

Fresh Catch

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RAZZOO'S CAJUN CAFÉ AND TRICKY FISH TAKE A NUANCED APPROACH TO SOUTHERN SEAFOOD

Walking into a Razzoo's Cajun Café, one feels transported onto a floating barge on the swampy Louisiana bayou. The large, open dining room is primarily lit by natural light, amber string lights and glowing neon signs. In the center of the space, it's as if a tornado has swept motley artifacts up onto the ceiling. Intertwined with rope and string lights are street signs, screen doors, chairs, steering wheels, bird houses, antique gas lanterns and oil cans, and musical instruments. Each restaurant has a different swirl of objects. Large painted murals and framed photos of music legends, concert flyers and Cajun country nightlife line the walls. Stacked colorful glass bottles, threaded through wrought iron rods, gleam in the sunlight, adding an eye-catching and creative element. Bead necklaces and green, purple and gold neon lights infuse some Mardi Gras spirit. Instrumental jazz and blues music enhance the inviting and comfortable atmosphere.

In a smaller area called the Natural History room or the Cabin, taxidermy animals are affixed to the walls and line the shelves, along with an assortment of hunting and fishing décor.

Razzoo's décor may be busy and resemble a fish shack, but don't mistake that for chaos and untidiness.

"There's a lot of kitsch and stuff on the walls, but if you look beyond that, you'll see that the background is in pristine condition," said Craig Bayless, Director of Facilities at Razzoo's Cajun Café. "It's a juxtaposition between a taxidermy possum on the wall and freshly painted walls and trim, immaculate booths, and waxed and well-maintained floors."

Bayless and his facilities team are zealous about restaurant upkeep. They focus a discerning eye on the restaurants from the guest perspective, visiting or checking in on them daily.

"Guests should never find a burned out light bulb in our restaurants," Bayless said. "We remove maintenance distractions so guests can focus on the food and on having a good time. I'm like a stage manager, creating a mood and experience guests can't get anywhere else. When people's

faces show they're relaxed and having a good time, and knowing I had a hand in that, gives me a lot of joy."

The eclectic accoutrements, which are integral to Razzoo's charm and identity, can sometimes pose sourcing challenges. For example, the neon beer signs and exterior neon marquee, deemed essential to the brand, are becoming much more difficult to source in the age of LED lighting.

"They are too expensive for beer companies to use as promotional materials and are becoming a lost art," Bayless said. "The ones we have and the few that are still available are highly coveted. Some of the ones we have are no longer in production. We have an artisan who can repair broken neon elements here in Dallas. Dallas is a great place for this kind of art. We keep an inventory of these signs and periodically send them out for a refresh. We also have an offshore source, but the diameter of their neon tubes are smaller than the standard size, and if we need a total replacement, that is the only option."

While there are LED alternatives, the neon establishment has yet to fully embrace them because they do not glow, buzz, crackle, hum and pop like true neon.

"LED has the glow that mimics neon and it's very efficient, but it's not neon," Bayless said. "We are crossing that bridge with the help of some of our valued vendors, and we are looking into what that might look like in the future. But for now, we are staying with the original neon as long as there are benders and installers who can do it."

The company prioritizes achieving the right look and feel that is distinctly Razzoo's over cost. Securing the elements that define Razzoo's may sometimes require specialized craftsmanship and items to cross oceans, but to the brand, quality is always worth it.

The brand celebrates Cajun cuisine with fried gator tail, gumbo and po' boys. In fact, Razzoo's has a proprietary blackened seasoning blend and is the only brand in the market that makes truly authentic dirty rice every shift and made-from-scratch etouffee every day. During crawfish season, mud-bugs are brought in from Louisiana every two days.

The extensive menu, with its emphasis on fried foods, is not exactly health-conscious but it is unapologetically fun.

“When it comes to our food, chalk us up as your cheat day!” said Chris Degan, President of Razzoo’s Cajun Café.

SEAFOOD SPINOFF

Over the years, good ideas that were never implemented at Razzoo’s were stored away in a folder. As the folder grew, Degan thought, “I have to do something with this.” From the ideas emerged a sister concept called Tricky Fish. The first restaurant opened last year in Richardson, Texas, where Razzoo’s first found success in 1991.

Richardson’s Cityline was chosen for its trendy and urban environment, where guests expect elevated experiences, and for its business-lunch crowd.

“I know the Razzoo’s guests; I feel confident about them,” Degan said. “I look at the younger generation—people in their mid-20s and 30s—and wonder what it takes to get them into restaurants. Tricky Fish was created with them in mind, though both Razzoo’s and Tricky Fish have a broad range of guests.”

Named after the popular Tricky Fish entrée at Razzoo’s—blackened tilapia over dirty rice and crawfish etouffee—the new concept offers fresh, made-from-scratch Gulf Coast and Atlantic seafood. But unlike Razzoo’s, the flavors are not exclusively Cajun, and there is less emphasis on fried foods. Every menu category offers non-fried options and more grilled, blackened and sautéed items.

