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Design and Construction

Megan Weadock

The Art of Five Flavors Pei Wei redefines ‘fast casual’ with innovative design and construction techniques

In today's hectic, stress-filled world, many consumers are seeking a more relaxing and inviting restaurant experience. Combine that atmosphere with high-quality food and wallet-friendly prices, and you've got the perfect recipe for success. Pei Wei Asian Diner seeks to be just that: an oasis of calm for guests that offers unique cuisine, atmosphere and experience.

Pei Wei features the classic Asian dishes guests love, plus some more adventurous options, from China, Korea, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. The fast-casual diner is worlds apart from its parent chain, P.F. Chang's, but is just as successful and popular as Pei Wei.

Pei Wei offers its guests convenient counter service, with a dedicated entrance and registers for take-away orders. Each of Pei Wei's restaurants has additional counter seating that overlooks the open kitchen—allowing guests to take in the excitement and fast-paced nature of wok-cooking and to feel welcome and comfortable. Pei Wei currently operates 173 locations in 23 states.

“The thing that sets Pei Wei apart is the quality and the diversity of the ingredients we source,” said Terry Haley, Vice President of Marketing for Pei Wei. “Asian food is often defined by its nuanced flavors. Pei Wei brings in more than 20 kinds of fresh produce and spice ingredients for our dishes six days a week, and our employees hand-cut all of them every morning. This lets us deliver a superior flavor profile and quality of flavor and gives our guests a culinary experience that is hard to replicate anywhere else.” Pei Wei also has the ability to accommodate guests with dietary restrictions, including gluten and other food allergies.

Atmosphere is Everything

Pei Wei's design philosophy centers entirely around the guests.

“Our approach to design is to create a warm, inviting space that is true to the materials that are used,” explains Becky Holler, Pei Wei's Vice President of Development. “We seek out cleaner, simpler lines to the design.”

Instead of painting over natural qualities like exposed brick or covering up modern-looking concrete floors, Pei Wei embraces the down-to-earth, relaxed feeling that these features provide. In each restaurant, the concrete floors are stained with a warm chocolate brown color. The walls are an inviting blend of brick and earth-tone paint colors, helping to create a homey, comfortable atmosphere.

The exposed ceiling structure is a rich brown and incorporates a mahogany wing element, which, combined with the dining room's millwork walls, adds to the feeling of handmade quality. Vibrant artwork and deep red seating help add pops of color and energy to the space. Blending technology and style, the restaurants' digital menu boards are supported by fashionable patina metal panels.

Pei Wei's current design specification has yet to be implemented company-wide. However, the company is in the process of remodeling many of its older buildings, constantly moving toward the more modern, upscale design.

Moving Forward

Pei Wei recently completed an extensive remodel at two of its Arizona locations.

“The remodels were motivated by the desire to update older restaurants to the new design,” said Maria Johnson,

Director of Facilities Management for Pei Wei. "These stores were of an age that they needed to have some fixtures, finishes and equipment replaced."

Future remodels are determined prior to the end of each restaurant's lease term. Each building is leased for 10 years. Nine years into each lease, Pei Wei reviews the company's sales trends as a guideline to determine which remodel package the location will receive. The company treats each location uniquely, dependent upon the overall real estate strategy for the market and the individual restaurant. If a given restaurant does not qualify for a remodel package, it receives repairs as needed.

The company has developed an effective, standardized process for determining which remodel package is selected for each location.

Pei Wei's three remodel packages are designed to cover each restaurant's needs:

Remodel Package 1 upgrades the look of the store to the latest design, and equipment is upgraded to the company's current specification. Remodel Package 2 has some of the latest design features but places more emphasis on the equipment upgrade. Remodel Package 3 focuses on brightening up the current look but focuses mostly on equipment upgrades.

During a remodel, Pei Wei focuses on eight key upgrades:

Replace the red VCT or red epoxy floor to a rust color, 24x24 porcelain tile floor

Add brick veneer to the dining walls

Remodel restrooms

Remove the digital menus from the traditional wooden cabinet to a metal menu stand

Replace existing neon beers sign with custom wine racks and add accent lighting

Replace booths and use the new deep red color upholstery

Replace all air-conditioning units with EER 11 units

Upgrade the deep machine to a model that saves a chemicals, water and energy

Upgrade the ice machine to the latest Energy Star rating and high-efficiency model

Customer-friendly Tech

Approximately two years ago, Pei Wei decided to update their static menu boards with high-tech digital signage.

The static menu boards were comprised of three large single panels. Any menu change on a panel required the printing of a full panel, which incurred costly printing and shipping charges for Pei Wei's 161 locations.

"This can curb innovation and change," Haley said. "At the same time, we were also looking for a way to merchandise our brand, communicate with our guests, tell our story and talk about new offerings in a way that really fit and accentuated our atmosphere."

Pei Wei sought to find a display company that offered three key components: durable products, high-definition screens and a network of partners to help build an integrated solution that includes of both hardware and software.

They found what they were looking for in NEC, a leader in commercial-grade, large-format displays.

NEC recommended the 46-inch MultiSync LCD4620-2-IT displays. After months of demos and testing, Pei Wei went national with their digital signage in June 2009 with 486 displays—three units at each of its 161 nationwide locations.

AZstar Communications, of mesa, Ariz., was hired to install the the local restaurants so they could fine-tune the process before going nationwide.

The deployment was no easy feat and involved several departments working together to achieve a smooth transition. Pei Wei's IT department purchased the monitors and monitor protectors, and the facilities department purchased the millwork frames and hired the electricians. The two departments coordinated the shipping of all materials to every location.

