

Pursuit Of Excellence

Skerlem Makmey

Mighty Fine Burgers' award-winning commitment to quality extends its influence beyond Austin, Texas

Ken Schiller and Brian Nolen made their mark on Austin, Texas' thriving food scene by introducing the city's first better-burger concept by way of Mighty Fine Burgers, Fries and Shakes. Owners of K & N Management, the two were already licensed area developers off our Austin-area Rudy's Country Store & Bar-B-Q restaurants before they created Mighty Fine Burgers in 2007. Success happened quickly, and the burgers developed a loyal following. Today, there are four Mighty Fine Burgers locations, plus a food truck and a food trailer.

To create Austin's best burgers, Schiller and Nolen partnered with Kincaid's Hamburgers, a Fort Worth, Texas, grocery store and meat market that began cooking hamburgers in 1964. Kincaid's management guided Schiller and Nolen on how to purchase the best beef, educated them about the best beef-to-fat ratio (80/20), and how to grind it, season it and cook it perfectly.

The end product is a delicious beef burger that is delivered whole chuck from Creekstone Farms in Arkansas City, Kan., and freshly ground every day. The all-natural beef has no hormones, antibiotics or preservatives. The hand-formed patties are seasoned with only black pepper and sea salt and delivered to hungry guests in four minutes.

The most popular menu item is the Classic 1/2 lb. Cheeseburger. The entire menu is made from fresh, high-quality ingredients. The crinkle-cut French fries are made with Idaho potatoes and prepared fresh daily. The onion rings are cut fresh and breaded every day. The only ingredient that is ever frozen is the ice cream for the milkshakes.

All About Consistency

Mighty Fine fans are assured a consistent experience with every visit and across all locations. The company goes to great operational lengths to ensure a reliable experience in food quality, speed of service, hospitality and cleanliness.

To maintain this high-level of consistency, Mighty Fine Burgers has a stringent inspection process. Several times a week, internal inspectors visit each restaurant to check its cleanliness, hospitality and food quality. They come unannounced and can arrive any time during the day, or even overnight to make sure the restaurant was properly closed. They are extremely detail oriented, inspecting everything from a guest's perspective, starting in the parking lot. They even notice crumbs on a table because they know that even minor issues can deduct points from great guest experiences.

The company also conducts mystery shopper inspections with the help of a company called Reality Based Group, also located in Austin. Incognito inspectors

wear hidden cameras and pose as guests. They record the entire experience, starting with entering the restaurant. They place orders, ask team members for product recommendations and make changes to their orders to capture the interaction. The videos also include start and stop times to ensure guests do not wait in long lines to order and receive their orders quickly. The videos end when the inspectors leave the restaurant.

Another way the restaurants measure delivery times is by using LRS Table Trackers. A tracker is given to a guest after he or she places an order. The tracker identifies the guest's table and broadcasts its location. The food runner references the order view to identify the guest's location and delivers the food. Orders are color-coded to indicate if they're on time, nearing their deadline or late.

"We want frequent snapshots from guest perspectives," said Allyson Young, HR and Brand Director at K&N Management. "By having weekly data, we can see real-time trends. We want to avoid the mistake of basing the way a restaurant is run by conducting only an annual visit."

Its evident that the bar is set high at K&N Management, and for the food-service industry, there is no such thing as "too clean."

Mighty Fine promises guests an extremely clean environment.

"From the time you walk in and sit down, everything is spotless and clean," Young said.

Cleanliness is so important to the company that the restaurants have a special Meritech Clean Tech Automated Handwashing System installed in the dining room and the back of the house. It cleans hands better than conventional sinks. The fully automated handwashing station removes 99.98 percent of pathogens with a full wash-and-rinse cycle that takes 12 seconds. After guests use the sink, they receive a sticker that says, "I have clean hands."

"We also have this quote on T-shirts," Young said. "It's become a talking point, and I find the stickers everywhere I go. Once, I even found one at an airport parking garage elevator."

Focus on 'Guest Delight'

Mighty Fine's high standards for its food, cleanliness, and fast and friendly service is all about delighting guests. The company's mission statement, "To guarantee that every guest is delighted because of me," is embraced from the top down. Everyone is empowered to create the best possible experience for guests.

For exemplary team members who consistently delight guests, the owners visit each restaurant every month to bestow the Five Star Team Member award. This effort reflects the owners' dedication to quality and personal stake in their team members.

Creating and retaining teams that strive to delight every guest requires hiring the right people and properly training them.

The hiring process selects candidates who have a natural affinity for customer service.

"We don't look for people with experience," Young said. "We actually prefer candidates with no restaurant experience so we can train them to do things our way. Our focus during interviews is for them to relate to experiences and demonstrate they know what providing good service looks like."

Once the right people are hired, the company is committed to retaining and promoting them.

"We set up our team members to be successful from their first day," Young said. "We explain what's important and teach them step by step how to do their jobs. Then, we reinforce their career path during performance feedback reviews."

This proven process has resulted in the fact that all but one manager started as an hourly team member and was promoted from within the company.

One of these general managers is Josh Moore.

