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Celebrity Chef-Branded Airport Restaurants Expand Across Markets

By Sally Kral

When Delaware North first approached renowned chef and restaurateur Wolfgang Puck in the '90s about expanding his fine-dining Los Angeles restaurant Spago into airports, the chef was skeptical about whether his high-end establishment could work in such a non-traditional environment. "He thought we were kind of nuts, frankly," says Vito Buscemi, Delaware North's vice president of brands and concepts.

But after sitting down with Puck to develop the concept and deciding that Spago's signature pizzas would be the perfect items to translate into a quick-service concept, Wolfgang Puck Express was born in Los Angeles International (LAX), Buscemi says. The brand to this day is a major

business for Puck and Delaware North alike.

Delaware North has since opened more than 20 airport concepts with Puck across the globe, with the most recent – an extension of his WPizza brand – slated to open this fall at Ontario International (ONT).

The prevalence of celebrity chef-branded restaurants in airports is undeniable and growing every year. "We did it very early on with Wolfgang Puck, and it hasn't slowed down – if anything, it's been picking up steam in recent years," Buscemi says.

Leah Pilcer, director of HMSHost Corp.'s restaurant portfolio, notes that these types of concepts are particularly popular now because of the rise of foodie culture. "Travelers today are more aware of

food trends, emerging chefs and flavors that go beyond the everyday meal," she says.

Indeed, today's consumers expect to see streetside quality and trends reflected in their airport dining experiences, and for concessionaires hoping to appeal to these discerning travelers, partnering with celebrity chefs – those who have instant brand recognition – is a no-brainer.

Media Presence Means Mass Appeal

The boom of food-related media of all kinds – from innumerable television shows to magazines and cookbooks to social media platforms – has meant that today's everyday



Left: Wolfgang Puck Express has been around since the '90s and remains a major business for the celebrity chef, restaurateur and media personality. Together with Delaware North, Puck has opened more than 20 airport restaurants across the globe.

Right: Though Wolfgang Puck is known for his fine-dining establishments, his signature pizzas translate well into his quick-service airport venues.



consumer is more educated about certain foods, chefs and restaurants than ever before. Because of this, chefs that are at the forefront of this media are well known and revered not only in major foodie cities like New York and San Francisco but across the country and, in some cases, even across the globe.

“Celebrity chefs, particularly those who make regular appearances on either Food Network, Cooking Channel or other nationally broadcast television stations – or, for that matter, on web platforms and podcasts – have vast appeal that goes far beyond a single market,” says Alan Gluck, senior manager at consulting firm ICF.

Chef Michael Symon, for instance, got his start as a restaurateur in his hometown of Cleveland and has since reached celebrity status thanks to the success of his restaurants and his wide media presence on numerous food-related TV shows on Food Network, Cooking Channel and ABC.

Symon entered the airport dining market in 2012 when he partnered with **United Concessions Group** to open Bar Symon at **Pittsburgh International (PIT)**. Thanks to Symon’s large fan following, Ben Rababy, vice president of United Concessions, felt confident that the concept would be

successful in Pittsburgh. “While Michael certainly has a strong connection to his hometown, he is an international celebrity whose culinary personality transcends many markets,” Rababy says.

United Concessions Group co-operates the PIT location of Bar Symon with **Paradies Lagardère** and in 2015 opened a second location in **Washington Dulles International (IAD)** with **Concessions International**. Most recently, United Concessions brought the brand back to Symon’s hometown, opening in **Cleveland-Hopkins International (CLE)** earlier this year.

To expand his scope even further, Symon has partnered with **Midfield Concession Enterprises** to open a fourth location of Bar Symon in **Philadelphia International (PHL)** later this summer.

“I see a chef like Michael Symon as more of a celebrity chef than a Cleveland chef. It’s the same with Cat Cora: Most people know her from TV rather than as a Bay Area chef,” says Pat Murray, executive vice president of business development for **SSP America**. “If you can partner with a chef with that large of a media presence, you can take their concepts anywhere.”

Currently, SSP focuses on connecting

with chefs in the local market, such as its partnership with Chef Massimo Capra to develop **Boccone Trattoria Veloce** and its quick-service counterpart **Boccone Pronto** at Toronto Pearson International (YYZ). “I just prefer someone who’s embedded in the community,” Murray says.

Hojeij Branded Foods has moved beyond local with chef Cat Cora. According to its website, the company operates three Cat Cora concepts – **Cat Cora Kitchen**, **Cat Cora Gourmet Market** and **Cat Cora Taproom** – in the chef’s hometown region in **San Francisco International (SFO)** but also at airports across the nation, including **Salt Lake City International (SLC)**, **Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County (DTW)**, **George Bush Intercontinental (IAH)** and **Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International (ATL)**.

HMSHost entered the celebrity-chef market in 2011 when the company partnered with chef Lorena Garcia to open an extension of Lorena Garcia Cocina in **Miami International (MIA)**. Though Garcia is from Venezuela, she has a strong connection to Miami, as it’s where she opened her first restaurant.

“Lorena was an emerging chef in the Miami market when we first partnered with

Below: Chef Symon says that about five percent of Bar Symon's menu changes based on location and local preferences but that the main goal is simple food done well. "It doesn't matter where you live, everyone loves a burger, mac n' cheese and a delicious salad," he says.



