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Identify the entrepreneurial drive in potential hires

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NPD: Kids' meal traffic slows as tykes pick from value menus

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RON RUGGLESS

John Galindo, chef-owner of Izzoz Tacos, stands in front of his 42-foot former horse trailer in Austin, Texas, which shares space with Holy Cacao.

**On a roll: Texas restaurateurs drive business with gourmet-food trailers**

BY RON RUGGLESS

AUSTIN, TEXAS — Entrepreneurs in this laid-back Texas capital are hitching their dreams not just to stars but to gourmet-food trailers.

While trailers offering gourmet foods are found in isolated numbers around the

nation, the number of food-toting Airstream, Wells Cargo and repurposed horse trailers in Austin has exploded in the recent past, as operators look to capitalize on such advantages as lower overhead, ability to follow the crowds and the perception of value for menu items.

Within the past few months, Austin has seen a half dozen new gourmet-trailer eateries literally roll into town. Izzoz Tacos, Holy Cacao and The Mighty Cone are among the newcomers joining such long-established trailer players as Flip Happy

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**Sales-trend data buoys optimism**

Industry may see spending trickle back

BY SARAH E. LOCKYER

NEW YORK — Consumers look like they're getting hungry again for restaurant meals.

Even as the operating environment remains incredibly tough, new data on consumer confidence, consumers' spending plans and restaurant sales trends have some observers thinking the foodservice industry already has suffered the worst of this recession's hits.

"While it would be premature to suggest that a full economic recovery is imminent," said Benihana chief executive Richard C. Stockinger, "we believe that overall guest counts are beginning to stabilize, and are more hopeful that trends could improve from these levels as we move into [the company's April-beginning fiscal 2010]."

Stockinger's optimism

surfaced even after Benihana Inc., the operator or franchisor of 116 restaurants under three brands, posted a systemwide same-store sales decline of 10.4 percent for its March-ended fourth quarter.

Officials at Brinker International, California Pizza Kitchen and Ruby Tuesday



Brinker International, parent of the Chili's chain, is among the casual-dining companies that say sales have improved.

in early April each indicated that sales trends at their chains have improved from

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High- and low-tech toys let Luce get creative

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**NRN EDITORIAL:**

Focused, strategic marketing plan could help turn the tables for foodservice

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**Chefs cook up ways to enhance quality, keep costs down**

BY PAMELA PARSEGHIAN

Bringing diners in the door is difficult enough during good economic times. But as the recession prompts accountants to scream for fat-cutting measures, chefs are feeling more heat to shrink costs without sacrificing the

quality that attracts customers. Or to put it crudely: It's still the food, stupid.

In response, chefs are analyzing everything — from purchasing practices to composting food scraps — and finding ways to still delight customers even as they seize opportunities to save.

In the following report, Nation's Restaurant News outlines several of the strategies chefs are using to please both those who count the beans and those who eat them.

For instance, some food buyers say that lower commodity costs have helped them not only maintain food

ON THE CUTTING EDGE

**Massaging the Menu**

SHAVING COSTS & PAMPERING CUSTOMERS

quality, but also increase it with no harm to the bottom line. Other chefs are adding more menu options, especial-

ly in multiple portion sizes, which take little extra effort. And smaller portions at lower prices can prompt penny-pinching diners to try new items or return more frequently for their favorites.

Back in the kitchen, new types of equipment help cooks SEE **MASSAGING**, PAGE 25

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# Operators drive business with gourmet trailers

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These entrepreneurs are finding their mobile restaurants in a variety of locations, even from eBay or Craigslist, where they can be purchased for as little as \$5,000.

Such a Craigslist find became Holy Cacao, which shares lot space with Izzoz Tacos.

"We're in an old taco trailer that we found on Craigslist," said John Spillyards, co-owner of Holy Cacao. "We completely renovated it, down to the granite countertops."

Spillyards, who is in the machinery business, opened Holy Cacao in March with his partner, Ellen Kinsey, who has a master's degree from the Wharton School of Business.

"We could have gone the brick-and-mortar direction, but for significantly less overhead we were able to open this," Spillyards said. To reflect their Austin style, they hired local artist Claire Hughes to paint murals on the trailer.

Holy Cacao offers gourmet hot chocolates, frozen drinks and "cake balls," which are cold, chocolate-

dipped cakes on a stick for \$1.50.

"We thought we would sell a couple hundred cake balls a day and a few chocolates and milkshakes," said Spillyards. "We have gone from 200 cake balls a day to 500 and then to over 1,000. The response has blown us away."

For culinary expertise, they hired as executive chef Mary Margaret Higdon, a Culinary Institute of America graduate. They also rely on advice from Spillyards' sister, Cammie Spillyards, who is director of culinary innovation at the Chili's Grill & Bar chain.

"We're always looking at new menu items," Kinsey said.

Spillyards said the recession makes gourmet trailers a popular alternative not only among investors but consumers as well.

"In a day when economic times are tight, a consumer may not be able to go have a \$9 piece of pie at a restaurant," he said. "But for a buck and a half, I can have a really nice luxury dessert. People still want those luxuries, but this is a

way it can be delivered at a significantly lower cost."

Just a few blocks away on Austin's South Congress Avenue is an entire block front of gourmet trailers, offering six diverse menus ranging from popcorn to Austin's popular Hey, Cupcake!

The Mighty Cone opened there in March and touts its familial relationship to the esteemed Hudson's on the Bend fine-dining restaurant. Mighty Cone is a creation of Hudson's owner Jeff Blank and executive chef Robert Rhoades. The trailer offers chicken and shrimp "meat cones" as well as sliders, giving customers a chance to sample Hudson's fare for less than \$10 a sitting.

The popularity of Austin's trailers is gaining the attention of established multiunit operators.

Jeff Sinelli, founder and chief executive of the Dallas-based Which Wich sandwich chain, said a franchisee in College Station, Texas, is investigating creating a satellite trailer location because of the seasonality of university business.



NON RICKLESS

**Hey, Cupcake! is among six gourmet-food trailers on one block in Austin, Texas.**

"We can use the original store as a commissary and set up the trailer as a mobile outpost with the ability to move it to special events," Sinelli said. "We attach it to the actual physical store. As a franchisor, we love it because it grows our sales."

"We're still costing it out, but the cost is a quarter of a what a brick-and-mortar restaurant will cost," he said. Currently, he said he projects a brand-new trailer, such as a Wells Cargo, outfitted for foodservice, to be \$100,000, give or take \$25,000.

"Anytime you reduce your footprint, you can reduce your labor," Sinelli said. "You can capitalize on large events with their high sales. If

a location doesn't work, you have the mobility to move it across the street, so to speak. And fun is an advantage: It's hip; it's fun. Customers feel they are supporting the 'little guy.'"

Sinelli said the gourmet trailers fit in what he calls an "artsy-entrepreneur feel. The Airstream works well for that. There's a slogan there of 'Keep Austin Weird,' and that works."

Denney said those looking at gourmet trailer foodservice should consider a number of factors that might impact operations. Among them are dealing with inclement weather, accommodating some seating, ensuring foot traffic, learning how to run an efficient kitchen in such a small space without harming quality, obtaining adequate utilities, and creating a sense of permanence despite the restaurant's mobility. ■

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