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Francesca's Restaurants

Encompasses the Spirit of Northern Italy

The newly announced opening of Francesca's al Lago in Madison, Wisconsin in 2010 marked a significant turning point for the company. Besides being the 21st location to be added to the premium dining concept's growing roster of restaurants, the opening also marked the launch of the chain's national expansion efforts. Representative of all of Francesca's existing Chicago-based restaurants, the newest additions would likewise become known for offering "simple, rustic cooking, friendly service and fair prices."

While Francesca's al Lago would aptly draw its unique name from the surrounding landscape features of Lakes Mendota and Monona, it would draw on its sister restaurants for inspiration for the interior décor, characterized by lofty ceilings, an antique bar, outdoor patio seating and photo images of rural Italian life on the walls that lend authenticity to the comfortable, urban trattoria setting. In a strategy begun in 1992, the menu continues to reflect the spirit of Rome, with its zesty, earthy food qualities reminiscent of the surrounding regions of Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio.

The chain traces its history back to the opening of the first Mia Francesca, developed by Chef Scott Harris in 1992, in conjunction with contributing partners and restaurant entrepreneurs Michael Noone and Terry Alexander. Scott's vision was to create a trend in the Chicago restaurant scene that would

become the benchmark against which all urban dining concept's that followed would be measured. Mia

Francesca's was declared an immediate success by the dining public and the media, and became the original inspiration for combining the lively art of sophisticated dining with a ca-

sual, contemporary, Italian inspired ambiance.

As a veteran of many high profile restaurant kitchens, Scott Harris considered the launch of Francesca's to be the culmination of his many years of experience, and a reflection of his desire to introduce Chicagoans to a new style of dining, stating "We were purposely informal, but did not compromise the quality of the food. We took away the pretentiousness of the restaurant scene and offered an exciting dining experience at a good price."

Another key strategy that has worked in the chain's favor is the concerted effort to partner with astute restaurant professionals in expanding the concept. For example, with the opening of each new restaurant, Harris would often bring in the location's chef as a partner. It is a managerial philosophy based on building working partnerships, rather than just a means of obtaining financial backing, that has positively influenced the direction of the concept. In the words of Harris, "We have created a family of restaurants where everyone has a vested interest in the company's success."

At Francesca's, the menu is predominantly handwritten and renewed every two weeks, to reflect the chef's latest available pasta and entrée creations. The main categories featured each week are appetizers, salads, pizza, pasta, and a revolving selection of chicken, pork and fish entrees. The ingredients used and the food preparation are supreme quality, with an emphasis on authenticity with regard to incorporating traditional Northern Italian recipes. A distinctive attention to detail is also evident in the plate presentation.

The menu prices are based on item availability and seasonality of ingredients, but generally range from \$10 to \$15 per person for lunch and approximately \$18 to \$30 for dinner. There is also a children's menu for patrons under age 12 (including a scoop of gelato for

dessert). Francesca's is also unique in offering a full page menu of gluten-free dishes and desserts. Carry-out is available daily for both the lunch and dinner menus. The restaurants also offer private accommodations that can be booked for groups of up to 40 guests, with separate facilities and a specialized menu geared around family style lunch and dinner packages. The restaurants also offer catering. Under the category of signature merchandise, an exclusive line of proprietary recipe Italian sauces is also available for purchase at any Francesca's location. And after much demand from customers, the restaurant has begun selling its own Garlic and Herb Olive Oil in bottles. Loyal fans of the chain can also purchase t-shirts depicting the brand's individual image and namesake.

Among the many characteristics that appeal to Francesca's Restaurants' patrons is the specialty destination's full bar and lounge area, featuring an expansive wine list (with value-focused Italian and domestic labels), and the availability of local beers and handcrafted martinis, which ideally complement the qualities of the food selections. In fact, enticing discounted pricing on the bottled wines, martinis and draft beers are among the featured "daily specials" each week, that are designed to bring in new customers as well as encourage repeat visits. Tuesday's, for example, might feature \$6 martinis; on Wednesday diners pay just \$10 for any bottle of wine; and on Thursday there is \$3 draft beers on tap.

As part of its national expansion push, growing beyond its existing 20 units operating in the Chicago region of Illinois, Francesca's has recently developed new restaurants in the markets of Madison, Wisconsin; San Diego, California (opened in May of 2011); Scottsdale, Arizona (June of 2011); and Raleigh, North Carolina (planned in 2011). In April of 2011, it was announced that the chain projects adding 60 new units nationally over the course of the next 10+ years, that are to be company-owned and operated. Southern California is among the regions targeted for additional market penetration, with a desire to occupy 2,500 to 5,500 sq. ft. of space in distinctive, upscale urban shopping venues that will accommodate a "contemporary casual" setting. **CC**

Direct site submittals to: for the Southern California region: Mike Spilky, Location Matters, (858) 792-5521 or Mike.Spilky@LocationMattersinc.com; for other regions of California and the U.S.: Francesca's Restaurants corporate office, 1039 West Bryn Mawr, Chicago, IL, 60660 (773) 334-8368.

