

What Our Readers are **BUILDING, BUYING & REMODELING**

This New Restaurant Business is a Picnic

Punk's Backyard Grill, Annapolis, Maryland

The concept is simple — as simple as a picnic in the backyard with family and friends. And that's what makes it so appealing, so fresh and so successful.

"Everything you experience here is something you see at family reunions or a picnic at grandma's house," says Jeffrey Sloan, co-founder and chairman of PBG Development Company, the parent company of Punk's Backyard Grill of Annapolis, Maryland.

"I spent most of my childhood with a paper plate standing beside the backyard grill or eating at a picnic table at my Uncle Punk's house in Richmond, Missouri, and they're some of my favorite childhood memories," Sloan says.

Sloan's partners, David McCabe and Sheila Laderberg, had similar childhood memories, so when the trio teamed up to enter the Cornell Restaurant Development Concept Fair in 2005, the idea that became Punk's Backyard Grill quickly surfaced. Of the \$1 million in play money awarded at the fair, about \$900,000 went to Punk's.

"We had such positive feedback and sincere interest from people with real money to invest, we put everything else on hold and began implementing the business plan," Sloan said.

Over the next three years, the trio found attorneys, accountants, marketing experts, a chef and an ideal location — adjacent to the newly expanded Westfield Mall in Annapolis. They met with local chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus and charitable organizations to further develop the community partnership component of this family-friendly, neighborhood restaurant.

Within a month of signing a 10-year lease for an empty shell of a building in September 2008, the nation's financial markets began to collapse. "We are the poster children of bad timing, but we decided not to let the bad economy delay what we knew was a great concept, one that doesn't exist anywhere else," Sloan says.

Taking advantage of social media, the team created a blog about the opening of a new restaurant, taking readers on a weekly excursion through the good, the bad and the ugly of opening a new property. "In essence, we were creating emotional ties and building customer loyalty to a product that didn't yet exist," Sloan says.

One of the team's best decisions, besides simply moving forward in the face of adversity, was the hiring of chef Dean Maupin and involving him in advance marketing efforts. He cooked at local farmers markets and appeared on local television shows and reached out to the community, all while developing a contemporary, healthy menu featuring simple, honest food.

"We all brought recipes and ideas from our family, and chef Dean took it from there," Sloan says. Everything on the menu is homemade, organic and locally sourced where possible. There are no fryers in the restaurant.

In bringing the concept to fruition, the owners seriously considered paper plates, certainly a staple of most backyard barbecues. However, paper plates add about 4 percent cost to the bottom line, diminish the eco-friendly goals of the restaurant and "simply don't give credit to the quality of food at Punk's," Sloan says.

STARTUPSTATS

Punk's Backyard Grill

www.punksbackyardgrill.com

How did you select the name for the restaurant? Named for an uncle who hosted great backyard cookouts.

Number of seats: 88 indoors, 45 on outdoor patio.

Bar: No, but alcohol served.

Smoking allowed: No.

Number of staff: About 30.

First restaurant under this name? Yes.

Square feet of kitchen: 1,200.

Square feet of restaurant: 3,100.

Purchasing decisions do include biodegradable packaging and disposable utensils made from corn-based products. Punk's is the first certified green restaurant in Maryland, according to a new initiative from the governor's office.

Punk's opened on February 1, 2009, and Sloan admits the numbers are somewhat slower than what they had forecast. "The bottom line is that people's consumer habits have shifted drastically and while the mall is a great location, it's not seeing the traffic that it did before this financial crisis," Sloan says.

Of the 14 restaurants at Westfield Mall, Punk's, with 100 feet of very visible storefront, is the only nonchain restaurant. Getting the message out that Punk's is independent is a priority for the team.

Very early in the concept development, they connected with local food bloggers, writers and others who pay attention to restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area. This same group was invited to a private preopening event. The opening event was a fund-raiser for a local charity, also a part of the strategic plan to establish Punk's as an independent, community partner.

"We have an owner on site every day getting to know customers and their children by name," Sloan says. "We are very involved in the community through bowling leagues and little league teams and our charitable work."

These are the things that make good neighbors and good family, just like the people you would invite over to a picnic in your own backyard.

RS&G

Photo courtesy of Punk's Backyard Grill



Punk's Backyard Grill is the only independent among the 14 restaurants serving the Westfield Annapolis Mall in Maryland.

Signature items: Classic all-natural burger with 100 percent beef from Vande Rose Farms, \$6.49; and a Home Veggie Burger, \$6.49.

Total project cost: About \$1 million.

Where and how you got your financing: Private investors.

Are you leasing or do you own the property? Leasing.

Catering/banquet service offered? Yes.

Average check: \$11 to \$13.

If you had the chance to do it over again, what would you do differently? Build a bigger kitchen.