



## Facilitator — June/July 2012



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### Pepper in Some Style

*Sherleen Mahoney*

Exciting changes are happening inside and outside of Grill & Bar

Once guests walk into a Chili's Grill & Bar and are greeted enthusiastically with the customary, "Welcome to Chili's!" they know they're in for a fun and energetic experience with delicious Southwestern-style food and drinks.

The home of famous savory, fall-off-the-bone Baby Back Ribs and fresh and juicy Big Mouth Burgers started as a laid-back roadside hamburger joint in Dallas in 1975. Chili's has since become a household name that has even infiltrated popular culture.

It is nearly impossible to find someone who is not familiar with Chili's Baby Back Ribs advertising campaign jingle. The famous jingle even found its way on to popular TV shows, such as "Will & Grace," "The Office" and "Scrubs," and the movie, "Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me." In fact, the song is one of the most recognizable jingles in pop culture history and was named as the song "most likely to get stuck in your head" by Ad Age magazine in 2004.

Chili's heritage of a fun and casual atmosphere dates back to the original restaurant. The roadside restaurant hung copper chili kettles as lamps above colorful Mexican-tiled tabletops. Beer bottles were filled with salt and pepper, and the décor consisted of an assortment of antiques, toys, signs and Texas memorabilia. There was even a jukebox that played 50s and 60s tunes for free.

Though the brand has grown into a leading fast-casual restaurant, with more than 1,500 restaurants in all 50 states, 32 countries and two territories, Chili's goal has never wavered: serve great tasting food in a laid-back, fun environment.

Change is Good

Chili's leadership realized that in the 37 years of the restaurant's existence, it wasn't just the company's goal that has never changed; the look hadn't changed either.

"Although we've done upgrades, and our restaurants are well maintained, in the history of the brand, we've never done a comprehensive remodel or reimage of the brand," said Kevin Falconer, Senior Director of Design at Brinker. "A 4-year-old store would look like a 34-yearold store because that was the look."

Chili's realized they needed to progress with the times and stay relevant with their guests, so the company launched an unprecedented and ambitious reimagining campaign. The initiative brought together key departments, such as marketing, design, facilities, operations and construction, and, most importantly, the guests.

Knowing that success lies with the guests, Chili's conducted in-depth consumer-insight research to understand how the company was perceived and what was expected from the brand. The research involved focus groups and collecting thousands of online responses. In addition to answering questions about the brand and reputation, customers were asked to comment on renderings of existing and proposed design concepts.

The research yielded positive and some surprising information. For example, Chili's learned their customers are extremely loyal and equate Chili's with great-tasting food, good value and positive energy. But Chili's was surprised to learn their customers did not particularly like the signature Mexican-tiled tabletops, something Chili's valued as a sacred tradition. Guests thought the tables looked old-fashioned and kitschy, and preferred tables

with a cleaner, more contemporary look. Chili's, which is always striving to give their customers what they want, took this into consideration.

After collecting and analyzing feedback from various departments and customers, an initial design concept was rolled out in a test restaurant in Allen, Texas. Loyal ChiliHeads and lapsed patrons were invited to experience the restaurant, where a moderator explained the new design elements while guests enjoyed a meal. Again, Chili's collected customer feedback, made changes and re-tested the designs until a final concept was reached.

In the end, Chili's achieved their goal by creating a bold, new interior look that still respects the Southwestern heritage but is relevant to guests.

#### A New Experience

With the refresh initiative, guests will be welcomed into their neighborhood Chili's and greeted with a brand-new look and dining experience. The comprehensive and dramatic reimagining program includes new furniture, lighting, colors and finishes, an enhanced TV presence and the creation of new spaces.

The new interior is noticeably brighter, enhanced with warmer tones and much more contemporary.

As requested by customers, the Mexican-tiled dining tables were replaced with beautiful honey-colored ash wood tables, which perfectly complement the colorful, striped accent wall panels found throughout the restaurant. Central to the dining room is a new community area, where oversized hickory tables can accommodate larger parties with flexible arrangements that encourage gatherings of families and friends.

Above the community tables are unique chandeliers made of margarita glasses, which coordinate nicely with the modern pendant lights in the restaurant. A mirror wall in the dining room is etched with the popular "Baby Back Ribs" jingle.