Above: Chef Lorena Garcia's Latin American style of cooking helps her resonate in areas that are known for that type of cuisine, though she adds elements of each city into her menus. In Dallas/Fort Worth International, for example, Garcia features flavors of the South as well as Latin America.

her in MIA, and as her career grew and she became a national TV sensation, we looked at future opportunities to partner with her," Pilcer says. "HMShost views chef-driven concepts as long-term relationships."

The company has since expanded Garcia's airport presence, opening Lorena Garcia Tapas in ATL in 2012 and Lorena Garcia Tapas Y Cocina in **Dallas/Fort Worth International** (DFW) last September.

"Celebrity-chef brands are successful because people often already know about the chefs and follow their food and activity," Pilcer adds. "Having the celebrity involvement gives these restaurants instant brand credibility; guests are automatically intrigued and excited to try the food, which leads to great results for everyone involved."

Raising The Bar

Consumers are increasingly favoring restaurants that have more character and use fresh ingredients, and this is the sweet spot for celebrity chef-branded venues.

"Food is looked at much differently today in the U.S. than it was 15-20 years ago," Delaware North's Buscemi says. "People are moving away

from processed foods and national franchised brands – not that these brands are going away, but certainly there are more people who are conscious about what they put in their bodies and the experiences they're going to get when they go out to eat. As a company we have absolutely transitioned from concessionaires to restaurateurs in a very intentional way."

As Symon's national brand grew and he found himself traveling more and more, he was often disappointed by the lack of nutritious dining options in the airports he frequented. This is where he saw a major opportunity to bring better food into the travel experience: "I travel so much, and it was always hard to get good airport food," he says. "You should be able to get food of equal quality at an airport that you can get anywhere else in the country. It really all started out of necessity."

Symon adds that Bar Symon mimics his streetside restaurants in terms of quality ingredients, with a focus on delicious food that can be cooked quickly to accommodate travelers. "At the end of the day, people want good food no matter where they are," he says.

Celebrity chefs are synonymous with quality and care in many consumers' eyes, as ICF's

Gluck points out: "People feel that they really know these chefs – through their TV appearances, restaurants, cookbooks – and therefore they have comfort in believing that they know what they will get in terms of quality and service at one of their establishments."

United Concessions Group's Rababy adds that consumers today are willing to pay more for sustainable, fresh food. "The bar is being raised, and guests are very sophisticated and know that a restaurant that uses the same chicken as a fast-food chain is different from one that sells organic, hormone- and antibiotic-free chicken. Bar Symon uses the same from-scratch ingredients and service standards as Michael Symon's streetside restaurants, and his involvement is active and real throughout the term of any lease. We welcome this and heed his team's advice because our goal is not to be a great restaurant for an airport but a great restaurant period."

Hands-On Approach Is Key

When a restaurant branches out to become a multi-market brand, ensuring quality control across venues is important to

staying relevant to the chef's name and not becoming generic. "When a chef franchises their name, they may lose control of how the brand is presented," ICF's Gluck notes. "I personally think that a restaurant that has the name of the chef on its door should be run by the chef. At the least, the chef needs to be very involved in the setting up, training and product quality control of the venue."

Symon's involvement in his airport Bar Symon restaurants has been vital to the brand's success, Rababy notes. "While a lot of people claim to have chef-inspired restaurants where a chef gets paid a lot of money to write a menu and put their name behind it and then do yearly visits, very few people are really executing chef-driven concepts like we do with Bar Symon."

For Symon, staying involved in the development and execution of Bar Symon is a given. "I think you lose that personal touch when you stop caring about your restaurants," he says.

HMSHost's Pilcer notes that the company's partnership with Lorena Garcia works so well because she's hands-on with her concepts and has a clear passion for her projects. "Having a celebrity-chef partner that is available for input on all aspects of the restaurant, from design, to menu items, to training the staff,

truly resonates throughout the restaurant."

Though celebrity chefs often have national recognition and are therefore relevant to each new city they enter, concessionaires still make sure to bring elements of each local market into their celebrity chef-branded venues.

Symon says that about five percent of Bar Symon's menu changes based on location and local preferences but that the main goal is simple food done well. "It doesn't matter where you live, everyone loves a burger, mac n' cheese and a delicious salad."

Garcia's Latin American roots and style of cooking have helped expand her brand to other locations that are known for that type of cuisine. "Working with Lorena in Miami was great as she had a strong connection to the city and region, but we didn't have issues expanding to other markets outside Miami as her career was gaining more traction, and she was becoming a worldwide phenomenon."

But Pilcer adds that there were certain strategies put in place to ensure each new market would embrace Garcia's venues: "Chef Garcia takes the base model of her concept and then comes up with new creations that incorporate local components. In Miami the menu is more directed toward tropical flavors, whereas in Dallas we wanted to bring in more hearty

flavors from the South. When working on the Atlanta market, we overcame the local challenge by appealing to travelers in the international terminal whose flight patterns included Latin America."

The future of chef-driven airport venues is bright. Building on the success of Delaware North's partnership with Wolfgang Puck, the company added another big-name chef to its portfolio in 2012 with the introduction of Skewers by chef Masaharu Morimoto in LAX. Though this is the only airport location of the restaurant so far, the company partnered with the chef to open Morimoto Asia at Walt Disney World in Florida and is certainly interested in expanding their partnership to more airports in the future.

"Our intention with these great chef partners is to continue to grow with them wherever we can," Buscemi says. "It's a very exciting time to be a chef in the industry. These partnerships bring a lot of value to us, to the customers, to the airports and to the chefs who get their brands out. It's a great model across the board." ■

We'd like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Carol Ward at carol@airportrevenue.com.