

Long Beach

BUSINESS JOURNAL

November 23-December 6, 2010

Local Restaurateurs Are Anticipating Improvement In Sales This Holiday Season



A busy holiday season is expected at the Long Beach Towne Center's Lucille's Smokehouse BBQ, especially at the end of November. Gift card sales increase during the holidays, and about one quarter of the restaurant's catering revenue happens in December. Pictured left to right are: Maribea Besley, general manager; Brad Hofman, director of marketing for all Lucille's locations; and Alfredo Desantiago, kitchen manager. In addition to Towne Center, Lucille's is located on 2nd Street in Belmont Shore. There are nine other Lucille's spread throughout Southern California, with another opening soon in Culver City, plus one in Northern California in the City of Rocklin, as well as restaurants in Tempe, Arizona, and Henderson, Nevada. For more information, visit www.lucillesbbq.com. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

■ By **AMY DEMPSEY**
Staff Writer

Restaurants have been among the hardest hit industries during the prolonged recession, but with a recent uptick in private sector hiring, many restaurateurs are expecting the busiest holiday season since 2007.

Sales are not close to historical high performance levels, but overall, restaurant sales growth is better than it was in 2009, according to Hudson Riehle, head of research at the National Restaurant Association. October had the highest sales volume, and by the end of 2010, national restaurant sales will reach \$580 billion, an average of \$1.6 million a day.

The upswing is partly because of 1 million new jobs in the private sector this year. In October, Los Angeles County added near-

ly 30,000 jobs. "It isn't an environment of conspicuous consumption anymore. It is much more conscious consumption. As employers and employment picks up, consumer spending in restaurants moves up," he said.

Restaurant owners and operators are being creative when it comes to marketing their businesses. Many are being proactive by using social media to reach out to potential clients. "Savvy restaurant operators know it is still an extremely competitive environment," Riehle said. "Remaining at the top of consumers' business owners' minds is paramount."

With Thanksgiving only days away, Long Beach restaurateurs have mixed opinions about the holiday season's effect on business. Some expect increased sales from corporate events, holiday parties and catering during the rest of November and in December, but others don't anticipate any change.



Frank Buono of Buono's Authentic Pizzeria expects December's sales to be the same as last year, "which was mediocre at best," he said. At his three locations, two in Long Beach and one in San Pedro, December is typically a lucrative month because of corporate event and banquet catering, but customers are still very budget-conscious and corporate accounts continue to be prudent. "Last year, the catering was down, and I'm projecting the same this year. And if it's up I'll be really happy," Buono said. Since catering is reasonably priced between \$10 and \$12 per person, there is no need to lower prices, he said.

Although business is not booming like 2007 and 2008, which he calls "wonderful years," by the end of the holiday season, Buono expects between a 1 to 2 percent increase in sales for the year. "We are noticing a trend of business being a little bit better, but it's

nothing to brag about. Flat is the new up. It's a wonderful thing," he said.

Naples Rib Company owner Dave Ursini anticipates a minor increase in sales this December compared to last year. Regular customers and corporate accounts are more secure than they were last year, he said, and the restaurant started booking holiday events early.

To keep the restaurant attractive, Naples Rib Company utilizes local newspapers and Twitter to promote complimentary appetizers and birthday offers. It also offers special incentives for Facebook fans. "People are looking for a reason to dine out; they need a reason . . . We've been running some discounting, which we never did before. People feel good about coupons," Ursini said.

The Naples Holiday Boat Parade and Belmont Shore Christmas Parade help boost his sales during the holidays. "We're fortunate to have residents [nearby] that light their houses. A lot of people on Naples come to dinner here and then walk and see the lights," he said. "Some people really do a nice number on their house, and we get to feed off that."

On the other side of town in Bixby Knolls, Café Bixby and Pizza owner Jack Skandalakis anticipates a slow November, except on Thanksgiving Day. Café Bixby and Pizza does not cater many corporate events in December, and it is closed Christmas Day, which makes for a slower month. "Restaurants closer to malls do better because people shop," he said.

To keep the restaurant fresh and innovative, Skandalakis changes the menu every six months. The next menu revamp will include new wraps, salads, paninis and pasta dishes. Also, people ages 65 and up can take advantage of the breakfast senior specials, which are \$7.95 for a meal and drink.

Still, Skandalakis does not expect sales to increase in the near future. "With the way the economy is and the high unemployment rate, I just don't see a change," he said.

At family-owned George's Greek Café, Jimmy Loizides said the restaurant's three locations – in Downtown Long Beach, Belmont Shore and Lakewood – typically slow down during November and pick up in December. "It's a wash," he said.

He is optimistic about catering events, which are up 5 percent from last year. The restaurant's average catering job is for about 40 people, he said.