Pressed tin mounted along the ceiling trim and around the booths creates a bright, clean look with vintage material. Wood plank wall accents, which are actually durable hardwood floor products, were recommended by the facilities management team at Brinker. "These give the restaurants a warm, rustic feel," said Bruce Smith, Director of Facilities Management.

"We worked closely with our facilities team," Falconer said. "Everything in the reimage was done in coordination with the facilities team to not introduce additional maintenance issues."

The facilities team members also recommended using virtually indestructible Line-X protective coatings around the legs of the booths. Line-X is the same product used for truck bed liners. The low-maintenance and durable liners hold up better to wear and frequent cleanings.

New, large flat-screen televisions were introduced in the dining room. Strategically placed for high visibility, they are muted so they don't interfere with the dining experience. The bar area also features a video wall with more and larger TVs in a contemporary setting.

Frosted, translucent panels replaced bulky wooden partitions to define spaces but maintain a bright and open feel. The frosted panels are etched with some of Chili's culinary phrases, such as "Bold," "Fresh" and "Flavor."

Iconic images that represent Chili's brand are used throughout the restaurant. The margarita glass represents Chili's popular line of refreshing margaritas, a steer is an ode to Chili's Southwest heritage and popular Big Mouth Burgers and steaks, the flame represents Chili's Sizzling Fajitas and the star represents Chili's roots in the Lone Star state.

New artwork replaced dated chili cook-off art pieces. Large "Fajitas," "Baby Back Ribs" and "Margaritas" signage promote some of Chili's most popular menu items, and duo-toned artwork featuring rustic scenes of the old Southwest reflects Chili's history.

The exterior received some special treatment as well. Along with a fresh new color scheme, the traditional striped awnings were replaced with bold and wide swatches of Chili's signature red and green colors embossed with tone-on-tone graphics. Smith said that facilities team members worked across departments to help functionally redesign the awnings to include a gasket that seals the awnings to the building to protect the windows when the restaurant sheds rainwater. Facilities also provided input regarding exterior paint specifications and worked with the design team to ensure the right areas were being primed correctly to accept the new paint. In addition, facilities recommended a supplier partner for sourcing paint who could continue to support the restaurants' needs across the system in the years to come.

Finally, new building signage with a new, cleaner font has been placed at the restaurants' entrances, along with updated street and highway signage.

### A Welcomed Change

Guests' responses to the refresh have been extremely positive.

"I love the atmosphere," one guest said. "I like how you guys keep the interior contemporary. You guys hire some really friendly staff, and it made me notice the difference with 'higher' restaurants. Thank you, guys, for making Chili's a great place for adults and families."

"The remodel looks great now that it is complete," said another guest. "At first, I wasn't sure, as I got to see the transition. But once it was complete, it looks fantastic. Again, the staff is wonderful, attentive, caring and very customer-service oriented. Their ability to continue building rapport with 'regulars' is amazing. I look forward to being a patron for more years to come."

Other guests raved about the open dining areas and the refreshing and upbeat design.

"I love the new look!" a guest said. "It's very clean! I love the straight lines and clean look. I like the new tables as well."

Under the supervision of Matt Stephens, Senior Director of Remodeling, and his team, 105 out of 835 restaurants have been refreshed so far. Stephens is out in the field, onsite, overseeing all the remodel work. With 50 to 60 restaurants refreshed in a quarter, the entire reimage program should be completed in two to three years.

"The best test of how our reimage program is doing is the actual performance," Falconer said. "The four we've done in Dallas are among the highest-performing restaurants we have."

### A New Pepper

To complete the refresh, an updated pepper logo was revealed. The new logo increases relevancy and conveys Chili's current brand imagery.

After approximately 40 rounds of exploring many design options that featured various colors, shapes and font sizes, the logo that was chosen resonated best with Chili's guests.

"The logo contemporizes the Chili's brand while being respectful of our heritage," Falconer said.

Guests also agree, saying the logo conveys the welcoming atmosphere, high-quality food and positive energy that define Chili's.

### Kitchen of the Future

In conjunction with the logo update, and interior and exterior refresh program, Chili's is also installing a Kitchen of the Future in their restaurants.

"We didn't want our guests to just experience something superficially new, but something new all around," Falconer said.

The driving force behind the Kitchen of the Future was to improve the guest experience, the pace of service and the consistency of the food.

The initiative was spurred in part because guests said they would not chose Chili's as a lunch option because the menu and pace did not serve their limited time needs. Homero Ortegon, Senior Director of Strategic Innovation at Brinker, admitted that the kitchens did not make good use of value-added steps; for example, a chef would be required to turn proteins cooked in a broiler five to six times.