In 2004, Moore worked as a cashier for Rudy's Bar-B-Q for two years before being promoted to a restaurant manager. He then moved over to Mighty Fine Burgers as a restaurant manager when the concept opened its first restaurant in 2007. In 2012, he was promoted to general manager.

As a general manager, his favorite part of the job is growing and developing team members.

"When I first started, I had just moved to town and was simply looking for a job while I was in school," he said. "As I began to learn about the company and grow with it, I fell in love with the idea of becoming a leader and mentoring others like how my mentors had been there for me. There is nothing more rewarding than helping people grow into better versions of themselves."

Another general manager is Shawn York. He also started his career as a cashier for Rudy's in 2001.

"When I saw a co-worker get promoted, I knew that advancement was an option," he said. "I was excited to learn I had the opportunity to advance in a company that I enjoyed working for. From that point, I made it my goal to move up."

He expressed interest in advancing to his managers. They told him the first step was to become a trainer and prove that he could lead a team.

He became a trainer in 2002, and it was evident that he had leadership qualities. In 2005, he was promoted to general manager. In 2009, he moved over as a general manager to Mighty Fine Burgers and has been in that role ever since.

He especially enjoys the team atmosphere and the interaction with guests. In the future, he hopes to land a leadership role with an emphasis on creating and implementing strategies for K&N Management.

Leaders like Moore and York help promising and ambitious team members identify a career path.

They show them the way to achieve promotions, milestones and growth, but the team members must take ownership of their own development.

"We're reaping the dividends of having such a detailed plan to grow our people from within," said Jay Andruk, CRFP, FMP, Facilities and Fleet Manager at K&N Management. "The evidence is the number of managers who have been promoted from within. As we've grown from one restaurant to four, to a food truck and a food trailer, we haven't had to reach outside because we have great, quality people that were ready to take the next step."

The company understands that valuing team members also means listening to them. Leadership encourages team members to submit ideas, suggestions and feedback through an online comment box. Every Tuesday afternoon, senior leadership meets to review the submissions and one leader is assigned to respond to each one.

There's also an annual town hall meeting, where one hourly team member representative and one salaried representative from each restaurant location present their team members' feedback and ideas to senior leaders, who are known to make fast decisions.

Many great ideas have stemmed from team members, such as the ability to receive a 50-percent discount any time. Previously, team members could only receive the discount when they were working. Other team member-initiated ideas include installing shut-off lighting timers in lesser-used rooms to save energy, online ordering and the popular food truck.

A Specialized Team

The facilities team, led by Andruk, has seven in-house technicians who focus on maintenance issues for Mighty Fine Burgers and Rudy's Bar-B-Q. There's also an overnight cleaning crew with two managers and eight hourly team members. Each facilities technician has a specialty.

- Carl LeBoeuf, CRFP, has a bachelor's degree in construction management and is taking the PMP exam this fall.
- John Harris is a CFESA-certified Master Technician.
- Bill Nigro is a CFESA-certified technician and a licensed HVAC contractor.
- Brad Tiefel has an associate's degree in welding technology and was internally promoted from a cashier position.
- Adam Robinson is actively pursuing an associate's degree in heating, air and refrigeration technology. He was internally promoted from a management position.
- Kyle Price is a certified welder and has multi-year experience in the automotive service industry.
- Allen Stewart has an extensive machinist background and is an EPA-certified HVAC technician.

Typical in-house responsibilities include preventive maintenance for HVAC, refrigeration, plumbing and electrical. There are 180 preventive maintenance items

that rotate throughout the year at each location.

When minor issues arise, restaurant operators submit an online help desk ticket. However, any issue that affects guest delight is considered a 911 issue. For those, restaurant operators call a hotline that is answered by an on-call facility technician, 24/7. The technician is required to respond within one hour of receiving the phone call. After the restaurant manager makes the call, he or she can go back to work; no more of their time is spent on following up on the issue because it is now in the trusted hands of one of the technicians.

"We have a very good relationship with our restaurants," said Carl LeBoeuf, Facility Technician at K&N Management. "We help out tremendously; we're very timely; we do what we say we're going to do; and they appreciate us."

The facilities team relies on vendor partners when projects require special permitting, such as master plumbers and electricians, or are too difficult or too expensive for the in house team to tackle. Such projects include large electrical work and filter cleaning and replacements.

As a smaller, independent company, sourcing vendors can be a challenge.

"We're a small fish in a big pond," Andruk said. "When we're looking for service partners, we're in the same pool as large corporations, so we have to work harder on our relationships and partnerships. That's why we call our vendors 'vendor partners.' We want them to partner with us, and understand our culture and what we're doing to ensure our guests have the best experience possible. RFMA helps us with this. RFMA vendors are much more willing to assist us with our needs, even though we're a smaller company, but they understand that we're a part of something larger like RFMA; RFMA has given us a voice."

National Recognition

In 2010, K&N Management won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. It is the second restaurant group to be recognized with the prestigious national honor. The award is given to role-model organizations that demonstrate exceptional performance in areas of management, including leadership, strategic planning, customer service, workforce focus, process management, data analysis knowledge management and results.

