

RESTAURANT FACILITY BUSINESS[®]

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2015

Side Show

Saladworks brings a traditional side item — the salad — front and center. How the 29-year-old franchise plans to grow in 2016 with a new restaurant prototype.

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Front & CENTER

As people place greater emphasis on healthy living, salad moves to the center of the plate — something Saladworks has been doing for almost 30 years. Today, the franchise prepares to expand and unveil a new design prototype.



Saladworks will celebrate its 30th anniversary in 2016.

When Saladworks was founded nearly three decades ago in a suburban mall in Philadelphia, skeptics questioned the salad-centric concept: Who's going to eat just salad? Salad is a side item, right? Today, as the 29-year-old brand readies itself for domestic and international expansion and a new design prototype, salad has been firmly moved to the center of the plate in people's minds. Healthier lifestyles and food choices have finally caught up with what Saladworks has been doing all along.

"That was the great genius," says Paul Steck, president and CEO of Saladworks, who has been with the company for 13 years. "For many, many years, we were the lone ranger doing salads. Now you can find salads anywhere — apparently even gas stations are selling salads."

With 108 restaurants open, Saladworks has a healthy domestic expansion planned in 2016

and continues to test the international waters. "We'll open 12 [U.S.] stores in 2016 if we do our job right," Steck says. "We're just kind of dipping our toe into international development. There's a whole learning curve that goes along with international." One location in Qatar will open by the end of the year, and two more are expected to open next year in the Middle East.

Currently, Saladworks is located in 15 states, mostly in the Mid-Atlantic. But according to Steck, Saladworks doesn't plan to remain just a regional player. "Right now in my opinion, there's a foot race going on in the salad sector," he says. "There are a whole slew of fairly strong regional brands. We're kind of the 800-pound gorilla, being the largest by better than double, and being the lon-



Paul Steck, President & CEO, Saladworks

gest at the game. But they're all regional players that are dominant in a city or dominant in a small geographic area. Who's going to be the national player? I think within 5 years we'll see an answer to that. If I'm doing my job right, it's going to be Saladworks. There's big opportunity there."

After 2 years of turmoil within the ownership ranks — equity owners fighting in and out of court — Saladworks was acquired by an affiliate of New York-based Centre Lane Partners following Saladworks' filing for bankruptcy in February 2015. Centre Lane has since invested substantial capital in the fresh-tossed salad chain to spur growth, specifically along the I-95 corridor. Having reemerged from this tumultuous period, the reenergized company has now added four new people to its home office team, including Charles Bruton III, who joined Saladworks from Krispy Kreme this summer as vice president of operations, as well as one new person to its field base team. "I think of it as, 'Let's fix what's wrong, let's move forward in an expeditious and orderly manner



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BY KATIE LEE

Editor,
Restaurant Facility Business

and grow this thing," says Steck. Saladworks plans to grow utilizing a 100% franchised model. "It's tempting to get involved with company stores; we've had them in the past," notes Steck. "But to my mind, if you really want to do it right, you almost have to have two companies: one that handles and manages your company stores, and one that handles and manages your franchise stores. It's two different skill sets. We're focusing on the franchise model."

Saladworks was the first quick-serve restaurant to serve primarily salads. Even today, more than 70% of its revenue comes from, yes, just salads. Customers walk up to a custom-designed salad case full of 64 ingredients and 14 different dressings, and watch as their salad is prepared in front of them in 30 seconds or less. "It's like Chipotle!" is something Steck hears all the time, which gives him a chuckle considering that Saladworks pre-dates Chipotle by 7 years, but he takes it as a compliment and in good stride.

One thing Saladworks is not like? A salad bar. "The salad bar of the 1980s or 1970s has kind of gone the way of the dinosaur," Steck says. "People don't like the salad bar any longer because of food safety issues associated with it. That was kind of our genesis, to go beyond the salad bar but still allow people choice."

