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Ideas in Action

Catching the wave

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For husband and wife Bill and Lovett Bayne and their customers, Fish City Grill restaurants are like comfy neighborhood hideaways. So it makes sense that the Baynes were initially reluctant to franchise the brand.

In fact, a few years ago, when family friend Pat Garza came to them with the idea of franchising, they were downright uninterested.

"Three years ago, it was the furthest thing from our mind," said Bill Bayne of Neighborhood Ventures Inc. "We wanted to keep it close and stay in control of it."

Before growing Fish City Grill, the couple co-founded Half Shells Oyster Bar & Grill at Snider Plaza and Rockfish Grill, in which they no longer have a stake after a 2000 split with their former partner.

Eventually, Garza convinced them that, with the right franchise partners, the Fish City Grill brand and its culture could stay intact.

In about two years, Garza, who is now director of franchise development, has delivered on his promise to attract high-quality franchisees who are capable of opening at least five restaurants instead of single units. And he has taken the lead on franchise development so that the Baynes are free to concentrate on their own three Fish City Grills and two Half Shell restaurants (the other is at Legacy Town Center in Plano).

As many entrepreneurs will testify, the dream of franchising can easily turn into a nightmare. But franchising has turned out to be a good thing for Fish City Grill as well as for the company's staff, according to the Baynes.

"To attract the quality franchisees that we have, we had to have a system

and procedures in place," Bill Baynes said. "It forced us to get it done."

The Baynes fine-tuned their recipes, tightened their ordering systems and launched a training program to grab franchisees' attention, said Lovett Bayne, whose job title is "Director of Happiness." Her husband's title is "You Name It."

So far, the company has signed five area development agreements for more than 40 units that will open in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida and Georgia. The average start-up cost for each restaurant is about \$500,000 to \$600,000. The couple plans to open two restaurants in Denver.

The company's "relaxed seafood" concept has lured franchisees with impressive pedigrees like Scott Nietschmann, a former chief operating officer of Brinker International's Chili's Bar & Grill chain.

Nietschmann, who plans to open Fish City Grill units in Round Rock, College Station and Houston next year, said that the restaurant's fresh spin on seafood and family-oriented culture drew him to the franchise. After spending years in a corporate position, he also was ready to get back to the dining room, Nietschmann said.

Three of the Baynes' five franchisees formerly held executive positions at Brinker International. The other two have upper-management experience at large franchise companies.

In training

A few weeks ago, Nietschmann was a franchisee-in-training at Fish City Grill's Dallas restaurant, which means he was doing everything from bussing tables to preparing oyster nachos -- a customer favorite.

That on-the-job training is also important when vetting potential



franchisees. The Baynes have taken their staff's opinions -- including servers, cooks and managers -- very seriously. They've even turned away people who received a thumb's-down from the staff.

"It's like joining a family. We are very protective," Lovett Bayne said.

At the same time, the Baynes have realized that franchising has given their staff opportunities they wouldn't have had otherwise. Beyond giving them more room to advance, the staff now has access to stellar mentors. The educational possibilities became clear to Bill Bayne when he spotted a young employee working "side by side with (Nietschmann) an ex-Chili's COO."

Right now, the duo is determined to keep their company culture alive at franchise-owned restaurants. To that end, each franchisee must agree to carry on the tradition of Fish City Grill's First Tuesday Benefit, whereby on the first Tuesday of every month the Baynes donate 15% of their sales proceeds to a local charity.

That culture is what the Baynes believe will set them apart from typical chain restaurants.

"You can duplicate our floor plan, but you can't take our culture," Lovett Bayne said.