

Statewide growth on menu

Qdoba franchise owner finds recipe for quick expansion across N.C.

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Tom Lewison was part of the Bojangles' Restaurants Inc. management team that took the Charlotte chain's Cajun recipes to Mexico in 2006.

Today, in a new role, Lewison is adding to the flavors of Mexico in Charlotte.

Lewison, a former Bojangles' president and chief operating officer, is expanding Qdoba Mexican Grill restaurants across the Tar Heel State. Last week, he opened a Qdoba in the Ivey's building uptown. It's the 22nd Qdoba restaurant he owns as part of his QCarolina Restaurants.

"We may have set a new company record for opening-day sales," he says.

Lewison owns franchise rights for the Qdoba brand across North Carolina. He has opened four restaurants in the past 18 months, and 10 more are in the pipeline, he says.

Lewison first considered an investment in Qdoba, a Denver-based franchiser, 10 years ago, when the company brought its first restaurant to Charlotte. "The food just knocked me out," he says. "And I won't do anything unless I love the food."

But the chain's franchise rights in North Carolina weren't available at the time. And Lewison, a 34-year veteran of the restaurant business, was happy in his role at Bojangles'.

Then the chicken-and-biscuit chain's ownership group sold controlling interest to Charlotte private-equity group Falfurrias Partners in 2007, and Lewison eventually left the



Tom Lewison has 22 Qdoba's statewide with more on the way

photo NANCY PIERCE

company. In September 2008, as the financial markets crashed, he bought Qdoba's North Carolina franchise rights for an undisclosed sum from a group in Charleston, S.C.

"Great timing," he deadpans. "But really, in a way it was good. We've seen the bottom, and we know things are picking up."

Lewison says same-store sales at his Qdoba locations have increased "a few percent" so far this year. He hopes to open four more stores in 2010.

Todd Owen, Qdoba vice president of franchise development, says Lewison is one of the biggest franchise owners in the 500-location company. He says Qdoba seeks individuals such as Lewison for their extensive restaurant experience. "He's a microcosm of what we're looking for."

Lewison says he was drawn to the "fast-casual" category. Food is affordable and quick at such restaurants. But fast-casual venues tend to offer better food and nicer dining areas than traditional fast-food restaurants. That

helps attract higher-quality employees, he says. Fast-casual operations are typically in retail centers instead of stand-alone buildings, keeping real estate expenses low, he adds.

Plus, the category is gaining favor with diners.

"The recession has helped as people spend less, but I think it's a segment that will continue to thrive," says Robin DiPietro, director of the International Institute for Foodservice Research and Education at University of South Carolina.

She notes fast-casual restaurants have been so successful that fast-food chains have begun to follow their example, adding amenities such as wireless Internet service.

Lewison, still the owner of a Bojangles' franchise in South Carolina, says he investigated competitors such as Charlotte-based Salsarita's before investing in Qdoba. He believes he found a niche that will keep growing.

"The sky is the limit," he says. "But only if you have the right brand."