George's Greek Café does not offer holiday promotions except for a New Year's Eve special, which costs \$60 for an early seating and \$90 for the late seating. The promotion includes a full course meal for two people. The late seating also offers live music and a champagne toast. "Our business is pretty much run by our regular clientele, and we don't do too many gimmick things for the holidays," Loizides said.

Café Bixby and Pizza owner Jack Skandalakis expects the state's high unemployment rate to keep sales low at his Bixby Knolls restaurant. To keep the café attractive for customers, Skandalakis offers specially priced meals for seniors, and he is revamping the menu to include pasta dishes, salads, wraps and paninis. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)



Restaurant News In Brief

Fish Tale Seafood Restaurant owner John Bloeser said, for his business, sales are picking up. “We have a lot of regular customers, and we don’t fluctuate like others may. I feel it’s going to be fairly strong.” The restaurant, located at the Los Altos MarketCenter, does not cater many corporate events, nor does it offer holiday specials, but Bloeser just introduced Saturday and

Parkers’ Lighthouse is undergoing a \$2.5 million renovation, which includes a new lounge and patio with views of the Long Beach waterfront. The lounge will feature private cabanas and nightclub-style booths, which can be reserved in advance. Another component of the renovation is the third floor Queensview Room. On weekends, the room becomes the “Queensview Steakhouse, where diners can listen to live music. The space is also available for private parties and meetings. Parkers’ brought in Agoura Hills-based Bitton Design Group for the renovation. The restaurant remains open during construction, which is scheduled to end in early 2011. Parkers’ Lighthouse is at 435 Shoreline Village Dr.

In addition to the renovation, the restaurant has a special “prix fixe” menu, featuring items made with Maine Lobster. A two-course meal consists of lobster corn bisque or lobster asparagus rolls, and lobster with shrimp stuffing or lobster tail. The promotion ends November 30 and costs \$39.

Also at Parkers’ Lighthouse is a breakfast fundraiser on December 4 from 8 to 11 a.m. benefiting Miller Children’s Hospital of Long Beach. Children of all ages can take photos with Santa after he sails in on a yacht at 9 a.m. All proceeds go toward the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit, which is being expanded, as well as the cancer and maternity programs. Breakfast is \$8.95 for adults and \$6.95 for children under age 12. Attendees are encouraged to bring an unwrapped toy for children up to age 18. Reservations are encouraged.

For more information about Parkers’ Lighthouse, call 562/432-6500 or visit www.parkerslighthouse.com.

Congregation Ale House on Broadway opened in September, and owner Travis Enfling is happy with the way business is going. “We’re delighted with all the support we’ve had.” During the holiday season, he plans to reach out to other local businesses to offer customized holiday functions, such as special beer tastings or themed events. “This is a neat venue and everyone is in a festive spirit for the holidays. For me, being a restaurant and pub owner, it would be completely remiss to not try to capitalize on that,” Enfling said.

The newly renovated Chelsea Chowder House & Bar on the Queen Mary is open, with a menu focused on sustainable seafood (including Hawaiian Ahi poke, Maryland soft shelled crab and Ipswich fried clams), specialty beers and chowders. The restaurant now features the feel of a casual English chowder house and seats 130 patrons, an increase of 45 seats. Interesting facts about the ship and photographs from its first-year voyages line the restaurant’s walls. For reservations or more information, call 562/499-6695. ■



There are three George’s Greek Café locations, two in Long Beach and one in Lakewood. Catering sales for corporate events and banquets are up 5 percent compared to last year. Pictured outside George’s Greek Cafe in Belmont Shore are, from left: Kristan Little; co-owner Euripides Loizides; and Adam McKenna. (Photograph by the Business Journal’s Thomas McConville)

Sunday happy hour from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., in addition to its weekday happy hour from 3-6 p.m. It also started recently offering complimentary soup or salad with entrees.

Lucille’s Smokehouse BBQ in the Long Beach Towne Center is expecting a busy Thanksgiving and Christmas season, both for catering and in-house diners. One quarter of its catering revenue is accrued in December alone.

According to Director of Marketing Brad Hofman, Lucille’s fall season was better than expected and, as it gets closer to December 25, Lucille’s will focus on gift card sales and accommodating shoppers during the holiday frenzy. “Overall, the economy is a little stronger, so people feel better about shopping and dining, and restaurants are seeing the positive effects of it,” Hofman said.

Similarly, franchisee Scott Williams of the Super Mex Restaurant and Cantina on Spring Street said, “Business is fantastic.” Williams participates in community fundraisers three nights a week, which keeps the restaurant full on slow nights. During the holidays, Williams said he expects business to stay consistent, but not overly busy.

The franchise does not provide off-site catering but can accommodate large orders. Hamilton will not offer special promotions this season but gift card sales are ramping up, totaling between \$50 and \$200 each day. Hamilton expects sales to excel after the Thanksgiving holiday. “Super Mex is a very low price point, so value-wise it’s a great card to give someone,” he said.