

# Chain Melody

*Upscale multiunits are growing in leaps and bounds. What opportunities exist for chefs at these higher-end concepts? And what can other segments of the industry learn from this newer breed of chains?*



Pleau



Nuetzi

BY KATIE AYOUB

**A**rguably the most successful chain empire, Orlando-based Darden Restaurants, with a tally of 1,270 units dispersed among its four established concepts, is dipping its toe into a new, more upscale concept. Deviating from its casual-themed successes such as Red Lobster and Olive Garden, Darden has launched a test restaurant in Orlando called Seasons 52.

After extensive market research and analysis, Darden found an under-served niche. Seasons 52, which opened in February 2003, has been designed as a vehicle to explore popular culinary trends such as grilled foods, fresher ingredients, bolder flavors and lighter preparations. Although self-described as “sophisticated

casual,” its fare is comparable to other upscale multiunits such as The Capital Grille, a subsidiary of Atlanta-based RARE Hospitality International, Inc., and Portland, Ore.-based McCormick & Schmick’s Seafood Restaurants.

How does one define a chain concept as upscale? *The National Culinary Review* came up with simple parameters: quality and pedigree of ingredients. Check averages, although higher than in casual chains or quick-service restaurants, vary tremendously within the segment. For instance, we define both The Capital Grille and Seasons 52 as upscale. Although their check averages are dollars apart, they share high-end ingredients, seasonality and a chef focus.

The Capital Grille’s first unit opened in 1990. It now

has 19 locations, averaging three openings a year. McCormick & Schmick's Seafood Restaurants has been around for more than 30 years, and the company is still growing, opening six to eight restaurants a year. Roy's, an upscale Hawaiian-fusion chain based in Newport Beach, Calif., has opened 18 restaurants in the last four years. Five more are slated for 2005, bringing its global tally to 35.

Why such growth in this segment? Each concept tells a different success story, but perhaps they all answer an underlying public desire: a collective hankering for consistency, comfort and familiarity that is given a soft, inviting edge by high standards of quality in these concepts.



MIKE GRAY

### King

Each of these upscale multiunits, as well as others, such as Napa Valley Grille (under Emeryville, Calif.-based Tavistock Restaurants), Palomino Restaurant Rotisserie Bar (under Seattle-based Restaurants Unlimited) and New Orleans-based Ruth's Chris, is thriving. Each offers chefs creativity in the kitchen and upward mobility within the corporation. Each performs market research that addresses customer satisfaction, dining trends, diner comfort level and consumer loyalty.

With the kind of growth we're seeing in upscale multiunits, the rest of the industry should take notes. The elements of success implemented by these chains are not indigenous to upscale chains, or even to upscale anything. Indeed, they are the building blocks of any successful restaurant.

### Chef-driven kitchens

There is a stigma attached to cooking for a chain restau-

rant. Cookie-cutter formulas, corporate dogma. But take a second look. Upscale chains are seeing the value in chef-driven kitchens. They're granting greater autonomy to chefs—even demanding it. "Understand the brand, then add your signature," seems to be the new calling card for hiring in this segment.

Jim Bologna, executive chef at The Capital Grille in Troy, Mich., echoes this drive. Culinary direction at the unit level is moving away from kitchen managers to chefs. "They're elevating their game," he says. "At The Capital Grille, we're looking to culinary schools for our kitchen brigades. Seasonality is becoming important, and a knowledge of that comes from chefs."

Bologna has a fresh perspective on upscale multiunits—he's held the position for just over a year. "I came from a kitchen where I had complete autonomy. I lost a chunk of that when I came here. Everything is reciped out to the ounce. But now that I've got my sea legs, the kitchen is becoming my own," he

says. "I'm driving the train."

The Capital Grille runs weekly specials, or features, as they're called within the company. Executive chefs create them with approval from their regional managers. As a lunch special recently, Bologna created blackened beef tenderloin over linguine Alfredo with wilted summer Swiss chard. Occasionally, specials are picked up nationally. At The Capital Grille in Kansas City,

Mo., a coffee-rubbed Delmonico steak sold like hotcakes. Other units soon specialied it, as well.

"Our executive chefs have the autonomy to drive the local food market," says Jim Nuetzi, corporate executive chef of The Capital Grille. "They appreciate not having as large of a scope as they did in independents, with only three to four changing features on the menu at a time."

At Roy's, chef/partners are granted tremendous autonomy in their kitchens. They're also granted equity, which gives them high stakes in the success of the concept. Roy's Classics, approximately nine items that can be found at all 30 locations, is the through line that indelibly imprints founding chef/owner Roy Yamaguchi's mark on each restaurant. But the rest of the menu is left to the unit chef's interpretation of Roy's cuisine.

"They have enormous latitude on our menu that changes daily, but discipline to Roy's cuisine is very

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This dish, pan-seared sea scallops on a potato cake with saffron/chive butter, is an example of the individual work that executive chefs contribute to the culinary program at McCormick & Schmick's.



