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LABJ Poll

Will you watch the Super Bowl?

- Yes, mostly to watch the game.
- Yes, mostly to see the ads.
- Yes, I want to see both for the game and the ads.
- No, I'm not interested in either.

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Posted date: 2/1/2010

Founded in 1958 in Culver City as Del's Sizzler Family Steak House by Del and Helen Johnson, Sizzler pioneered the concept of fast-casual dining in the late 1970s and early 1980s by providing customers with the feel of a full-service restaurant at prices only slightly above those of fast-foot chains. To keep overhead low, many of the stores even employed resident meat cutters back in those days.

By the mid-1980s, however, other fast-casual restaurants had begun catching on. In order to compete, Sizzler went to a buffet concept, offering such promotions as all-you-can-eat fried shrimp and a full salad bar. But the plan backfired when patrons began using the inexpensive salad buffet as a substitute for more-expensive meals. Sizzler responded by lowering the quality of food on other parts of its menu – and the decline began. Eventually, previous ownership filed for bankruptcy in 1996, closing 130 of its 215 stores. It emerged a year later, beginning the first of many searches for a new identity.

One restaurant consultant, even then, neatly summed the problem up. The restaurant, he said, had done too much “zigging and zagging.”

Yet it survived, even though it was rocked 10 years ago by scandal when an outbreak of E. coli at two Wisconsin franchises made 50 people sick and killed a 3-year-old girl.

Keith Gellman, publisher of RestaurantChains.net, an online newsletter based in Irvington, N.Y., said that Sizzler's recent moves make sense.

“I think they're doing what conventional wisdom is telling them to do,” he said. “They're tightening up, pulling more things in-house, minimizing the franchise network and maintaining more control.”

Whether it will ultimately work, he said, remains to be seen.

Reactions to the most recent changes seem mixed.

Rosendo Ramirez, co-owner of the Inglewood restaurant, said the new menu and design has increased his sales by 20 percent. While “nobody can touch the way it was in the 1980s,” he admitted, “these are the best changes I've seen in 33 years. Hopefully it will catch on; the feedback we're getting is good.”

Aziza Georgian, owner of the Baldwin Park Sizzler, agreed. “Because of the value menu, we're surviving,” she said. “I think it was a good idea.”

Yet she's heard other franchisees complain bitterly, especially regarding the cost of retooling. At least one Inglewood customer was decidedly underwhelmed by the changes he was told he should see.

“I really didn't notice any change in the menu,” insisted Gerald Vessel, 74, “Though I guess there's a slight improvement in the look.”

Sizzler, however, already claims to have seen some bottom-line results. Since Kramp took over, the company, which had revenue of \$311 million in 2009, has enjoyed monthly sales and guest counts averaging about 4 percent higher than the previous year's in almost each of the last 13 months. The trend has helped compensate for a 5 percent decline in the average guest check, from \$11.87 to \$11.37.

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WEEKLY EDITION

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GOLDEN RULE

Some local precious metal dealers peddle gold by tapping into customers' fear of inflation.

Funding a Thorny Issue for Rose Bowl

Pasadena's Rose Bowl may field-test corporate sponsorships to pay for much desired venue improvements.

Finally Time for 12-to-2 in L.A.?

The city of L.A. has revived the drive to streamline the city's permit process.

Pasadena Thrift On Fast Track

The thrift created from the ashes of failed lender IndyMac has ambitious branding and expansion plans.

WEEKLY EDITION

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