

At Aramark, innovation center is the mother of invention

By Elissa Elan

PHILADELPHIA — In an attempt to expand its culinary offerings and provide clients with the latest products and services, Aramark last month unveiled a state-of-the-art innovation center where the company's research, design and merchandising divisions could work together on developing menus and programs to be applied across all segments of the on-site foodservice industry.

The 53,000-square-foot center, located in this city's historic Wanamaker building, houses 120 full-time employees who focus on consumer research, brand strategy, culinary development, retail merchandising and promotion.

"Growth through innovation is really the path for us," said Chris Malone, senior vice president of marketing for the Philadelphia-based contract caterer and facilities management specialist. "It all starts with what clients think we can offer and how we can better serve their needs. We see ourselves much more as consultants or partners with them."

Malone added, "Despite being in business for 70 years, every day we're finding out new things in order to make sure the needs of our clients are being met."

The company, which has approximately 240,000 employees at accounts in 19 countries, reported total sales of \$11 billion in 2005.

The center includes a 3,500-square-foot test kitchen where 24 development chefs collaborate on the research of new menu items being developed for use at accounts in the company's health-care, university and school, corporate dining, correctional, and sports and entertainment divisions.

"This kitchen was built with a lot of flexibility so we can put in new equipment as we develop new concepts," said Paul Carr, Aramark's senior director of culinary program development.



Above: Sean Craig, concept development chef for catering, left, and assistant Sakeena Pendergrass work on recipes in the innovation center's test kitchen.



Left: Aramark's 53,000-square-foot innovation center has 120 employees who specialize in consumer research, brand strategy, culinary development, retail merchandising and promotion.

Carr noted that the company was experimenting with a lot of Mediterranean and Asian foods and ingredients as well as sustainable cuisine.

"We're looking at using seasonal ingredients and a lot of development with Thai and Indian flavors," he said. "We're in the beginning stages of researching Vietnamese cuisine, and Mediterranean is in the developmental stage right now. We're using a lot of grains, legumes and nuts,

and focusing on incorporating them into menus so items automatically are healthier."

According to Oscar Budejen, Aramark's vice president of strategic marketing, one of the biggest challenges for the innovation center's team members is the pressure to devise new concepts that will attract consumers' interest, which, in turn, the company expects will increase sales and participation.

"How do we change behavior and drive customers to eat more on-site?" Budejen asked. "It is all about understanding the client, the consumer and their needs. We're taking a fact-based approach to find out what's working and what's not."

Doug Martinides, vice president of culinary development for Aramark, said that one of the most important aspects of the center and the work of its employees is their ability to anticipate and create products that are necessary as well as desired by the general public.

"We understand what consumers are looking for better than the clients do," he said. "The key is taking this rich mining of consumer needs, getting together and developing the right end product that we can deploy."

Another area Aramark officials are focusing on is how to incorporate more retail-based concepts at various accounts to satisfy current consumer desires.

"We have savvy consumers out there so we need to be on par with the retail world in order to meet their needs," said Ann Marie Solomon, associate vice president of merchandising and promotion development. "It's about the total experience, not just the food. Even the uniforms have to reflect that mind-set." ■

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NEWS DIGESTS

Compass Group to implement sustainable-seafood policy

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Compass Group USA announced a new sustainable-seafood policy that calls for the removal of threatened fish species from its menus. The fish will be replaced with other, environmentally sound supplies.

The policy, which is scheduled to debut March 1, will include the elimination of Atlantic cod and other species classified "avoid" by the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch list. It also will increase the company's use of the group's designated "best choices" species, such as Pacific cod and pollock. The company said it planned to seek ways to decrease its use of shrimp and salmon that are farmed in an unsustainable manner.

Compass Group USA is the North American division of London-based contract caterer Compass Group PLC.

Sodexo to open Einstein Bros. unit at Pearl Harbor

GAITHERSBURG, MD. — Sodexo USA, the contract caterer and facilities management specialist based here, announced it would open the first Einstein Bros. Bagel unit in Hawaii this spring on the naval base at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu.

The unit, part of a five-year deal between Einstein Bros. and Sodexo, will be housed in an existing cafeteria-style location that currently is undergoing renovations. Menu items to be served include bagels, panini sandwiches, salads and coffee beverages.

Under the terms of a licensing agreement signed in 2001, Sodexo operates Einstein Bros. stores at a number of colleges, universities and health-care facilities

throughout the United States. Those locations include Auburn University in Auburn, Ala.; Emory University in Atlanta; Bentley College in Waltham, Mass.; and Savannah Memorial Health in Savannah, Ga.

Einstein Bros. operates 373 company-owned stores and 61 franchised units in 29 states. Other brands in the company's portfolio include Noah's New York Bagels, Manhattan Bagel and Chesapeake Bagel Bakery.

Delaware North eyes bid to control New York racetracks

ALBANY, N.Y. — Delaware North Cos., the hospitality and foodservice company based in Buffalo, N.Y., said its gaming division is considering a bid on operations at New York's Belmont, Aqueduct and Saratoga racetracks, which currently are run by the New York Racing Association, based here.

NYRA's contract to operate those racetracks expires at the end of 2007.

"It is at the very early stages, and the [request for a proposal] hasn't even been issued yet," said Wendy Watkins, a Delaware North spokeswoman.

The company currently owns and operates the Finger Lakes racetrack in Finger Lakes, N.Y., as well as the National Hockey League's Boston Bruins team and TD Banknorth, the arena where the Bruins and the National Basketball Association's Boston Celtics play, as well as various foodservice contracts worldwide.

In addition to operating at three of New York's premier racetracks, the winning bidder also would control the operation of a casino to be built at Aqueduct racetrack in Jamaica, N.Y., according to published reports.