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Dallas restaurateurs compete for the top of seafood chains

07:13 AM CDT on Wednesday, September 3, 2008

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There were times, Mike Hoque admits, when he felt like he was swimming upstream.

As president and chief executive of the Dallas Restaurant Group, the Bangladesh native heads a company with three seafood restaurants in North Texas. By the end of 2009, he expects to have at least seven.

As Mr. Hoque casts his net wider, he joins a small but growing school of restaurateurs betting they can launch successful seafood chains in Dallas – with no natural bodies of water nearby and in the heart of cattle country.

"We're a city in the middle of the prairie, far from the ocean," said Mr. Hoque (rhymes with *poke*). "When you first open a restaurant [here], you've got to educate your guests about seafood."

One of the company's largest restaurants, Go Fish Ocean Club, reopens today in its new berth near the Dallas Galleria, offering dinner only. (Lunch starts Monday.)

Featuring Swarovski crystal glittering from the entryway chandelier and tables handcrafted from African zebra wood, the high-end haunt is about two miles south of its original location in Addison, which closed last week to make room for the larger venue. As for price, Go Fish swims in more exclusive waters than the company's more modest offering, Fish Express.

The original Fish Express, at Preston Road and Forest Lane, will be joined early next month by a second outlet, in Frisco.

More locations in the fast-casual chain, which offers such items as Atlantic salmon and Hawaiian mahi mahi for around \$10, are planned next year for West Plano, Southlake and Las Colinas.

At least two other Dallas companies are also looking to spawn seafood offerings: Neighborhood Ventures Inc., parent to Fish City Grill and Half Shells Seafood Grill, and 8.0 Management, which owns the Flying Fish chain.

In addition, Ray Washburne, the new majority owner of Rockfish Seafood Grill, announced plans to expand that 14-unit chain.

Mr. Hoque, 35, came to the U.S. from Dubai at age 14 to visit his grandparents in Duncanville and to see Disneyland. He never left.

Today, the limo company operator turned restaurateur is pursuing two different fish strategies in price.

In addition to Go Fish on the high end, the company owns Dallas Fish Market downtown, where patrons can dine on black truffle wrap Chilean sea bass for \$34.

But with a \$2 million-plus price tag to open the latest Go Fish, expansion of these venues is now in the "maybe someday" category, said Mr. Hoque, who owns the restaurants with investor Robert Holly, a Fort Worth entrepreneur who sells private jets.

Even the less expensive Fish Express (the new Frisco outlet will cost about \$500,000) brought challenges when it debuted in February 2007.

"In the beginning, it was a little tough," said Mr. Hoque, adding that the early days were sans profit. "I thought, 'Did I do the right thing?'"

Mr. Hoque streamlined the original menu to keep only the best-sellers. Because seafood has a shorter shelf life than, say, beef, it's even more important to buy what sells.

And in simplifying the menu, he found a formula that was not only easier on the kitchen staff, but also easier to replicate.

Competitor Fish City Grill is one of the state's fastest-growing seafood chains.

This year, Fish City will grow from about 20 locations to nearly 30. Ten more are set to open next year, largely through franchising, said Bill Bayne, 48, who co-founded the Addison-based company with his wife, Lovett, 41.

Mr. Bayne said he'd like to see his chain eventually go national.

When he opened his first seafood restaurant outside Texas two years ago, in Edmund, Okla., Mr. Bayne was prepared for some raised eyebrows. A North Texan hawking Maryland crab cakes?

"It hasn't been as big an issue as you might think," he says now. "I thought I'd be hearing more about that."

Meanwhile, 8.0 Management has five company-owned Flying Fish restaurants – Preston Center, Garland, Fort Worth, Little Rock, Ark., and Memphis, Tenn. – as well as a franchised outlet in Addison.

That company hopes to expand late this year or early next year to either Waco or Tyler, said Shannon Wynne, president. He aims to re-create the dining experience near Caddo Lake, Texas' only natural lake, on the Louisiana border.

Though Flying Fish restaurants serve salmon, oysters and crab, "probably 70 percent of our food is catfish," most of which is farm-raised in Mississippi and trucked in on ice, Mr. Wynne said.

"We don't sell anything exotic like swordfish. We sell comfort food to people who were raised this way, that reminds them of how they ate years ago and 100 miles from here. It's the Bubba element," Mr. Wynne said.

"Can we go into Chicago and do as well?" he asked. "I'm not so sure."

Flying Fish's down-home appeal drew Rowlett residents Jodi Butler, 37, husband Jeff, 42, and their 11-year-old daughter, Hannah, to the Garland location over the weekend.

"It's the closest in taste to my mama's," said Ms. Butler, who came for the catfish. "She comes here, too, so she doesn't have to heat up the kitchen."

Although the seafood restaurateurs are bullish on their ability to grow, they also are mindful of predecessors that got in too deep.

Rockfish Grill, once partly owned by Dallas-based Brinker International Inc., had more than two dozen restaurants in 2004. Industry insiders say the chain, now with just over a dozen outlets, expanded too far, too fast.

Then there is Cary Ray, co-owner of the Original Daddy Jack's on Dallas' trendy Greenville Avenue. He sees his

restaurant, open since 1993, as a long-term success, even though other Daddy Jack's outlets have shut down.

Mr. Ray said he is "not ruling out opening more stores," but "just looking at the state of the economy, we're staying put right now."

That could be interpreted as a warning for others. Or it might just mean more room for others to drop a line and see if diners bite.

GONE FISHIN'

Several Dallas-area companies are trying to turn their seafood restaurants into regional or national chains. Here are some examples:

| Company | Chain | Headquarters | Restaurants | Planned growth |
|-------------------------|--|--------------|----------------------|---|
| Neighborhood Ventures | Fish City Grill/ Half Shells Seafood Grill | Addison | 25 (8 company-owned) | Opening 10 in 2008, 10 more in 2009 |
| 8.0 Management | Flying Fish | Dallas | 6 (5 company-owned) | Opening in Waco or Tyler by mid-2009 |
| Dallas Restaurant Group | Fish Express | Dallas | 1 (company-owned) | Opening in Frisco in October; three more by the end of 2009 |

SOURCES: The companies; *Dallas Morning News* research