



Black Angus aims for the BullsEye

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Black Angus targets revival with new bar concept, menu

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The Black Angus Steakhouse chain is looking to grow again.

After years of declining sales and two bankruptcy restructurings within the past decade, the Los Altos, Calif.-based chain has turned itself around with a new menu and the addition of a bar concept that has injected the brand with new energy.

Prior to the most recent Chapter 11 filing in early 2009, the 46-unit chain's owner, Versa Capital Management, recruited Meredith Taylor as president and chief executive. Taylor had worked for the nearly 50-year-old brand for many years in key executive positions in the 1990s, as well as for other restaurant brands such as Velvet Turtle, Straw Hat Pizza and Spectrum Restaurants.

With Taylor's return, Black Angus developed a new bar concept called BullsEye Bar in 2009 that it has added to 25 locations, and eventually 35 of the chain's restaurants.

Next year, the company will open a new prototype that will be the first to incorporate the BullsEye Bar in a new building, Black Angus's first new location to open in about five years.

Taylor spoke with Nation's Restaurant News about the brand's revival:

How has the brand changed since 2009?

We have focused on maintaining our core equity, which is offering a complete steak dinner at an affordable price delivered in a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere with warm, friendly service and some sort of engaging bar concept. We've really tried to contemporize all of that.

Black Angus historically included phases when it offered live entertainment, then later had sort of a disco format with music videos and a dance floor. Then those obviously became antiquated and the bars trailed off and there wasn't much going on.

We did some focus group research when I came aboard and we learned that the guests missed that energy and lively bar scene. So we set about to develop BullsEye Bar in a way that we felt was more contemporary and more synergistic with steakhouse experience.

What did BullsEye bring to the equation?

BullsEye became another occasion for existing guests, where they could have a different experience, maybe a more casual one. And it also appealed to a different guest who had not yet become a Black Angus customer. We see it as an entry point, particularly for people in their 20s who become a BullsEye user and see steak dinner as something they can grow into.

How has the Black Angus menu changed?

We have focused heavily on product innovation. We worked very hard around the notion of a complete steak dinner, and most people define that as starting with a great cut of steak, Black Angus beef cooked to perfection.

We also really focused on things that go along with that, like wonderful bread and great salads. We added a fabulous wedge salad, for example. We introduced the choice of 16 "sidekicks," or sides, from a loaded baked potato to green beans sautéed with bacon, or sweet potato fries. We have a seasonal rotating sidekick.

And crave-able desserts are a big part of the experience, so we introduced new desserts including seasonal options. Right now we're promoting a cookie topped with fresh berries.

What's the best seller on the menu?

The number one seller is prime rib and the number one steak is a rib eye. The average check is about \$22 with beverage, and guests have the choice of two sides included.

Does the BullsEye Bar have a separate menu?

It does, but the complete lunch and dinner menu for Black Angus is also available in bar. People can get full steak dinners while watching sports, for example. The bar menu includes take-offs on sports bar classics, filet mignon or blackened chicken sliders, steak nachos. And we have terrific pizzas, like one with spicy steak and jalapenos.

We have also introduced new cocktails, including some beer cocktails. We have chelada's from Mexico, a drink that traditionally mixes tomato juice and beer. We have one that's a mix of pineapple juice with jalapeno, and a spicy Bloody Mary chelada, for example.

When did the first BullsEye open and how quickly has that grown?

The first one opened in September 2009 in Burbank, Calif. Last night, we had the grand opening for number 25 in Pleasant Hill, Calif.

There will be full-scale BullsEye [bars] in all larger restaurants, probably 35 or so. We also have a smaller Black Angus format that will only get elements of the BullsEye addition, like the filet mignon sliders and nachos, but they can't get the full 12 flat-screen TVs and the rest of it.

Are the bars incorporated in the dining room?

In our larger restaurants, which are typically about 10,000-to-11,000 square feet, the bars are quite separate. The bar is 2,000-to-3,000 square feet in and of itself.

How have the changes impacted sales?

Sales have been trending terrifically. We've seen seven consecutive quarters of positive [same-store] sales growth and this year up we're up by double digits. We've been trending well above industry average for [same-store] sales and we're quite pleased, given the economy.

BullsEye has certainly been a contributing factor on a number of fronts. We're increasing the frequency of existing guests because it provides that other occasion. It also has a halo effect with energy.

And now you're ready to grow again?

We're currently working on a new prototype that will integrate the BullsEye concept from the ground up for the first time. Others have been remodels. We're currently looking for sites, probably in Southern California or the [San Francisco] Bay area, and we will open in the first half of next year.

How will it be different?

The new prototype has a patio that is more a part of the bar as well. It's an enclosed patio with heating and misters and the flat-screen TVs. Existing BullsEyes all have straight bars, because that's what the restaurants had in place, but the new prototype will have a modified horseshoe bar so people will gather around, which will facilitate socialization.

In the dining room, it will be laid out in a more flexible fashion with areas that can almost privately accommodate groups of 20 or 25. It's sort of set up to be more flexible and accommodate different sized parties while preserving the comfort of high-backed booths around the perimeter.

The footprint will be about 7,800 square feet with a 900-square-foot patio.

Do you feel that Black Angus has shaken off its past?

I hear all the time from people that hadn't been to us in a while and they're just amazed by the quality of the experience and the value in the entire offering. They love the new things that we've put in place.

The good thing about the steps we've taken is that because we've tried to anchor them in the fundamental equity in the brand, our loyal customers that have been with us through thick and thin say the changes have resonated with them.

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