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Building business a burrito at a time

Ex-president of construction firm reinvents himself

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Drew Ferris was far from alone a couple of years ago when he felt the bottom drop out of what he thought of as his lifelong career.

After 18 years as president of a home construction company, the Northbrook native suddenly found himself without a way of continuing in that field after the great banking meltdown.

"I didn't see an opportunity to get back into that for a good number of years," he said.

And so, using his brother, Brian, as both a model and a coach, he decided to reinvent himself.

After an intensive, four-week unpaid internship with Moe's Southwest Grill restaurants in Atlanta, Ferris now is entrusted with expanding the chain into the Chicago area with 10 suburban franchises.

The first opened late last month in Schaumburg, and Ferris is finalizing the site of his second store. In all, he hopes to open three of them next year.

The internship he took up, after years of his brother's urgings, is an established program of Moe's for experienced business owners new to the restaurant industry.

In an experience like an episode of "Undercover Boss," the former homebuilder found himself making burritos, cleaning tables and immersing himself in all aspects of his future business.

Because he came from an industry where work was itself intensive and time-consuming, he didn't find the workload of the restaurant business all that shocking.

In fact, he found the potential problems much reduced from those he knew in construction. And given the reasons he changed careers in the first place, Ferris was quick to recognize



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Drew Ferris, franchise owner of Moe's Southwest Grill in Schaumburg, waits on Jackie Rosinski of Schaumburg. Ferris, a Northbrook resident, was forced to leave the home construction industry when the market collapsed and try his hand at a new career.

Business: Owner completed unpaid internship at Moe's in Atlanta

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the benefits.

"When you pick up your food, I get paid!" he said with a laugh. "I don't have to wait."

With that, though, comes the heavy responsibility of nightly accounting, not a regular task in home building.

Because Moe's Southwest Grill is a largely unknown brand in the Chicago market, highly visible locations are of paramount importance, he said. That's why he's still not sure of the order in which he'll open his intended 10 restaurants.

"It all depends on real estate availability," Ferris added.

Besides Schaumburg, the towns he's identified as likely locations are Des Plaines, Naperville, Lincolnshire, Oak Brook, Deerfield, Downers Grove, Evanston, Skokie and Wilmette.

There are already three existing Moe's, owned by other people, in Hoffman Estates, Deer Park and

Gurnee.

The brand's identity — first established by his brother's franchises in Atlanta a decade ago — is characterized by southwestern fare made with healthy ingredients, free chips and salsa, the "Dead Rocker" music played in all locations and the hearty "Welcome to Moe's!" greeting all customers receive.

Ferris said that's one element of the chain's southern hospitality some of his new customers were initially

surprised by but have grown to love.

While much of his time is taken up preparing for his future franchises, he still fills in at his current restaurant and finds the experiences of his internship essential.

"I don't think you can be a good business owner without knowing how every job is done," Ferris said. "It gives you good insight into what your employees are thinking and what their concerns are."