Cedar-plank roasted salmon with roasted Yukon gold potatoes and fresh market vegetables is a signature item at Seasons 52.

good. We haven't had anyone stray too far off the path," says Mark Running, president of Roy's.

McCormick & Schmick's seems to exact greater control over their unit chefs, but still emphasizes creativity, only funneled through corporate channels. "Every culinary decision has to be passed through regional," says Bill King, executive director of culinary development. "We need that financial stability—it is a \$250 million publicly held company."

But that company does offer tremendous opportunity for upward mobility with its structure of overseeing regional chefs. "And we're growing, so we will add more regional chefs over time," says King.

Darden's test restaurant, Seasons 52, has not hired unit chefs yet, as its only restaurant is in Orlando, but Clifford Pleau, director of culinary development for new business and Seasons

52, says it is a chef-driven concept. "Consistency needs to be a driver, of course, but a full immersion of understanding our brand is crucial," he says.

The brand is built around a changing weekly array of fresh seasonal vegetables, fruits, fish and meats. No menu item exceeds 475 calories. "We're offering a subtle delivery of nutritional food. The message is, it's good food and, by the way, we're good for you," says Pleau.

### Strong culinary leadership

Although unit chefs of these upscale chains are being granted more and more autonomy, honed culinary leadership at the corporate level is a common thread in upscale multiunits.

Chain of command differs depending on corporate culture, but the general principle seems to involve a unit kitchen brigade overseen by an executive chef who

reports to a regional manager, who reports to the corporate executive chef or culinary director.

At McCormick & Schmick's, the unit chef is under the guidance of one of eight regional senior chefs in the company. These regional chefs approve every culinary decision in the 51 nationwide units. Says King, "Our regional chefs have to be strong culinarians. They're not cooking, but their knowledge of ingredients and how they come together is critical. They need to think about food at a higher level."

Of course, leadership and people skills, as well as business savvy rank among the desired qualities for this position. "We're a close-knit company. The chemistry has to be just right," says King. Most of the chefs at McCormick & Schmick's are promoted from within.

The Capital Grille's pyramid is

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The Capital Grille's 24-ounce dry aged porterhouse steak, served with a side of onion strings.

peaked by the corporate executive chef who oversees a team of regional managers. They're not necessarily cooks by trade, but have foodservice experience. The managers oversee the executive chefs, meeting with them each week via conference call to discuss specials, food and labor costs, among other operational issues. Nuetzi, the corporate executive chef, drives the brand for the company, ensuring that the menu stays focused.

At Roy's, a director of chefs oversees the unit chefs, along with a president, a chief executive officer and, of course, Yamaguchi. The unit chefs are chef/partners, holding equity with the company they serve.

## Recognizable identity. Individual flair.

The Capital Grille in Chicago is contemporary and airy. The one in Troy is club-like and masculine. But diners still know they're in The Capital Grille. Ditto for McCormick & Schmick's. In Philadelphia, mosaic tile flooring is an architectural feature. The unit in Minneapolis

goes with Polo-green carpeting and framed historical photographs of Minneapolis history.

But there are themes that give a recognizable feel to the multiunit.

Each restaurant of The Capital Grille features red leather, brass and deep wood. At all McCormick & Schmick's, diners find a handsome interior of rich mahogany wood, brass and stained glass. At Roy's, tropical-themed art hangs from the walls. Lighting is the same in each unit. "The buildings aren't cookie cutter, though," says Running. "You want the feel of your restaurant without the look of a chain."

Perhaps that speaks to a new trend in diner demand—familiarity of menu and brand without the monotony of identical units. □

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## Crib notes from a unit chef

*As Jim Bologna's perspective on cooking for a multiunit is so fresh, we thought we'd take a closer look at his observations.*

**Unit:** The Capital Grille in Troy, Mich. Troy is an affluent suburb of Detroit saturated with fine-dining restaurants, such as steakhouse competitors The Palm and Ruth's Chris.

**Volume:** Averages 250 covers at lunch and 300 covers at dinner. "Double those numbers at Christmas, and quadruple them for The Ryder Cup," says Bologna.

**Training:** The Capital Grille instills extensive training for its executive chefs. Bologna spent two months at the Kansas City shop, then five days at RARE University in Atlanta for brand training, meeting all the executives. "You learn about the psychology of management," he says.

**Biggest surprise:** "The amount of control that a company can have over so many restaurants—they really know the daily operations. But that helps you as a chef. The structure is good," he says.

**Biggest frustration:** Lack of daily interaction with the corporate chef. "I miss the brainstorming," says Bologna.

**Oprah moment:** "My career took a turn that I wasn't anticipating. I didn't conceive of going this corporate; I envisioned owning my own restaurant, maybe 100 seats, where I could do my own phenomenal things. I've had my eyes opened about the advantages of being a part of something more global," he says.

**Greatest perk:** "There are many, but the quality of life has skyrocketed. We strive for five-day workweeks and 10- to 12-hour days. You have to give up a little control to achieve that, which is a hard adjustment, but the trade-off is phenomenal. Now I've learned to anticipate what's going on and I set the restaurant up before I take my days off. I set it up for success."