Maria Johnson was in charge of designing a universal plan that suited each location. She handled the scheduling and coordination, shipping logistics and worked with the development department on restaurant design.

"Coordination of the delivery of materials was very important and had to be managed almost daily to make sure everything arrived on time and was not damaged," she said. "In some states, we only had one or two restaurants so if the delivery didn't make it, the installer would have to drive to the next install, which could be hours away, and come back to finish the installation."

Carrie Siegrid, User Experience Designer for Pei Wei, and Mar-jorie Mangone, the company's Graphic Designer,

created the digital content. Siegrid developed content for the trial digital menu boards and continues to make creative improvements. Mangone designed the layout for the menu items using merchandizing zones.

Each store, as well as the IT department, had to be notified of the install schedule so the digital menus could be programmed to work the next day.

Although every precaution was taken to ensure the safe arrival of the materials, Pei Wei provided AZStar back-up materials just in case. During some of the more challenging installations, the design department worked with the facilities department to assist with those installs.

With several contractors involved, billing also had to be coordinated so Pei Wei wasn't buried under an abundance of invoices at the end of the roll-out. Invoices were processed every week after a batch of restaurants was completed.

Installed near the entrance of each restaurant's dine-in area, the digital menu boards provide Pei Wei with flexibility and customization. Now, Pei Wei can make a change, whether it's a small initiative or a nationwide promotion, without incurring printing and shipping costs.

"The introduction of this technology has greatly increased our ability to test and innovate, increased our speed to market in meeting both store-level and systemic menu changes and improved our ability to communicate with our consumers," Haley said. "It's like having your own television channel. The design is a tribute to our facilities, development and architectural group. The design just fits the preexisting and the evolution of the atmosphere to a tee. They look like they just belong there."

In fact, Pei Wei won a 2010 DIGI Award for Best Digital Signage Applications. The DIGI Awards recognize resellers, integrators and service providers who went the extra mile to ensure success for their clients and have furthered the digital signage industry as a whole each year.

A Variety of Offerings

Always seeking to enhance the customer experience, Pei Wei is open to the new and unexpected.

Case in point: Pei Wei partnered with The Coca-Cola Company in 2009 to install Coca-Cola Freestyle fountain units in restaurants across the country.

The fun, innovative fountains allow guests to select from more than 100 sparkling and still brands—and people are loving them.

"This fountain creates unique brands by blending concentrated beverage ingredients with water and sweetener at the point where the beverage is dispensed, via a proprietary, patented nozzle with PUREPOUR Technology," said Desiree Kriel, Senior Customer Marketing Manager at The Coca-Cola Company. "It does not use syrup, but instead uses concentrated flavors and other ingredients that are stored in the dispenser cabinet."

The system even includes 70 diet and low-calorie beverages and more than 90 caffeine-free beverages, giving guests enough choices to fit every lifestyle.

"Consumers select and pour beverages via Coca-Cola Freestyle's touchscreen interface, choosing from more than 100 regular and low-calorie brands, including many varieties of waters, sports drinks, lemonades and sparkling beverages that, prior to the arrival of Coca-Cola Freestyle, were not available in the U.S.," Kriel said.

For technology this impressive, maintaining the units is a fairly simple task for the restaurant managers. Kriel explained that the equipment dispenses more than 100 sparkling and still brands from a single freestanding unit with approximately the same footprint as today's six- or eight-valve dispensers. The fountains are maintained via a computer system that notifies managers when brand cartridges in the dispenser's cabinet need replacing.

"Managers, crew members and consumers are very excited about the innovative fountains," Kriel said. "Not to mention the fact that Coca-Cola Freestyle in-market results from 2010 indicate an increase in beverage servings, total transactions and total restaurant sales."

The project was launched on just two Southern California locations. Now, it's grown to include 23 restaurants in Indiana, Arizona, Texas, Illinois, California and Florida, with more locations being added all the time.

To celebrate the 125th anniversary of The Coca-Cola Company this summer, Coca-Cola Freestyle is increasing its offering of drink choices from 106 to 125. Each restaurant that features Freestyle will receive new cartridges, icons and recipes. This allows new products to be tested or introduced in foodservice outlets in conjunction with retail launches, or even independently of a packaged product retail launch, Kriel said.

"We have a strong organizational partnership with Coca-Cola," Haley said. "We felt that the positioning of Coca-Cola Freestyle was very aligned to Pei Wei's enduring attributes, such as offering a great variety of flavors and experimentations. So, there's great equity between our brand and Coca-Cola."

Watching the Horizon

Ever the adaptable company, Pei Wei is constantly looking toward the future. One of its most recent projects involves looking into "greening" its restaurants to reduce its carbon footprint and address consumers' growing concerns for sustainability.

"We've been researching green initiatives, but have not implemented them in a Pei Wei yet," Holler said. "We have implemented them in a P.F. Chang's China Bistro, and we're expecting to receive Gold on that project."

The results of the P.F. Chang's effort will determine how the company would implement green initiatives at Pei Wei, Holler said.

"We are still tracking the results to see if we will have any energy savings," she said. "I feel we were able to maintain a consistent design to our level, but still do not have enough data to fully know the other impacts on construction and energy expenses."

At each Pei Wei storefront and behind the scenes, there is a team of exceptional people intent on delighting all guests who walk through the doors. Whether its customer relations, marketing, design, construction or facilities, the team strives for excellence in all aspects of business.

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