

Crowing for Wings

Roosters Inc. – with locations in Ohio and Louisville, Ky. – is known for its service, quality employees and, above all, its tasty chicken wings. **By Libby John**



>> Roosters' wings are served with nine types of sauces, all developed in-house. The company says the sauces can stand on their own, but are also good mixed together.

Although Roosters Inc. has a very extensive menu that includes grilled chicken, salads, subs and pizza, people flock to the Ohio-based restaurant chain for its No. 1 item: chicken wings. "We use a jumbo wing – most other restaurants use much smaller wings," President Dan Ponton says. "This gives a value perception in the marketplace. It also allows us to cook wings that are plump and juicy and not dried-out."

The restaurant offers nine types of sauces: the mildest one being teriyaki and the spiciest being Super Killers. "All the sauces have been developed by either [founder] Bob Frick or our area kitchen people," Ponton says. "We fry every order; we don't precook to order."

The company has specialized in chicken wings since it was founded in 1989. "No one else was doing it," Ponton explains.

"We built our menu around wings, but basically, that's how we started out. We had chicken wings, fries, burgers – a very limited menu. Now, we have a very extensive menu."

Expanding its menu is not the only thing Roosters has changed over the past 20 years. "Now, it's more of a family restaurant," he says.

The company has 13 company locations and 8 franchised locations. Its closest competitor is probably Buffalo Wild Wings, he acknowledges.

"They are competitors, but they don't have a wait staff," he explains. "[Also], they cater to a younger crowd, where our guests are on average a bit older and include a lot of family activity."

company profile

Roosters Inc.

www.roosterswings.com

Headquarters: Dublin, Ohio

Employees: 800

Specialty: Chicken wings

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>> President Dan Ponton says Roosters started out offering "chicken wings, fries, burgers," but has expanded its menu with a variety of appetizers, soups, salads, chicken fingers, subs, sandwiches and pizza, as well as its signature wings. The company's Dumpster Fries include "everything the garbage man won't take," such as curly fries, melted cheddar cheese, bacon bits, diced tomatoes, green onions, jalapeno slices and Roosters' own "dumpster dressing."



Roosters works hard to adapt to customers' evolving taste buds, Ponton says. "It's an ever-changing thing," he says. "If you could predict it, you will do very well." The company keeps up on trends through its guests, employees and by reading trade magazines. "Most of our really good stuff – recipes, sauces, ideas – come from our employees."

He notes a recent trend is the influx of Hispanic-inspired flavors. "We kept up with that and introduced a few new things [that meet that taste]," he says, such as the chipotle wing sauce. "The chipotle wing sauce we developed can stand on its own or it is versatile enough – like our other homemade sauces – to mix with any of our wing sauces. We encourage our guests to order their sauces mixed together."

The economy has had an impact on the company, but it's been positive. "The economy isn't the greatest, but we're priced so well," he explains. Entrees are \$6 and below. "When people have limited money, they're not going to high-end places; they're dropping to value prices when they want full service. Times are bad, but we're continuing to do well because we are positioned so well."

Serving Its Guests

Roosters has a strong work force, which distinguishes it from competitors, Ponton says. Its corporate management team has about 20 years of experience, and 15 of its employees have been with the company for 15 years.

"We have consistency," he says. "Employees are one thing that sets us apart. They really try to service our guests."

Employees like to stick around because they enjoy the work environment, he says. "They have fun while making money," he says. "There are not many jobs that you can have fun and make money."

Taking care of its employees is important to the company. "We really value our employees and guests," he says. "If you forget everything we have ever taught you during your management training,

just remember these two things: Take care of your employees and guests and everything else will fall into place.”

Expansion Opportunities

Roosters plans on opening two to three new locations – a mix of franchises and corporate-owned restaurants – over the next two years, Ponton says. “A lot of it depends on available buildings and if real estate prices continue to spiral down in the commercial [industry],” he says.

The company typically likes to purchase or lease former restaurant buildings when expanding, Ponton says. “Our cost of getting into business is so much lower,” he explains. “It’s half of what other people’s costs are. That’s one of the reasons we are able to weather economic storms so much better than some other casual restaurants.”

For example, if a Bob Evans location

plans to close down or relocate one of its restaurants, it would call Roosters to see if it is interested in purchasing or leasing its old facility. “Currently, we’re in four or five [former Bob Evans restaurants],” Ponton says. Most of them are about 6,000 square feet.

“All we need to do is go in and remodel,” he says. “Someone else has already provided us with some very expensive essentials that we take advantage of.” “We build a bar of about 30 to 35 seats, install redwood on all the tables and bar tops, white or yellow pine on all the walls which are decorated with our ‘Roosters Sayings.’”

Huntington Park

Bob and Corrine Frick started the concept back in 1988 at their first Roosters in Dayton, Ohio. One of its longest tenured employees is Derrick Pernell, a kitchen

manager who has been working for the company for 21 years.

“Bob and Corrine over the next 20 years have opened an additional 12 company locations,” Ponton says. “Bob still continues and loves to be involved in recipes and development. Bob is responsible for probably 90 percent of the items and recipes on the menu. Corrine was the one who gave Roosters its distinctive atmosphere and personality that is a cornerstone of our business today.”

The company just opened a location in Huntington Park, Ohio. “Huntington Park is the brand new home of the Columbus Clippers baseball team – an AAA affiliate of the Cleveland Indians,” he says. “Because of our history with the Clippers at their old stadium, they reserved Roosters a spot at their new park. We are very excited to be a part of the Clippers’ new home.” **FD**