

Grill Masters

Sherleen Mahoney

LongHorn Steakhouse works to become America's favorite steakhouse

The founding of LongHorn Steakhouse was inspired by George McKerrow Jr.'s trips to the Texas Hill Country, where he encountered the technique of grilling steaks on a flat-top grill. He especially liked the unique flavor and believed it was a winning product. With his previous steakhouse management experience, he and his father opened the first LongHorn Steaks Restaurant and Saloon in Atlanta in 1981.

Success didn't come right away, however. It wasn't until a snowstorm hit Atlanta the following year that spurred the company's growth.

Known as Snow Jam '82, the midafternoon snowstorm halted traffic and shut down the city. While other area businesses closed, McKerrow decided to remain open and have some fun with it. He offered \$1 drinks and menu specials while it snowed. The offer attracted stranded commuters and locals, and even garnered some press for the restaurant. The publicity introduced the restaurant to Atlantans, and business started to boom.

This event became a company milestone because it allowed the restaurant to open its second location, also in Atlanta, and established a culture of perseverance and fun.

"Those who were trapped by the storm needed a place to have a good time and have a great meal," said Paul Livrieri, Executive Vice President of Operations at LongHorn Steakhouse. "We could've closed down, but instead of taking the easy way out, we decided to work hard, do the right thing and have fun doing it. This became part of our culture."

Today, LongHorn Steakhouse is part of the Darden portfolio and has more than 480 restaurants in 40 states.

THE LONGHORN WAY

LongHorn is known for the quality of its food— its fresh, never-frozen steak, chicken and Atlantic salmon and bold flavors, brought to life through a proprietary blend of seasonings— and its great service that over-delivers on guests' expectations.

A certified LongHorn Grill Master ensures each piece of steak, chicken and salmon is grilled to perfection. To become a Grill Master, team members undergo extensive training to become experts in how to prepare the correct cut of steak, know the appropriate amount of seasoning to apply and consistently grill steak to the right degree of doneness.

Guest favorites include the 18-ounce bone-in Outlaw Ribeye; the 10-ounce New York Strip; the LongHorn Salmon, marinated in a housemade brown sugar bourbon

marinade; and the Baby Back Ribs.

Every season, LongHorn unveils its Peak Season menu, which introduces a variety of new menu items that highlight the freshest ingredients of the season.

The marketing and culinary team research highquality ingredients that are readily available across all markets and applies twists to make them unique.

"Our grilled corn on the cob that's featured in the summer is very popular with our guests," Livrieri said. "Corn may not sound that unique, but with its seasoning and flavors—Mexican crema and seasoned Parmesan cheese—it has built a loyal following."

This year's new summer menu items are:

- Pepper-Crusted Filet & Shrimp: A 6-ounce peppercrusted filet, topped with shrimp over grilled corn relish and finished with smoky tomato butter
- Grilled Hawaiian Salmon: Fresh Atlantic salmon glazed with a sweet ginger-garlic soy sauce, served on a bed of wilted spinach, finished with a fresh pineapple salsa
- Brown Sugar Peach Cobbler: Warm brown sugar peaches and shortbread butter crust, topped with vanilla bean ice cream and a raspberry drizzle
- Pineapple Coconut Margarita, made with real pineapple juice, orange liqueur and ZICO Premium Coconut Water

The great food is always paired with great service.

"We hire people with great personalities who make genuine connections with our guests," Livrieri said. "Guest loyalty is very important to us because loyalty helps grow the brand."

LongHorn's leadership understands that building loyalty begins at the top.

"We try to create great, loyal managers," Livrieri said. "We believe that helps them build loyal teams, and loyal team members create loyal guests."

"We train our staff to make our guests feel like family," said Joe Scorcio, Manager at the LongHorn Steakhouse in Waco, Texas. "We greet guests by name; we help them celebrate anniversaries; we've gone out to buy flowers and cakes for them; we give out birthday cards with a free appetizer gift card inside, and the entire staff signs it. One guest was upset we didn't have espresso, so a team member went to Starbucks to get some for him. We'll do anything for our guests."

Stories like this are not a rarity at LongHorn.

In the Winter Haven, Fla., LongHorn restaurant, Nate, the manager, surprised a regular guest, who is a diabetic, by purchasing a carton of her favorite sugar-free ice cream. Nate even sent her and her husband a LongHorn postcard when the couple returned to New York for the summer. He wrote, "This is Nate from LongHorn Steakhouse. I hope you are enjoying your summer in New York. I think about you a lot and can't wait to see you again when you return to Florida for the winter."

The Tallahassee, Fla., LongHorn staff mailed three loaves of fresh bread to surprise a Stanford student because she and her family are regulars at the restaurant, and her mother noted to the manager that her daughter was studying for finals and was missing dining with the family at LongHorn.

Lastly, in the Columbia, M.D., LongHorn, a creative server named Sean delighted a family when he created a dessert especially for two small boys. They had asked for cheesecake ice cream, which is not on the menu. Sean filled two cups with one scoop of ice cream, added two small pieces of cheesecake and topped them with whip cream.

The company calls these efforts “unexpected personal touches,” and the staff strives to offer this level of service to each guest.

“We’re not just another place that serves guests,” Livrieri said. “We’re there to build relationships in the community.”

PASSIONATE ABOUT THE DETAILS

LongHorn’s atmosphere and decor is reminiscent of a sophisticated rancher’s home. The soft, natural materials and neutral colors, accented by wood, stacked stone and western-inspired artwork and scenic paintings create a warm and inviting environment.

The facilities team, with five facility managers, each managing approximately 100 restaurants, keeps the restaurants looking beautiful and operating smoothly.

