

RESTAURANT RENOVATION ON A TIGHT BUDGET

by Martin Dorf

Ciao Baby Cucina restaurant in Washington, D.C.

Rather than spending millions of dollars to create a new concept, many restaurateurs are taking over existing spaces and transforming them into successful restaurants on very low budgets.

When Carl Bruggemeier and his partners took over Twenty-One Federal, a 7,000-square-foot, 170-seat restaurant on L Street between Connecticut Avenue and K Street in Washington D.C., they were challenged to create an entirely new concept for \$165,000. This was the first of a chain of "Ciao Baby Cucina" restaurants.

Bruggemeier says Washington, D.C. was selected because "it is somewhat of a recession-proof town since there will always be a need for lobbyists, government workers and politicians to eat.

"The former Twenty-One Federal location was selected for several reasons. It is located in the 'K Street Corridor,' the most dense office market in Washington; it is in proximity to 18 hotels and the busiest metro station; and its size fit the ideal parameters described in the pro forma."

According to Bruggemeier, Twenty-One Federal failed for several reasons, including its "high average check (\$35 for lunch and \$65 for dinner), its rent and debt service, high labor and food costs and its rather stark hard-edged image. It had been designed in the 1980s as an elegant, formal and rather expensive restaurant."

The group believed that a moderately priced, high-quality Mediterranean menu served in an informal, comfortable environment would work in this location.

"Our 'style' of food is rooted in the diverse history and cultures of the Mediterranean, drawing from Greek, Spanish, Italian, Spanish, French and North African cuisines," says Bruggemeier. "The menu is straightforward, abundantly plated and fun to eat, with customers making lazy Susans out of the tables, tasting each other's dishes."

Ciao Baby Cucina's average check is \$19 for lunch and \$35 for dinner. Bruggemeier contends, "Customers are receiving great value, because of portion sizes and the variety of flavors and ingredients. Food cost is 28 percent and



Customers feel very comfortable in this warm yet fun-to-be-in space

our beverage cost is 24 percent with labor costs—after taxes, management payroll and benefits—at 29 percent.”

Jimmy Gibson, the restaurant’s executive chef, has created entrees such as a 1-pound Pork Chop à la Trojan Horse and Braised Lamb Osso Bucco with mixed beans and risotto.

“These are not the most expensive cuts of meat, but we can pass these savings on to customers with large portion sizes, creating a great sense of value,” admits Bruggemeier.

The restaurant serves nine varieties of pasta, such as Tonnarelli Romesco d’Oro with square spaghetti and an assortment of seasonal fresh seafood with roasted yellow pepper saffron sauce. The menu includes a variety of salads, six varieties of pizza, eight fun appetizers and two soups, plus an “Italian Wedding Soup” with chicken, vegetables, pasta and tiny meatballs in a rich chicken-dill stock.

Ciao Baby Cucina offers 48 wines by the glass, with beverage sales accounting for 36 percent of revenue. Any

appetizer—in fact, the entire menu—is available at the bar. The antipasto table has become so popular, the restaurant often seats 125 people at the bar on busy nights.

“The design has had wide appeal,” concludes Bruggemeier. “Our average lunch crowd is 45 years or older, with women in groups accounting for 50 percent [of diners]. Surprisingly, our average [customer] at dinner is under 35.”

DESIGN CONCEPT

A Mediterranean farmhouse vernacular is the metaphor for this concept, reflecting the food’s style, with its inherent spirit of informality, comfort and warmth.

“Food as entertainment” is integral to this renovation to encourage customers to perceive this space—especially the bar—as a place to graze and drink at happy hour.

The restaurateurs especially wanted a “woman-friendly” feel. Bruggemeier states, “We wanted customers, especially

Continued on page 28