Now, Chili's is using a change-step approach to apply the smart use of systems and technologies to deliver great guest experiences, improve the quality of life for team members and drive profitability.

Like with the refresh program, Chili's set out to completely evolve their existing kitchens with the Kitchen of the Future initiative. The company did not want to make small changes here and there, such as simply replacing older equipment with more energy-efficient models. Instead, Chili's looked to their menu and asked, "How can we deliver better nachos and quesadillas; how can our ribs be hotter and juicer?" and chose technology and streamlined procedures that achieve those goals.

Chili's also wanted to understand consumer and technology trends expected to occur in the restaurant industry within the next three to five years and purchase kitchen technology that would meet those future demands.

"We did not want to source current technology that will be outdated in two years," Ortegon said.

In order to source kitchen technology that leveraged future innovation, Chili's used a testing protocol that involved extensive lab work, including alpha and beta test phases.

Once technology was identified, Chili's, once again, turned to their customers to provide feedback on food cooked at an off-site test kitchen with the proposed equipment. If certain foods did not test well, Chili's would make equipment changes, sometimes working with the manufacturer to improve upon their products to serve Chili's needs, and test again.

Once all the data was collected and customers were satisfied, Chili's Kitchen of the Future would include a combi oven that offers three methods of cooking: pressureless steam, convected heat and a combination of both to replace a smoker and a tilt skillet. The combi oven specifically targets Chili's famous ribs; by adding humidity to the cooking process, the ribs stay incredibly moist.

Also, by leveraging conveyer equipment, chefs no longer have to turn proteins on a broiler up to six times like before. By cooking the foods on both sides simultaneously, the cooking is automated and consistent, allowing chefs to focus on plate presentation and delivering correct orders.

As a bonus, the new kitchen equipment also reduces the need for frequent cleanings.

"The way the proteins are now cooked result in cleaner hoods so fans don't have to run continuously like before, which means they don't need to be cleaned as frequently," said Mark Slayton, Project Manager for Brinker.

Ortegon also credits the entire facilities team for saving the company from having to remodel some of the kitchens to fit the new equipment.

"Some of our kitchens did not have the space for the equipment," Ortegon said. "We were going to have to spend several thousand dollars to carve out walls to recess the equipment."

However, Ortegon and his team were able to work with the equipment manufacturers to reduce the size of the box but increase the belt width to maintain capacity for the equipment to fit in its space without cutting into walls.

To round out the Kitchen of the Future, a re-thermalizer that uses water to evenly heat items, such as soup, will replace microwave ovens, and a crisper and quads will hold fried and other hot foods during peak times. These technologies are expected to cut the approximately 15-minute wait time by more than half.

The old equipment will be purchased by a recycling company that will refurbish it for re-sale.

"It's the responsible thing to do," Ortegon said. "We don't want them to end up in landfills or the ocean."

All 825 restaurants will receive a new Kitchen of the Future by the end of the calendar year.

Four weeks before each restaurant in all of the company's 14 regions receives its new kitchen, trainers will be onsite to train kitchen staff on the new pieces of equipment and optimized procedures, and discuss expectations. Kitchen staff are actually not allowed to serve guests until they complete this orientation.

The installation will take place in two phases, starting with the prep area and then the production area. Most importantly, like with the refresh program, no restaurants will be closed during installation.

Two national vendors will install the equipment overnight.

"On the night of install, the crews go in at 11 p.m. and by 10 a.m., the work is completed," Ortegon said.

#### Looking Hot

The restaurants that have completed the reimage program and received the Kitchen of the Future are enjoying phenomenal success.

"The menu items are better; our food quality scores have never been higher and we're faster," Ortegon said. "Thanks to heat-transfer technology, we're able to make products that were not possible in the past."

Ortegon is referring to improved quesadillas, nachos, cheese fries and future innovation. "It's a new eating experience," he said.

Chili's set out to completely refresh their brand, without re-positioning it. Their ambitious reimage program and Kitchen of the Future initiative have created an improved dining experience that still holds true to what makes Chili's, Chili's.

Guests can still enjoy their favorite dishes in a fun and beautiful new setting. The company is equally thrilled with the results and never underestimated the importance of getting the design just right, because as Falconer said, "When your logo is a pepper, you better look hot."

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