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Menus Make Room for Local Favorites While Embracing Core Items that Satisfy Tastes

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By **Susan Gonsalves**
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Menu familiarity and flexibility are the recipes for quick-service restaurants whose locations span the United States and overseas. Add one healthy respect for local traditions while still embracing core favorites, and customer satisfaction is guaranteed.

"Our brands try to keep the core menu items the same across the country to ensure consistent customer satisfaction; food-quality standards; and ease of operations, training, marketing and communications. So a Great Steak enthusiast in Ohio can still order their favorite Super Steak

Cheesesteak in Arizona," says Veronica Graves, public relations coordinator for Kahala Corp., a privately held firm based in Scottsdale, Ariz. Kahala handles the franchising, development and marketing of a dozen quick-service restaurants in nearly 3,500 locations.

However, in addition to core menu items, several stores offer regional dishes. Blimpie franchisees can order a "local favorites menu board" to incorporate top-selling items not usually found on its standard menu board. Pastrami sandwiches are a big Northeast hit; French Dip is popular in the Northwest.

Other differences are obvious at Blimpie's unique locations, like convenience stores and Wal-Mart. Snacks such as popcorn and pretzels are sold at the retail giant while convenience spots sell streamlined selections.

According to Graves, limited-time offers identify local tastes. Last year, TacoTime offered the Navajo Taco, which proved very successful in Utah, Nevada and Washington, but didn't fare as well in Montana or Oregon. A core menu item called the Veggie Burrito has developed into a regional favorite in Oregon.

Red Lobster's current promotional campaign champions new entrées inspired by the country's rich coastal culinary traditions. From the Northeast arrives a new Maine Lobster and Crab Bake featuring garlic-roasted Maine lobster, jumbo shrimp, scallops, and half pound of snow crab legs. New Orleans Shrimp Jambalaya with spicy sausage simmered with Creole seasonings represents the South.

To support franchisees with regional favorites, the Great Steak corporate team is rolling out a new menu board with magnetic strips on one of the panels so stores can showcase their localized specials. In Pittsburgh, for example, fries are an ingredient in Great Steak Salads, making that choice unique to that location. West Coast customers are more inclined to crave the Bacon Cheddar Cheesesteak sandwich, while the Pastrami Philly scores points as a favorite on the East Coast and in Chicago, Graves says.

Jill Lawrence, director of marketing at Cosi, says that menus seldom vary by location but certain parts of the country embrace different products more readily than others. More red meat is sold in the Midwest than any other region and East Coast diners are greater fans of occasional shellfish menu item with choices like shrimp salad, shrimp sandwiches and lobster.

Sandy Smith, senior vice president of marketing at Captain D's Seafood Kitchen echoed those thoughts. Oyster dinners and fried green tomatoes are favorites in southern markets, although the restaurant's most popular item "by far everywhere" are the Batter-dipped Fish Fillets. Often, franchisee operators feel strongly about offering a certain product and those wishes, along with local preferences, are respected.

With Samurai Sam's Teriyaki Grill, the only regional difference in promotional menu items appears to be between southern California and the rest of the states. The California stores prefer the true Japanese menu options while last year's special Chinese meals sold better in other places, particularly Phoenix.

Even ice cream gets into the act. Every Cold Stone Creamery location carries mandatory flavors like Cake Batter, Sweet Cream and Cheesecake, but franchisees in some cities add options including French Toast, Green Apple Gummy Bear, Pistachio, and Butter Pecan. In Hawaii, more fruit flavors are available such as peach, mango, raspberry and coconut.



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Menu alterations can be subtle from store-to-store. Some Subway franchisees choose to add BLTs and veggie burgers to their bill-o-fare, said Spokesperson Les Winograd. "We keep the core menu the same but allow freedom to acknowledge local tastes. Subway emphasizes consistency, but with a lot of options. It gives the customer the freedom to get what they want. But a roast beef sandwich is still a roast beef sandwich whether you are on the East or West Coast."

Far greater variations occur at international locations, Winograd said.

In India, Subway has expanded vegetarian offerings sold at separate ordering stations away from the meats. Products are made from lamb, turkey and chicken, adhering to cultural standards prohibiting beef, pork and other blood-based foods.

At Subway restaurants in the Middle East, great care was taken to carefully follow halal food standards, a designation similar to Jewish Kosher practices. Foreign markets present an array of menu preparation changes and challenges. "The most important thing is to respect what is considered proper...their traditional values," he says. Adapting to cultural differences can lead to growth. For example, 60 halal Subway restaurants have been located in Great Britain in areas with large Muslim populations.

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