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Be Our guest

Sherleen Mahoney

Who would've thought within the Lone Star state—which has a love affair with all things barbequed—one can find the delicate countryside flavors of Loire Valley, France?

La Madeleine Country French Café is reminiscent of a French countryside farmhouse. The beautiful exteriors capture the distinct provincial French Renaissance architecture with wood accents and gables. Inside, rustic hardwood floors, a stone fireplace and heavy wooden tables and chairs create a charming and cozy setting to enjoy warm tomato basil soup, flaky quiches and delectable tarts.

Patrick Leon Esquerré opened the first la Madeleine bakery near Southern Methodist University in Dallas in 1983 using his mother's recipes. In fact, it was on the advice from his friend Stanley Marcus, of Neiman Marcus, that Esquerré opened the first la Madeleine near the university.

It didn't take long for the neighborhood to fall in love with the authentic French breads and pastries. Soon, customers started requesting other items, such as sandwiches and soups. As the requests became more frequent, Esquerré turned to the only person who could help him: his mother. He brought her—and more of her recipes—all the way from the Loire Valley region of post-World War II France to Dallas to create the La Madeleine offerings so beloved today. The Caesar salad and tomato basil soup, in particular, are two of Madame Esquerré's signature dishes.

Today, La Madeleine operates under Le Duff America Inc., a subsidiary of Groupe Le Duff, a restaurant company committed to tradition and nutrition by only serving handcrafted food made with the best ingredients, such as additive-free French-style flour and locally sourced butter. With more than 60 la Madeleine locations in seven states, Americans can enjoy country French cuisine right in their neighborhood.

French cooking is an art form, and La Madeleine's culinary team is nothing but calculating and precise with their ingredients and preparation. There are no microwaves, fryers or heat lamps allowed in la Madeleine restaurants.

Meet Amanda Montgomery

La Madeleine attracts a very specific clientele. So specific, in fact, that the company has named her Amanda Montgomery.

Amanda is between the ages of 25 to 54, is employed full-time with a household income of at least \$75,000 and has children. She enjoys different types of food, indulges in sweet cravings and often eats on the run. When she's not at la Madeleine, you'll most likely find her in her office or at Ann Taylor, The Pottery Barn or Crate and Barrel. And when she's sitting down with a baguette and espresso, you may find her reading *Architectural Digest*, *Bon Appetit* or *Cooking Light* magazines.

"Sixty-seven percent of our customers match this profile," said John Cahill, Vice President of Operations at La Madeleine. "The reason we named her is to keep her in the forefront of our minds and challenge ourselves to ask, 'What would Amanda think?' when we make any changes."

Already, Amanda has inspired the company to offer mini desserts, smaller portions, more variety and trio combinations.

Service-style Improvements

Recently, La Madeleine changed its service style to focus on being more customer-friendly.

According to Rod Towns, Director of Facilities for La Madeleine, the first time he entered a La Madeleine restaurant, he did not know where to stand or where the menu was; the style was intimidating to new customers.

To create a more natural flow, the restaurants are eliminating the traditional cafeteria-line style of ordering and are beginning to leverage digital menu boards because of their visual appeal.

Upon entering one of the newly remodeled restaurants, a customer's eyes are instantly drawn to the bank of 42-inch commercial-grade plasma TVs that feature warm colors—incorporating soft beiges, deep purples, browns and greens—to create a pleasant and inviting ambiance. Two sets of menu boards—the to-go menu and the dine-in menu—are located right by cashiers, making it easy for guests to place their orders. The company's long-term goal is to roll out digital menu boards to the majority of restaurants.

With the cafeteria-line style of ordering, the operations department had noticed that customers within groups would often receive their food at different times. For example, those who ordered salads or soups would receive their food on line, pay and head to the table to eat. But other members of the group who ordered entrees would place their orders at the cashier, head to the table and wait to be served. "One or two people in the group would be through eating by the time the other two people got their entrees," Towns said.

With the new service style, customers place their entire order with the cashier and everyone receives their food at the table at the same time.

"The digital menu boards allow our photography to tell our story with our food, and it wasn't necessarily the technology that was leading this change, but the service-style change that needed to happen," said Stephanie Miller, Senior Manager of Brand Marketing at La Madeleine. "We wanted one central ordering point, everyone sits down together and everyone gets their food at the same time."