“That number is high for the casual-dining industry, but we also have the best facility managers in the industry,” said Michael Zografos, Director of Facilities at LongHorn Steakhouse.

Each year, the facility managers perform a 160-question audit at the restaurants. The audit covers every corner of the building inside, outside and on the roof. The audit helps the facility managers calculate a budget for the following year.

“The Restaurant Support Center calls it an audit, but I like to call it a visit,” said Nikki Hale, Facility Manager at LongHorn Steakhouse. “I’m collaborating with the team to resolve issues and coach them on opportunities. It also provides a platform for the team members to teach me about what’s important to them, and how I can best support their efforts.”

“We take a detailed approach,” Zografos said. “Our world-class facility managers—most of them have 20 to 25 years experience—take pride in our restaurants. As the number of restaurants they manage increased, we wondered if we should stop doing the audits, or considered doing them every other year. But the facility managers say they want to continue the process. They say it’s rigorous, but it’s the right thing to do.”

After the audits are completed, the facility managers meet with each director of operations to review all the projects in their region. Next, the facility managers and the senior vice president meet to review the projects.

“We’re always prioritizing our projects,” Zografos said.

Zografos and Livrieri then review all the projects, and the final step is for Todd Burrowes, President of LongHorn Steakhouse, to complete the approval process.

"There's not just one person deciding how to spend the budget," Zografos said.

"We want to spend the money in the most impactful way that benefits our guests, and this process ensures that."

June is the busy season. That's when the audit process begins and lasts until mid January.

June is also the start of the hurricane season, and LongHorn restaurants are predominately located in the southeast.

In addition to the audit, the facility managers need to ensure restaurants have their emergency preparedness plans in place. Humidity is another problem in the summer, so they are all paying extra attention to their restaurants' HVAC systems.

When repairs are needed, every restaurant has a list of approved vendors with pricing (hourly rates and trip charges) already negotiated by the facility managers.

The facility managers' interactions with restaurant operators vary. Typically, the facility managers get involved to help resolve issues, when problems become larger problems, or if there's a replacement or installation of larger equipment.

And because the flat-top grill is the heartbeat of restaurant operations, issues are treated as emergencies.

In large-city markets, the vendors carry many emergency-related service parts to minimize downtime. Redundancy also is built into the grill. If one burner goes down, three can still operate. It's rare for the entire grill to malfunction.

To successfully manage more than 480 restaurants with a small facilities team, it takes an all-hands-on-deck approach and a supportive attitude. Each team member takes pride in their restaurants, and their commitment and dedication shows.

"The teamwork is awesome," Hale said. "My peers are amazing at what they do, and we are a true team. Having them to rely on helps all of us support that many restaurants."

A FAMILY FEEL

LongHorn is proud of its industry leading retention rate.

Livrieri attributes it to the company's inclusive and diverse culture, practice of celebrating great performance and its scalability, allowing employees to advance their careers within the company.

LongHorn's employees enjoy what they do, like and respect their peers and have fun at work. This creates a strong sense of family in the workplace.

"A director of operations was recently promoted, and the entire LongHorn team at the Support Center went to congratulate her," Zografos said. "I have never seen this level of family attitude at a brand this size. Bill Darden said, 'The greatest

competitive edge our company has is the quality of our employees, evidenced by the excellent job they do every day.' This quote is featured on a wall at the Restaurant Support Center."

Zografos also points to programs such as Darden Dimes that demonstrate the company's heart.

Through Darden Dimes, nearly 50 percent of the company's 150,000 employees contribute part of their salary to a fund that provides financial assistance to their co-workers facing emergency situations.

One of those employees was Karen Cooper, a server at the Thomasville, Ga., LongHorn Steakhouse.

Cooper's son-in-law suddenly died, leaving her daughter a widow and her young son without a father.

Deanna Lance, also a server at the restaurant, and other team members organized a community barbecue and sold \$9 raffle tickets for barbecued chicken plates with beans, salad and a cookie. They raised \$2,400 to help Cooper and her family pay for the funeral.

Darden Dimes also provided a matching grant.

"I'm so grateful to the people I work with and to Darden Dimes," Cooper told Darden Digest.

In FY2015, \$1.6 million was routed to help approximately 2,700 employees.

"My family owns a business, yet I feel a stronger sense of family here at LongHorn," said Toi Hinojosa, a server and bartender at the LongHorn in Waco, Texas.

"Everyone is so nice, and managers have your back and give you a lot of encouragement. I've never worked for a better company."

"My brother Nicola is also a manager at the Temple, Texas, LongHorn restaurant," said Scorcio, who has been with LongHorn for 13 years. "He's worked for the company for 11 years, also starting as a server, and when I was working in the LongHorn in Howell, N.J., the restaurant hired 80 percent of my friends. Here, our employees recommend their roommates and friends for jobs. We all end up becoming family since we work together for more than 60 hours a week."

LongHorn leadership truly values team member feedback, which is another aspect that helps with their industry-leading retention.

"We're trying to grow the company smaller, which means we're constantly listening to our employees in the field," Livrieri said. "Many of our processes are based on their suggestions and opinions."

The company shares stories on a weekly basis of how employee feedback has resulted in operations changes.

Darden's people-first culture gives it a competitive advantage and helps retain and promote the finest restaurant professionals in the industry.

A Job Well Done

Since Snow Jam '82, LongHorn has been putting guests first, focused on doing what's right and having some fun along the way. This culture continues today.

LongHorn strives to delight one guest at a time. Each guest is an opportunity for LongHorn Steakhouse shine. The company's simple operating model: deliver flavorful food by warm and attentive servers in a beautiful and comfortable atmosphere has been winning over guests for 35 years.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.