

Hot Concepts! honorees find innovative ways to do business

BY MOLLY GISE

WASHINGTON — Creating value for cash-strapped customers and finding smart ways to grow business were big topics of conversation for this year's Hot Concepts! honorees at the recent Multi-Unit Foodservice Operators conference.

The Hot Concepts! Awards, which recognize innovation in up-and-coming restaurant brands, were bestowed this year on Chop't Creative Salad Co. of New York; The Counter of Culver City, Calif.; Jasper's Restaurant of Dallas; Organic To Go of Seattle; and Vapiano of McLean, Va.

In a panel discussion, representatives from the winning companies said the key to winning over customers is providing both value and a unique experience.

"The restaurant business has become complicated," said Kent Hahne, president of Vapiano International. "We didn't just build a restaurant company — we built a lifestyle company."

Vapiano, an upscale fast-casual concept, uses "cooktainers" who interact with customers as they prepare pizzas and pasta to order, helping to turn a meal into an experience, Hahne said.

Two other Hot Concepts, Chop't Creative Salad Co. and The Counter, also specialize in customization, which they say provides value by giving customers exactly what they want.



Left, from left: Jason Brown of Organic To Go; Kent Hahne of Vapiano; Colin McCabe and Tony Shure, both of Chop't Creative Salad Co.; Kent Rathbun of Jasper's Restaurant; and Craig Albert of The Counter.

At Chop't, customers choose the lettuce, toppings and dressings for their salads, which empowers them to create a meal that fits their budget, said co-founder Colin McCabe.

And while it also offers wraps and soups, Chop't keeps its focus squarely on salads. "We wanted to create a salad segment," said co-founder Tony Shure. "We want people to understand that it's the best thing you can eat for lunch."

The Counter, which boasts more than 300,000 possible burger combinations, gives customers plenty of choices, helping it stand out in a crowded field of burger players. That said, co-chief executive Craig Albert noted that The Counter's success is directly related to the unflinching popularity of the burger.

"Everybody eats burgers," he said. "The other day we saw Harrison Ford in a restaurant along with 10 firefighters."

The familiar also gets a fresh spin at Jasper's Restaurant, said chef and co-owner Kent Rathbun. The upscale-casual restaurant offers "gourmet backyard cuisine," such as blue cheese potato chips and Texas peach-barbecued pork tenderloin.

"I thought we could do a concept that took food that people really loved and give it a chef's flair," Rathbun said.

An organic focus is clearly at the center of Organic To Go's name and concept, but chief executive Jason Brown said the food still reigns supreme. "Our goal was to be a delicious food company," he said. "We serve food that people like that just

happens to be organic."

Education about organic food is still an important component, Brown added. Employees are well-trained, he said, and "we also strive to give customers the opportunity to learn more about the food they're eating."

The panelists also talked about the challenges of building sales and expanding their concepts amid a troubled economy.

Vapiano was founded in Germany and opened its first U.S. unit in Virginia in 2007. Since then, three others have opened, and the company has plans to open several U.S. stores next year.

"The U.S. is going in the direction of fresh food and healthy food, and we knew we had a good chance here," Hahne said.

For Chop't, with nine units in

New York City, Washington, D.C., and Virginia, "measured growth" is the plan, McCabe said. And with the rising interest in food and the culinary world, Shure said it was

good time as a restaurant operator to be focused on quality food and ingredients.

The Counter is using franchise partners to help it grow, and Albert said the company expects to announce a capital injection to fund growth "very soon."

As consumers cut back on spending, the panelists noted that a broad customer base was critical in order to keep sales strong.

At Jasper's, Rathbun said he hopes to bolster his catering business by pursuing a high-flying clientele: private jet owners.

"People riding around in jets have a lot of money to spend," he said. "We're still in our infancy with this, but I can see some big potential." ■

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