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Metro Detroit small business owners take advantage of growing demand for quick-service food

By Joe St. Henry

Soups and salads are helping fuel a wave of new quick-service food franchises expanding in Metro Detroit, with their owners taking advantage of people's growing interest in eating healthier.

Among them is The Big Salad, which opened its fifth location in Ann Arbor this month, joining restaurants in Grosse Pointe Woods, Novi, Troy and Royal Oak. Its menu includes made-to-order gourmet salads, soups and sandwiches.

"There's a lot of pent-up demand for healthy food choices," said John Bornoty, 43, who founded the restaurant in 2008. "We're inundated with pizza and burger places here, but people want to eat healthier. Give them an option and they'll take it."

Bornoty is not the only food entrepreneur reacting to changing consumer tastes and the growth in healthy eating. In addition to salads, savory but healthy soup offerings are growing in popularity and providing business opportunities. Franchisors that specialize in low-calorie desserts are expanding here, too. Even those restaurants that cater to the most dedicated meat eaters are preparing their entrees differently to cut calories and woo new customers.

The International Franchise Association's latest report on the economic outlook for franchise businesses projects a 1.5 percent increase in the number of quick-service restaurants opening this year, creating more than 3 million jobs.

Mike Cory, owner and franchise placement specialist at FranNet in Grosse Pointe, projects incremental growth in food franchises in southeastern Michigan as well, as the economy continues to improve and people spend more.

"I'm seeing more people will commit to food franchises," he said. "Especially with consumers willing to spend money now and eat out."

Zoup, a Southfield-based chain of casual soup eateries, continues to grow and has plans to add 18 locations in Michigan, neighboring states and Canada.

Among the franchisees opening a new location is Karl Lewis, who owns a Zoup! in Pontiac. His second eatery will open in the fall in Dearborn. He has been encouraged to see customer spending gradually increase over the past three years.

"I think it has to do with the improving economy," Lewis said. "Plus, an increased interest in healthy foods and the quality of our products."

Even desserts can be healthy, said Rich Hankins, director of franchise development at TCBY (The Country's Best Yogurt). He said the six TCBY locations in southeastern Michigan have done well and the franchisor plans to open another 12 stores in the area by the end of 2014.

The new locations will continue to feature TCBY's proprietary 90 percent fat-free yogurt recipes, but use a new self-service model and a hip, laid-back motif, Hankins said.

"I like to think of us as the Starbucks of yogurt," he said. "We're an alternative to a coffee shop — a new place for people of all ages to meet and make their own frozen desserts."

Famous Dave's of America and its five barbecue restaurants in the region are capitalizing on the healthy eating craze, too.

Most people enjoy the pork, beef and chicken entrees slathered in the restaurant's homemade sauces, but a growing number of patrons are ordering their meat "naked," said Victor Salamone, vice president of development and franchise sales.

"Naked pulled pork has only 40 calories per ounce and our beef brisket with no sauce has only 50 calories per ounce," he said, boasting he has lost 60 pounds in the past year eating Famous Dave's food almost every day.

Salamone said local businessman Elliott Baum, 2010 Franchisee of the Year, owns all of the Detroit-area Famous Dave's restaurants, located in Roseville, Taylor, Novi, Westland and Rochester Hills. He has signed an agreement to open up to five more in the region in coming years.

"The resurgence of the auto industry seems to have breathed life back into the Detroit area," Salamone said. "Since 2008-09, we've seen substantial growth in sales. It's time to build restaurants here and grow. We're excited Elliott is investing."

Despite the growing number of healthy options, Detroiters still indulge in traditional quick-service food offerings like hamburgers on a regular basis. Checkers Drive-In Restaurants operates 32 locations in the area, 21 of which are franchisee-owned.

Jennifer Durham, vice president of franchise development, said eight Checkers restaurants are slated to open soon and two or three more in the next year.

"We're excited about Detroit," she said.

"There's a lot of interest and so much opportunity. Business owners are taking advantage of the down real estate market and making investments that will provide great returns."

The youngest multi-unit Checkers franchisee in the country is Nicole Wilski, 30, of Clinton Township.

Her company, Big Buford Holdings, operates six Checkers restaurants in the region, the most recent opening in Chesterfield Township in February. She has plans to open two more locations this year.

"Checkers as a brand has great prices," she said. "It's a value-driven company. Families can feed their kids here without breaking the bank."

Joe St. Henry is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.