

EXECUTIVE PEOPLE FACETIME

Cooking up Pizza Inn's turnaround

PRESIDENT AND CEO **CHARLIE MORRISON** REVERSED THE 52-YEAR-OLD DALLAS CHAIN'S DECLINE BY LISTENING TO FRANCHISEES, RETURNING THE BRAND TO ITS BUFFET-STYLE ROOTS

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An old Dallas startup is on the rise again. Pizza Inn Inc., which opened 52 years ago across from Southern Methodist University, has seen some tough times. At its height, the company had 750 locations. Last year, it had only 312. But under the guidance of Charlie Morrison, 42, who became president and CEO in December 2007, Pizza Inn opened more restaurants last year than it closed for the first time in 11 years. Morrison hopes to continue the streak. He aims to open 25 to 30 restaurants per year and expand Pizza Inn's international footprint. To return to growth mode, Morrison listened to his franchisees' suggestions and returned Pizza Inn to its roots, offering a buffet-style restaurant with a salad bar. Pizza Inn opened 25 restaurants last year, 13 of them using the new concept. Morrison discussed coming full circle and, of course, pizza with staff writer Shashana Pearson-Hormillosa.

WHERE DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL?

I went to Kansas State University for both my undergraduate and graduate degrees in business.

AS A CHILD, WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GREW UP? At one point, I wanted to be a business person and own my own store.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB AFTER COLLEGE? I worked for Pizza Hut's corporate offices in Wichita. I was in the internal audit department and wrote programs that pulled together exception reports to find theft issues.

HOW DID YOU PARLAY THAT INTO YOUR ROLE TODAY? My Pizza Hut role was very pivotal in my career because I wrote code that accessed large amounts of data. I had a skill that was desired and was surrounded by powerful business leaders, and I got to know what they needed to run the business. That experience and knowledge led me up the chain. I left (the company) as director and strategic planner, where I oversaw

operations, finance and marketing. I was recruited by Boston Market and then by Kinko's. I left just after we were sold to FedEx and went back into the restaurant business. I ran Steak and Ale from 2004 to 2006, and then was recruited here in 2007.

WHAT SURPRISED YOU THE MOST

ABOUT PIZZA INN? How little we knew as a company — as the franchisor — what went into the operation of the restaurants.

WHAT DID YOU HEAR THE MOST FROM YOUR FRANCHISEES? That they didn't have any desire to invest in new restaurants because they didn't believe in the concept we were selling. It didn't feel like the original brand. It had been oversimplified and was almost like a cafeteria. Customers didn't like it and franchisees didn't like it. We had to return to our roots.

HAVE YOU OR WILL YOU CHANGE THE RECIPE? Won't change the core — our dough, sauce and cheese — customers love it. We will add new flavor lines, concepts and products. We are soon releasing a loaded baked potato pizza, which includes ranch dressing, baked potato, chives and cheese.

WHY IS PIZZA INN SO POPULAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST? We've got a partnership that started almost 19 years ago. It's developed rather nicely. It's a well-capitalized group and is focused on being great operators over time.

WHAT OTHER COUNTRIES ARE YOU HOPING TO EXPAND INTO? We believe the opportunity is great in China. We hope to have our first opening there in the coming year.

WHAT IS THE BEST ADVICE YOU'VE RECEIVED? Don't chase the money; chase the experience.

WHAT'S BEEN YOUR MOST CHALLENGING BUSINESS DECISION? I had to walk away from a company once. I left because I'd uncovered some unethical practices that I didn't like.

OTHER THAN PEOPLE, WHAT IS THE BEST PERK OF YOUR JOB? The pizza. I get to eat a lot of it and I never get tired of it, it's great.

WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU COULD LEARN TO DO? To be a chef and deepen my culinary skills.



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