Saladworks' entire mission is one of choice. Today's Millennial generation wants nothing if not abundant choices and speedy service. Saladworks' longevity and experience may not even factor into their loyalty. Rather, young customers must be attracted in a different way. "We are coming out with a new prototype design at the end of this year," says Steck. "2016 will be a refreshing of the brand. A new logo, new store design, a mini refresh with new menu items. Being 30 is cool in one sense because it talks about longevity, but the Millennial generation doesn't really care that you've been around 30 years. They want to know what's hot and happening right now."

The general direction of the new prototype can be described as organic. Saladworks is, after all, selling a natural product — very

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“farm-to-table” before there was a clichéd catchphrase for it. The new restaurants will look and feel more “of the earth,” explains Steck. While the current design is bright and airy with primary colors dominating the palette (“and it looks great!” Steck points out), the new look will feature reclaimed woods, exposed brick, raw concrete floors, more natural colors and open ceilings without acoustical tiles. Also included will be LED lighting and low-VOC paint.

A typical footprint for the new prototype will be 1,800 to 2,200 square feet to reflect the national trend of fewer dine-in customers at QSR establishments across the board. “The days of needing a 100-seat restaurant in a quick-serve environment are gone,” says Steck. “Our sweet spot of 45-50 seats works for us operationally; it works for us economically.”

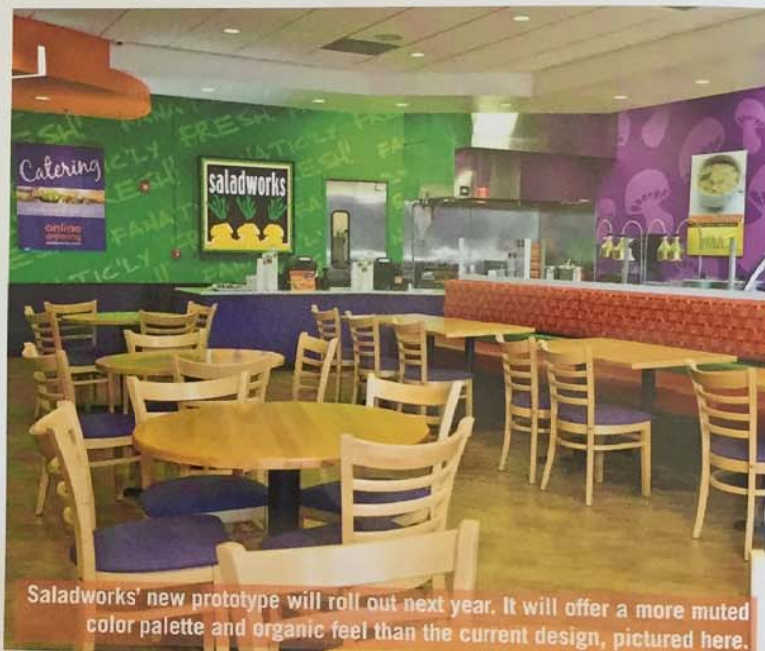
When it comes to maintenance, Saladworks franchisees largely rely on their own local vendors.

“We do provide a maintenance manual, so it gives them a sense of preventive maintenance tips, preventive maintenance schedules in their stores, common things that go wrong in a Saladworks. What it costs for something to be repaired. You know, you blow out a compressor on a refrigerator and roughly what you’re going to pay. That’s provided, but the actual work is done by vendors of our franchisees.”

In 5 years, Steck says, Saladworks could and *should* become the dominant salad player nationwide. “It’s our race to lose,” he says. He references a time about 15 years ago when bakery-cafes began popping up all over the country, and eventually Panera Bread emerged from the pack as the clear leader in the category. “I’m not suggesting we’re the next Panera Bread — I’m not naïve — but somebody is going to be the salad player, and we have that opportunity.” ♦



Saladworks currently has 108 restaurants open in 15 (mostly Mid-Atlantic) states. Next year, the company hopes to open at least 12 new locations.



Saladworks' new prototype will roll out next year. It will offer a more muted color palette and organic feel than the current design, pictured here.



The custom-designed salad case contains 64 different ingredients and 14 salad dressings, offering customers almost endless choices.



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