K&N won the award for its impressive sales, which significantly out performed local competitors and national chains; leveraging innovation and technology to constantly gauge operations and performance to create highly satisfied guests; creating a happy and dedicated workforce with a low turnover rate; community involvement; and meeting the majority of its strategic initiatives.

The award garnered national attention from organizations across a spectrum of industries. Many companies were interested in benchmarking K&N Management to learn its processes. So, Young created three learning sessions: a half-day customer-service workshop, a full-day class and a two-day class.

These training sessions teach attendees how to create a culture that aligns with their mission and commitment to quality. Included is a lunch and restaurant tour, where attendees can experience the guest-delight culture firsthand. The longer

sessions provide deeper insight to K&N Management's Business Excellence Model, culture, processes, continuous improvement, people selection, training and development, facilities maintenance and strategic planning.

More than 1,400 people from 70 organizations have enrolled in the training sessions. While the majority were from the restaurant industry, Young has trained attendees from defense companies, schools, hair salons, video gaming companies, and hospitals and clinics.

Creating a Mighty Fine World

For the fourth consecutive year, Mighty Fine Burgers has partnered with the No Kid Hungry campaign to raise funds to provide free school breakfasts, after school and summer meals, and groceries for local food pantries. In September, 50 cents from every Orange Dreamsicle Shake sold was donated to the campaign.

The company also supports other local organizations throughout the year, including Keep Austin Beautiful, Emma Long Park Restoration Project, Baptist Community Center Restoration Project, Rudy's Charity Golf Tournament, Homers for Hunger benefiting the Capital Area Food Bank, Classic Car Show benefiting the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Coats for Kids and Foundation for the Homeless.

"Volunteering brings people together," said Gini Quiroz, Director of Team Member Engagement at K&N Management. "When we support our local communities, we are strengthening the area we live in and raising good organizations up to continue their vision. Small impact— in numbers— drives change."

The company's primary charity partner is Africa New Life. The charity believes that caring for children involves providing educational opportunities, stable homes, faith, community development and healthcare.

Through payroll deductions, team members donate more than \$2,500 per month to sponsor 18 Rwandan children. K&N matches the donations each month. The sponsorships pay for food, education, clothes, healthcare from kindergarten until graduation. Many team members also sponsor children privately. Part of the donations also support Africa New Life's other ministries in the Rwandan communities, such as bible college, vocational training for men and women, and support for their "street kids" program. All K&N employees have an opportunity to join a yearly mission trip to see their impact.

"We are called to not only support those directly around us, but also those in every nation," Quiroz said. "Africa New Life Ministries shares similar values to K&N Management. We get to make real impact in communities in Rwanda, and especially those of the 50-plus children who have been sponsored through our mission trips and partnership. 'We may not be able to change the world, but we can certainly change the world for one.'"

Austin and Beyond

K&N Management may have brought Mighty Fine Burgers to Austin, but its reach has gone far beyond the city limits. The company's award winning commitment to quality, for both Mighty Fine Burgers and Rudy's Bar-B-Q, has given it national

significance. And through its charity work with Africa New Life, K&N is making an important impact globally.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.

MIGHTY FINE BURGERS HIT THE ROAD

Austin has a vibrant food truck scene, and in February 2015, Mighty Fine Burgers' food truck started bringing its food to popular Austin gathering places. Custom built by Cruising Kitchens in San Antonio, it is the largest food truck that is based in Austin. The food truck is maintained entirely by the facilities team.

"Maintaining the mobile food truck is challenging and requires a back-up plan at all times," Andruk said. "The most cumbersome issue is that it isn't stationary, so we have to find out where it is and head that way. We have a calendar for the food truck's locations, but that changes."

The food truck measures approximately 36 feet long and contains two 12-kW Cummin generators, two fryers, three refrigerators and a dipping freezer, a griddle, a cheese melter and a toaster.

While the ingredients are freshly prepped in a brick-and-mortar restaurant in the morning and loaded onto the truck, all the cooking and building of the burgers, fries and shakes are done on the truck per order.

The food truck operates most days of the week for lunch and dinner. Guests can order the full menu, except for lemonade and fountain drinks. Five team members work in the truck, cooking up to 200 burgers an hour. If supplies run low, a company van delivers products to the food trucks location.

This year, Mighty Fine Burgers opened its fifth location: A semi-stationary food trailer. Also built by Cruising Kitchens, and maintained by the facilities team, it is Austin's largest stationary food trailer.

Inside are three 50-pound fryers, four refrigerators and a dipping freezer, two flat griddles, a cheese melter, a bread machine and toaster, a 5-gallon beverage dispenser, a 60-inch prep table, custom vent hoods with grease traps and filters, and two upblast extraction fans.

"Luckily, the food trailer is at a fairly fixed location," Andruk said. "But since it is quite heavy, we are in charge of re-leveling it, as well as managing the logistics for moving the trailer to various locations and cleaning up after it. We're responsible for the generators, and we even change the oil in-house so there's no downtime. Using redundant equipment on both units also helps us with maintenance and repairs."