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commonly mounted above awnings to showcase brand logos on awnings. In the case of McAlister's, lights highlight offerings such as soups and sandwiches spelled out on the building's exterior.

Interior lighting also helps a fast casual's exterior appeal by giving customers a good look at the inside from the outside. The aim is to keep the outside lighting subdued so it doesn't compete with inside lighting.

### Give me a sign

Where QSRs tend to rely heavily on multiple signs — mounted at street level in landscaping, on rooftops and on high roadside poles — fast casuals are working to figure out how to create a similar level of visibility without looking cheap, Chidley said.

Tim Murphy, Design Forum's sales and marketing vice president, said fast casuals face the additional challenge of being located in upscale areas that commonly have tight rules on signage.

"Their challenge is to maintain a premium image while still standing out," he said. "You see a lot of backlit signs mounted directly on the building," incorporating the company's logo. Backlit lettering is common, too, but color choice becomes crucial again. Backlit red and green lettering is easy to see at night, but they might not make the quality statement a fast-casual operator wants.

Finding the right sized sign is a chal-

lenge, too, said designer Grady Cooley.

"I've seen where they just put the name of the place along the skirt of the awning; it's very subtle but effective. But sometimes it's too small, and people are saying, 'What's the name of that place?'" said Cooley, owner of Grady Cooley Interiors in New York. "Other places I've seen signage that is huge, in your face. It's unmistakable who they are, and yet it's done in very tasteful and artistic way."

Walls said McAlister's new sign accomplished the difficult challenge of being highly visible both at day and at night.

"We used white letters against a green background so the name really pops in daytime," he said. Before the change, the sign was neon. "At night, the letters are backlit so it's still very visible."

### Fast impressions

All three Design Forum officials said fast-casual operators have their work cut out for them if they want to have the roadside

and artifacts."

That's what Buona went after when it recently redesigned two stores. Joe Buonavolanto's family had operated the 11-store Chicago chain for 25 years and had always served high-quality, fresh-made food like the Tuscan Harvest salad and the Pollo Pomodoro sandwich. But Buonavolanto believes the Italian fare did not receive its due recognition inside the QSR's walls. Buonavolanto sought an atmosphere to match the store's price points.

"We wanted to make sure value was represented and that it was a real comfort-



McAlister's new sign accomplishes the difficult challenge of being visible night and day. (Photo courtesy of McAlister's)

recognition commanded by QSRs. Plus, by virtue of the segment's current evolution, definitive exterior design cues likely won't firm up soon. The rules are being written now, they say, and that makes their jobs fun. Regardless, the goal remains the same, Murphy said.

"When you talk about exteriors, you've got to communicate from the street level what the proposition is, what customers are going to get from you when they come inside," he said. "If it's fast casual, you need to let them know (through your exterior) that they should anticipate a fresher prepared meal and a higher level of service." ■

# INTERIOR DESIGN

## A superior interior

By Fred Minnick

A restaurant's interior can enhance a brand and invite customers in, or misrepresent the brand and drive customers out.

If the design does not complement the menu, the look is a lost cause — especially in fast casual. Restaurant consultant Arlene Spiegel believes operators can't just plop a sofa in a store or create an upscale design and call a fast-food spot fast casual.

"A fast-casual design should incorporate the best of full-service restaurant design and the convenience and speed of quick-service," Spiegel said. "Material finishes and furniture should be high quality, including lighting, art

able family atmosphere," Buonavolanto said. "We wanted the design to complement our food and convey freshness."

Buona's new 4,000-square-foot design made the dining room more of a backdrop for the food. The flow of the store takes guests by preparation areas, allowing them to watch pizza assembly. Indeed, the open kitchen keeps the line moving while influencing purchasing decisions.

"Our new design is not just about the environment," he said. "It's the quality of tableware and chairs; the fresh food. It all

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Buono, a Chicago fast-casual chain, recently redesigned two stores. The Italian restaurant made its décor match price points by including marble and oak table tops, leather chairs and an open kitchen. The upscale look complements the brand, the company says. (Photos by Cindy Bertram)

goes together."

The new dining ambiance is similar to that of a high-end restaurant. Marble table tops are surrounded by dark-brown wooden chairs, and customers can look through the black-trimmed windows or gaze at pizzas baking in the wood-fired oven. Others can sit on black-leather cushioned seats at oak tables facing a white tile wall. Low-hanging contemporary lamps pour warm light onto murals, menu boards and oversized bookshelves. Two paragraphs of bold black type tell "The Buono Story" and cover one side of the white walls.

Self expression and fusion that relates

to the brand is the new thing for today's restaurant, according to Owens Corning. In fact, the company said the hottest trend in restaurant design may be that designers aren't locked into any particular style.

"Today's restaurateurs feel empowered to express their personal taste and individuality on more than the menu," said Bob Heath, marketing leader for Cultured Stone, a division of Owens Corning. "We're seeing an increase in clients who are exploring combinations of color and texture in inventive ways."

Heath's product, Cultured Stone, has a stone texture and comes in five unique colors and in various forms like trim or tile. His

vener product could certainly give a fast casual an innovative look and feel. But when operators are at the stage of selecting construction materials, they should be thinking about their brands, not just aesthetics. It's important to choose colors and textures that draw the restaurant's target audience, said Michelle Bushney, partner and design director for VISION 360.

She said it also is imperative to design a store that incorporates technology like menu boards, POS systems and back-of-the-house kitchen software. These are issues that should be addressed when a restaurant owner is looking at redesigning an existing store or creating a new brand, Bushney said.

"A lot of people don't understand what they're getting into when designing a store," she said. "You need something that is aesthetically pleasing and functional for the back-of-house and front-of-house."

In the new upscale stores, Buona employees take orders on seven state-of-the-art POS systems. Menu boards and food cases are positioned throughout the store. There's even an extra POS at the catering and take-out areas.

Those upgrades, combined with the new look, cost more than \$1 million to concept and build. But that investment has paid off. Buonavolanto said the first newly designed store's sales increased 8 to 9 percent since May 2005. The family is building a third store.

"This new look and direction really complements our philosophy and fresh ingredients," Buonavolanto said. "We are happy with it." ■

## The European look



Like Buono, Vapiano is a fast-casual restaurant breaking out of the traditional mold. The European-based chain sports fine-oak furnishing, natural stone and soft leather. It has a lounge and a grand gallery to go alongside its Italian fare. Designed by Italy's Matteo Thun, the company describes its design as an "Italian lifestyle with Mediterranean elegance."

The first American store will open in Washington, D.C., in November, the company said. The D.C. store will feature "chip cards,"

which allow customers to personally order their food or drinks from the bar or from the individual fresh pizza, pasta or salad stations.

The restaurants are 5,000 to 8,000 square feet, seat 150 or so guests and have a blended check average of about \$13.50 per guest.

"Vapiano is an exceptional restaurant concept that will change the way fast-casual restaurants do business in the future," said Kent Hahne, Vapiano president.

— Fred Minnick



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