

Checkers makes a rally for the Chicago market

[News]

Thanks to some new twists on the classic drive-thru, the fast-food chain spot has enough room to open three Chicagoland locations this year.

BY MADELINE SKAGGS



If the black-and-white checked exterior of fast-food drive-thru Checkers has seemed absent from the Chicago dining landscape, wait no longer. Instead, get ready for a slimmed-down version.

Checkers Drive-In Restaurants opened its first new location in more than a year Thursday, at 4320 W. North Ave, the first of four Chicagoland locations slated to open this year. The chain — branded as either Checkers or Rally's depending on the region — has more than 700 locations nationwide, but has been limited in its expansion efforts because of the double drive-thru design.

To break into denser markets like Chicago, the company decided to loosen constraints on corporate and franchise locations build-out options, says Jennifer Durham, Checkers vice president of franchise development. "We've really evolved the restaurant formats and the designs to incorporate whatever it is that's needed in that particular trade area," Durham says.

For a congested city like Chicago, that means allowing single-lane drive thrus, strip mall end caps and building conversions to better accommodate pedestrian and mass transit traffic.

Food industry research consultancy Technomic executive vice president Darren Tristano doesn't think that ditching the double drive-through will hurt Checkers' brand, which he called "relatively flat." "This is going to help them expand the brand beyond more of the rural and suburban locations, into the more hip, urban places," Tristano says.

The move also allows franchisees to forgo the high costs of building from the ground up. "Ultimately, at the end of the day for any franchise owner or for the company, it's about making certain that you have a good return on investment. That's where it all starts and ends," Durham says.



Photos of the new North Ave. location courtesy of Checkers