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Southwestern food chain coming to city amid major Mass. expansion

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 20, 2010 11:52 AM

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(Courtesy: Moe's Southwest Grill)

An exterior photo of the Moe's Southwest Grill restaurant concept.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Boston, "Welcome To Moe's!"

And, vice versa.

The decade-old, southwestern food chain – well known for its trademarked employee-to-customer greeting "Welcome To Moe's!" – is planning to add to its five existing Bay State locales and open its first Boston franchise as part of a comprehensive expansion effort across Massachusetts.

The Atlanta-based [Moe's Southwest Grill](#), with over 400 restaurants nationwide, has signed agreements with franchise partners to open nine locations across the state, including two in the city in next year, according to company executives.

The food chain, a member of FOCUS Brands, which also owns Carvel Ice Cream and Cinnabon, is seeking franchise partners and exploring some additional 35 areas in Massachusetts for new restaurants within the coming

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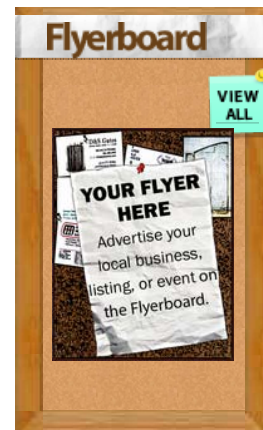


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three to four years.

“Some of our highest-success franchises have been our Greater Boston locations,” said the restaurant chain’s President Paul Damico, listing the Boston area as a top market, similar to success the chain has seen in Chicago and Long Island. “The population density, the income levels and the demographics of Boston really fit with our model.”

Exact addresses for most new locations in the state have not been finalized. But during 2011, he said, the company hopes to open a franchise inside Children’s Hospital Boston and one downtown, along with others in Hadley, Leominster and in a recently closed Pizza Hut off Route 9 in Natick. Dartmouth and Hyannis are also among the areas being closely considered.

Damico said some college campuses in the country house their own Moe’s, and the high concentrations of college-aged students in Greater Boston and in Hadley, which borders the state flagship university’s campus in Amherst, are a major plus for expanding locally.

The chain first entered the state when its Shrewsbury location opened in 2004. After adding four spots – in Worcester, Plymouth, Chelmsford and Hanover – over the past six years, Damico said the company’s hope is to have around 50 total Moe’s in Massachusetts within the next several years.

“We are well-established and have a good local base to build off of,” he said in a phone interview Friday.

The chain is eyeing plans to open between 75 and 100 restaurants domestically, along with several internationally, next year, the chain’s president said.

“We have some explosive growth coming in 2011,” said Damico, who became company president about one-and-a-half years ago.

He said the chain has benefitted from being among two fast-growing, niche segments of the food industry – the fast-casual restaurant segment, in which the company operates as neither full-service nor as a fast-food business, and the Mexican and southwestern cuisine segment.

The typical Moe’s franchise is 2,500 square feet on the end cap of a shopping center in an urban or suburban setting, Damico said. Most locations employ around 25 workers and take over space left open by a former business.

The average meal price per customer is between \$8 and \$10, he said. The company says it has a focus on green sustainability and nutrition.

“To demonstrate their commitment to freshness, Moe’s has never used freezers, microwaves, animal fat, lard, or MSG,” the company says.

The menu of burritos, tacos, quesadillas, nachos, salads and fajitas are given pop-culture-inspired names, like the Art Vandelay burrito and Billy Barou nachos – “Seinfeld” and “Caddyshack” references, respectively. And, all songs heard at Moe’s restaurants are by deceased musicians, from Barry White and Johnny Cash to Michael Jackson.

“Everything about our brand is unique,” he said, mentioning the chain’s signature welcoming that employees say to each customer that enters a franchise.

“It resonates with every customer. It’s one of the most-talked-about things on our blogs and website.”

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