"By having guests make their complete order at the cashier, it has cut the guest experience time by 5 to 10 minutes," Cahill said.

Though it is not a new feature, to provide better service to restaurant guests, La Madeleine employs a third-party call center to field phone calls. Call center agents, who represent themselves as La Madeleine associates, are so well versed in the brand and offerings that guests think they're calling a café instead of a call center. Fifteen call center agents process an average of 7,200 calls per month.

"We made the decision to use a call center to decrease the stress on our front-line associates from having to take care of our in-café guests while also having to handle call-in orders and inquiries," said Amanda Breau, Senior Manager of Interactive Marketing. "We've found that by leveraging professional call center agents, our associates have more time to tend to in-person needs of our guests, while the call-in orders are more thorough and order accuracy and check averages improve."

Welcome to the Family

After years of much interest, La Madeleine now offers franchise opportunities. One major obstacle had always stood in the way of a franchise program: there was no prototype kitchen design.

So, for two weeks in January, the facilities department, plus a team of carpenters, built a prototype kitchen, complete with a point-of-sale system, inside a warehouse in Mesquite, Texas. As the employees simulated an actual store's day in the test kitchen with real food in real time, they made equipment-location and working-height modifications as they worked to achieve an efficient and ergonomic prototype kitchen design.

"Now, we can take that kitchen and put it anywhere," Cahill said. "Whether a franchisee has a 3,000- or 4,000-square-foot building, the kitchen is the same."

"This was an exercise in ergonomic and kitchen efficiency, making sure we have the right equipment in the right position for ease of use," Towns said.

Going forward, this prototype kitchen will be included in all new stores and franchise locations.

The facility department—namely Towns—will be there to support the new franchises. In the future, a work-order dispatch system may be required, but for the present, it isn't cost-effective, Towns said.

The restaurants rely on a Web-based portal that he manages. The portal lists preferred, approved vendors with contact numbers. Also, all major expenditures are approved by Towns.

As for maintenance, Towns visits each location at least twice a year and sends out monthly reminders to general

managers with information that focuses on one specific aspect of maintaining the restaurant.

“One month may be on exterior doors that includes what they should look like, what should be checked, stain, paint, handles, etc.,” Cahill said. “The next month may be on lighting or landscaping. We do this to keep maintenance top of mind.”

The Evolution

From the first bakery on Mockingbird Lane, La Madeleine has come a long way. The company just opened its newest location with the new store format in NorthPark Center in Dallas.

The location features the new prototypical kitchen design, the digital menu boards, the new service style and a theater-style pastry kitchen design concept. The theatre-style pastry kitchen is also featured at the Grapevine and Preston Forest locations.

“This provides customers a form of entertainment as well as comfort about the conditions in which the food is being prepared,” Towns said.

Notably, at the NorthPark Center location, shoppers on the concourse have a direct line of sight into the kitchen and can watch pastry chefs decorate pastries and assemble fruit tarts.

“We’ve observed several children standing there, fascinated, watching the pastry chefs make pastries and fruit tarts right on the other side of the window,” Towns said.

The next new restaurant that will feature these upgrades will be in Tulsa, Okla., and the company plans to open its first airport location in Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport near Dallas at the end of 2012.

In addition to opening new locations, the company plans to remodel its 60 locations over the next five years. Under the Refresh Program, restaurants will receive new signage, a new quartz counter, new floors, fresh paint, and upgraded equipment. The upgrades aim to brighten and modernize the restaurants without losing the unique French country charm.

Guilt-free Indulgence

It’s no secret that French cooking is synonymous with butter and cream. A new mandate that requires restaurant chains with 20 or more units to disclose calorie counts on their food items has prompted La Madeleine to offer alternative slimmer portions and mini pastries.

“We used to offer very large dishes, but we now have slim portions of several products, so the calorie count drops quite a bit,” Cahill said. “With mini pastries, customers can choose not to eat the 700-calorie pastry, but instead indulge in the 110-calorie alternative.”

With these lower-calorie alternatives, Amanda Montgomery can hold the guilt and enjoy all the flavors of country French cuisine, just like Mama Esquerré would have wanted.

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