“You can eat healthier at Tricky Fish than at Razzoo’s, but you don’t have to,” Degan quipped.

Tricky Fish employs a unique service model that changes throughout the day. For weekday lunches, the restaurant operates as a fast-casual restaurant.

“There’s always someone standing at the front door to greet, assist and direct guests,” Degan said. “My biggest pet peeve with fast casual is when I walk in, I don’t always know what to do or where to go. We eliminate that problem.”

After 4 p.m. and on weekends, it turns into a full-service restaurant.

"We realized quickly that if we wanted people to come here at night we needed to have table service," Degan said. "We worried changing the style of service mid-day would be confusing for guests but it wasn't."

Uniquely, Tricky Fish has a lively bar scene that serves craft cocktails and beer, wine and a respectable bourbon selection.

"Our craft cocktails are liquor-forward," said Cody Johnson, General Manager at Tricky Fish. "We never want to take away from the liquor. We want to enhance it and provide a hint of the other fresh ingredients."

The margaritas are made with agave and freshly squeezed lemon and lime juices. The limoncello is house-made. The Raspberry Smash is made with raspberry-infused Tito's vodka, lime, lime, peach bitters and fresh thyme. Johnson crafted the Old Fashioned and the Sazerac, which were inspired by his grandfather and are his favorite drinks on the menu.

"We're known for our whiskey offerings, especially the Manhattan and Old Fashioned," he said. "We smoke the Old Fashioned to order over maple right on the bar top. It's a show that gets the crowd's attention."

Johnson had to sample a lot of beer to determine which ones to carry. He decided on mostly Texas beers with the exception of Louisiana's Abita Amber and Kentucky Bourbon Barrel Ale.

The bar accounts for 25 percent of sales, which is staggeringly high for the market. Johnson attributes the volume to a well-trained and knowledgeable bartending staff and the broad selection.

"Any higher and we'd have to consider Tricky Fish as a bar," Degan joked.

SOPHISTICATED SEAFOOD

To create Tricky Fish's menu, Degan partnered with Food & Drink Resources (FDR), a chef-driven culinary consulting agency based in Centennial, Colo. All the principals are chefs or bakers.

Razzoo's Tricky Fish entree was the first item selected for the menu.

“Chris said, ‘This is the style of food we want to serve,’ so we built the menu around it,” said Scott Randolph, Partner and Chef at FDR. “It’s the perfect dish to build the brand around as it is very approachable, middle of the road in cost and something no one else is doing in fast casual.”

As a Dallas resident for 15 years, Randolph was a regular customer at Razzoo’s and was familiar with its cuisine.

“Razzoo’s style of cuisine, with its big plates, big portions and longer cook times, doesn’t work in fast casual,” Randolph said. “So, we took the flair of Razzoo’s and applied it to Tricky Fish, with an emphasis on high-quality food, ease of execution and speed of service that is required with a higher-end business lunch crowd.”

For appetizers, Razzoo’s gumbo and Gulf oysters were the main anchors. FDR added the Cracklin’ house-fried pork rinds.

For the salad category, FDR created the Darn Good Salad and the charred Caesar salad with grilled chicken or shrimp to incorporate the brand’s fresh-cooking aspect. The Caesar salad is Degan’s favorite menu item, along with “anything that includes bacon jam!”

For sandwiches, the muffuletta was from Razzoo’s. FDR, with input from Degan, added the Pig & Poultry. The fish sandwich was created to incorporate Abita beer to the menu. It is Randolph’s favorite menu item.

“No one else is making an Abita beer batter,” he said. “It gives the fish a very unique flavor, and it’s very light and airy.”

The mac and cheese, a fan favorite, had to win the approval of Degan’s son.

“We use a very creamy Tillamook sauce, plus an extra cup of cheese on top so there’s never a shortage of cheese,” Randolph said. “That’s the way we do things at Tricky Fish. We don’t want to be a typical fast-casual restaurant.”

The fried okra side dish was invented by mistake. The FDR culinary team needed a garnish for the calamari and they threw okra into the fryer as a joke, but it turned out to be craveable. The fresh, unbattered okra is deep fried and seasoned with a sweet and spicy Cajun seasoning.

“Something that was invented as an R&D mistake now sells a crazy amount every day,” Randolph said.

To ensure the menu items are executed perfectly each time, FDR provides extensive ongoing training with Tricky Fish’s kitchen team. In addition, they supply full recipes with photos and step-by-step instructions.

“During rollouts, we spend a day or two in each kitchen,” Randolph said. “We spend a lot of time on training because if the kitchen staff can’t execute it well for the consumer, it was all for naught.”

Every six months, under Degan’s direction based on food costs, sales, time of year and seasonality, FDR presents new menu items to the team. Typically, FDR creates 10 to 12 dishes. Degan and his team choose around five to be presented, two of which may be added to the menu. Currently, FDR is working on lighter desserts, a new po’ boy and brunch items.

