, with brass-edge banding in a butcher-block design. Edison-style drop bulbs hang over the community tables, and lounge-style seating invites guests to gather and relax. In addition, new technology, including Web-Ahead seating and text paging provide convenient options for guests.

Opened in December 2017, the response has been positive. The team will test this prototype, along with several other prototype updates, and determine which elements to use in future remodels and new builds. Currently, 22 restaurants have been updated since the project started in 2016, led by McNertney and his team.

The facilities team will work with outside design firms, architects and contractors to complete the updates. In a few months, the refresh of 15 new restaurants will begin.

"As designs are modified and tweaked, our team will work to make it the best it can be," McNertney said. "We are excited about the next generation of new and remodeled Red Lobster restaurants."

The Next 50

On January 18, 2018, Red Lobster celebrated its 50th anniversary in all its locations. All of the company's more than 55,000 employees received special gifts, some of which included a commemorative t-shirt and a specialty branded cookie.

"Our founders had big dreams, but they never dreamed Red Lobster would be as successful as it is today—and we're still growing," Lopdrup said in a press release. "As we celebrate our 50th anniversary, we want to express our gratitude to our guests who choose us as their favorite seafood destination, and our team members for the excellent jobs they do every day to keep our guests coming back. As we look forward, we are incredibly excited about the growth opportunities ahead."

As Red Lobster celebrates its golden anniversary throughout the year, the brand also looks ahead to the next 50. With its investments for innovation and growth, the future of this enduring company looks brilliant.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.

Mary Stotler, Server in restaurant number 83 in Kissimmee, Fla.

Mary Stotler started her Red Lobster career in 1969 in St. Petersburg, Fla. This September, she will be celebrating a 49-year career with the company.

Stotler was first hired as a server and has worked in various roles throughout the years, including cashier, hostess and bartender. She also has worked in the kitchen and was part of the opening teams in Alabama and Georgia, which provided training at new Red Lobster locations.

"Back in the early days, no one knew what Red Lobster was all about," she said. "I was part of the team to train new team members about Red Lobster and the seafood we serve."

Today, she is working as a server once again. She's the kind of server every guest loves. She always greets them with a smile, asks for their names and gets to know them on a personal level. She radiates positivity and her upbeat, warm and friendly nature easily shines through.

"I love serving guests," she said. "I have lots of regular call parties and guests I see on a regular basis. I have a pair of guests who come in every Friday for their weekly date night."

Her Red Lobster team members have always felt like family.

"When I worked in St. Petersburg, we were like a family," she said. "When I transferred to my current location in Kissimmee, I was worried because I had to move to a new city, and I didn't know anyone. After a week or so, it was like I had known my coworkers for a long time. We bonded and celebrate special occasions together."

Her fondest memories were working with Joe Lee, the first Red Lobster manager and former president, during several openings.

"It was fantastic working with him," she said. "He's a great guy and very intelligent. The last time I saw him was at the 50th anniversary celebration at the Restaurant Support Center in the CNL building, and I bawled like a baby!"

She looks back on her long career with Red Lobster with fondness.

"My experience has been awesome," she said. "I've enjoyed every moment. I've done other jobs and served at other restaurants, but I always come back to Red Lobster. If you have to work, work somewhere you enjoy."