

RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY

Restaurant Hospitality's Fourth Annual Concepts of Tomorrow Conference Gives Attendees The Winning Formula For Growth.

READY TO ROLL



TOP PHOTO: Noodles & Co.'s Ross Kamen (top) and Bertucci's Rosario Del Nero (bottom right) told the audience how to replicate concepts, while Clark Wolf (bottom left) told them what kind of concepts might be worth replicating.

BY BOB KRUMMERT

Whether they were independent operators looking to open a second unit or emerging regional chain executives hoping to expand their concept nationwide, attendees at RESTAURANT HOSPITALITY'S Fourth Annual Concepts of Tomorrow Conference left the event equipped with the strategies and tactics they'd need to take their businesses to a much higher level. Held at Chicago's new Sofitel Water Tower hotel, the gathering featured the real-world perspective of some of the industry's savviest chain and independent restaurant operators. Their collective message: In the restaurant business, you're never too small to hit the big time.

Especially now. New York City-based restaurant consultant and trendmeister deluxe **Clark Wolf** kicked off the conference by giving attendees his rapid-fire perspective of what's hot, what's not and what's coming next for the restaurant business.

"The post-9/11 effect is going to be with us for a generation," Wolf said. "People today are tired of new things—a constant parade of new things gets old. Now they want not so much comfort food as comfortable food, food that seems safe, pure, clean and healthy."

"Even the way people eat in restaurants has changed," he added. "It's not uncommon to see one, two, three or even four generations at one table because people are going out to eat as families."

Thus the question becomes, "So what does your restaurant have that everybody wants?" Wolf asked, "because what they want is food that is familiar and fresh."

And do you need a great chef to prepare this kind of food? Not necessarily, although it never hurts if you hire the right one. Wolf said he likes to work with chefs in their "post-jerk phase," when their passion for food still burns brightly, but is tempered by a keen grasp of restaurant business realities.

And business should be on the upswing soon. Wolf foresees a recovery and a new boom for restaurants just around the corner, and he warned operators to be prepared. "It's gonna pop in 3-5 years," he said. "Invest now, and be creative when you do."

"Anything the public wants can become a good restaurant business, and figuring out what those desires are is key," Wolf said. "It's true that being first and be-

ing broke is no fun," he said. "But sometimes we don't change fast enough."

"It's an opportunity for you...if you can replicate your concept with quality."

Of course, replicating a restaurant's food and experience with quality is the major challenge for any concept that desires to grow. **Rosario Del Nero** has pulled off this feat dozens of times as v.p./executive chef of Bertucci's. And Noodles & Co. executive chef **Ross Kamen** has done the same for his company's fast casual concept. The pair gave COT Conference attendees their formulas for producing consistently great food in a multi-unit environment.

Knowing The Drill

Del Nero said that 85-unit Bertucci's Brick Oven Pizzeria, which began as a pizza place, is now a full-menu casual dining operation. "We promise to deliver a great experience to customers, and we have to deliver on that promise every day," Del Nero said. His challenge: Creating consistent great food at all units in a chain that has 7,000 employees.

To do it takes a food philosophy of "uncompromising food quality." Del Nero has formulated a standardized approach that relies on "systems. You need more than just recipes. You need systems," he said.

Part of the consistency factor is handled via rigorous purchasing and cooking specs. At Bertucci's, peppers must be 20 percent red, zucchinis are a maximum two inches in circumference, and rosemary sprigs always have a four-inch stem.

"Twenty percent of our food dollar is produce," Del Nero pointed out. "These specs make our signature items distinctive. Giving our employees consistent product to cook with produces consistent food."

Another key: All Bertucci's have brick ovens, and Del Nero designs the chain's food to maximize use of

continued on page 28

NERVE CENTER: Chipotle founder Steve Eilis (upper left) keynoted, Antico Posto's Russell Bry cooked (center left), Smokey Bones boss Brad Blum picked up the Melman Award from Rich Melman (center right) and serving drinks was the winner of the SKYY Vodka World Bartending Championships (bottom left).