“Roast beef is getting expensive, so we may work on a new po’ boy that’s not fried, such as a ham and cheese po’ boy,” Randolph said.

FDR has a full test kitchen in Colorado but all Tricky Fish and Razzoo’s menu presentations take place in the Razzoo’s in Irving, Texas.

“The average culinary team member at Razzoo’s has been with the brand for 12 years, so there’s a lot of longevity and knowledge there,” Randolph said. “That’s why we go to them instead of them coming to us. We can get real-time engagement and make tweaks based on the feedback to achieve faster buy-in—lots of decisions are made at the table.”

A COMPLETE DESIGN

To set Tricky Fish apart from Razzoo’s, Degan partnered with Dallas-based Zero3 to give Tricky Fish its own identity.

“Chris said, ‘I want it to look like there could be 10 of these and this isn’t our first one,’” said Paul Jankowski, Owner of Zero3 Inc. “I took that to mean he wanted a complete design.”

To complement Cityline's metropolitan neighborhood, Jankowski settled on an urban industrial aesthetic with a reserved color palette of blue and grey with pops of orange and green. The colors are found in an art mural at the bar, in the blue-green handblown glass shades in the dining room and in the metal fish logo, which Jankowski calls the angry fish. The logo was in Degan's expanding Razzoo's ideas folder. It was originally proposed as a t-shirt design.

"Razzoo's has 30 paint colors. Tricky Fish has maybe six, but we use color to create excitement," Jankowski said. "The pops of color excite your eyes in a subconscious way. Your eyes follow them around the space. I wanted to give people who are working all day under fluorescent lights in cubicles a different experience when they come in for lunch and attract people in the evening."

The contemporary and warm textural space feels like a comfortable warehouse.

There's an array of seating: tall tables, a community table, booths and the bar experience. Power outlets and USB ports are available throughout the space.

"In our high-tech world, we want guests to plug in their devices and hang out," Jankowski said.

The tables are made from oak palettes. The wood walls with exposed nail holes are from reclaimed oak salvaged from old buildings. Around the bar and order counter is a new wood product that uses all the wood from a tree, resulting in less waste. The edges are curved and the lines aren't cut straight, which create interesting patterns. The brick walls, though new, were made to look old and worn. By the order counter is a shiny corrugated metal walk-in beer cooler that allows guests to peek in to see the craft beer kegs.

The materials and colors—the graphics and artwork, the exterior of the building, the stripes in the concrete floor, the tabletops and the bathroom tiles—all reinforce each other in a controlled way to deliver Tricky Fish's distinct look and feel.

"We have specified some materials from overseas because we're looking for items that are not everywhere and over-used," Bayless said. "Paul does an excellent job finding unique materials. We recognize the long lead times for repairs, and we have a plan in place, but the hassle of time and planning is worth it. Again, it's all about guest experience."

"I already think Tricky Fish is a success," Degan said. "People get it, and I believe the concept would work in a lot of places."

A second location is set to open soon in Waterside, a mixed-use development in Fort Worth, Texas.

ESTABLISHING PROCESSES

When Bayless joined the team three years ago, there wasn't an effective way for the restaurants to communicate issues. As a process-driven guy, he added a third-party service software for store managers to submit service calls. The solution consolidated the work orders in one central location and facilitated line-of-service assignments. Repair times were greatly diminished, reduced from a week to an average of three days.

"Our team took to the process very well," Bayless said. "Within 30 days, we were up and running at all locations. Our operations team took it to task and made sure all managers were up to speed."

The new process kept the annual budget constant even though a new location was added. It streamlined the preventive maintenance program; all lines of service are dispatched on a timely schedule. The team also can leverage data to gauge ROI and determine whether to repair or replace equipment.

"Having robust software, a strong team and a great culture backing us make our facilities team scalable," Bayless said. "Coupling our process with vendors that can follow us wherever we choose to land makes Razzoo's and Tricky Fish capable of achieving a national footprint, if we choose to pursue that endeavor."

As both brands evolve and grow, the facilities team is ready for what the future brings.

PROVEN CONCEPTS

Razzoo's Cajun Café has forged a following in Texas. Two new restaurants are opening this year in Lubbock and Pasadena, Texas, bringing the total number to 21. Degan is exploring possibilities to expand Razzoo's into Florida, Georgia and North Carolina.

Tricky Fish has also proved to be a successful concept, though Degan has no plans for the brand to leave the Dallas/Fort Worth area for a while. He aims to grow it locally before expanding the concept outside of Texas.

In a perfect world, Degan would open two Razzoo's and one Tricky Fish each year for the next five years.

"It's a good pace," he said. "It's not too fast or too slow. Growth is fun and it provides new opportunities for people in the organization, but we never want to outgrow the culture we've built over 27 years."

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.