



FEELING AT HOME
Eric Little's company is expanding to Birmingham. **Page 4**

PACK YOUR BAGS
See which travel agency topped our annual list. **Page 12**



MAKING CHANGE
Laura Leigh Drake's good idea spread at Moe's. **Page 9**



From the ground up



Laura Leigh Drake's junior burrito concept has been rolled out in Moe's Southwest Grills across the U.S.

'IT'S IMPORTANT TO MATCH
your strategic plan with listening to what your customers' needs are.'

Laura Leigh Drake
Moe's Southwest Grill

How to spark corporate change from the franchise floor

BY LAUREN B. COOPER | STAFF

When Laura Leigh Drake began testing the Joey Jr. burrito at her six local Moe's Southwest Grill locations a few years ago, she never imagined the idea would take hold throughout the entire chain.

After seeing a need for a smaller portion – her customers were asking to split the hefty portioned Joey Bag of Donuts burrito – she added the menu item as a test and sales soared.

And her franchisor, Focus Brands out of Atlanta, took notice. Today, Drake's junior burrito concept is listed on 420 Moe's menus throughout the country. She now sits on the franchisor's menu development committee, which is currently exploring a light menu, with gluten-free and vegetarian items.

Drake and other franchisees say corresponding customers' needs with outside-the-box marketing have been key to success and have helped to effect change from the bottom up in the franchise world.

"Think of out-of-the-box things, not profitability," said Drake, who runs the business with her husband Kealon Drake. "You are providing a need to customers and then the money comes."

While Drake was successful in launching the junior burrito and a Thank You Thursday, which couples a buy-one-get-one-free entree with the American Idol contest and has been adopted by several other franchisees, some ideas haven't rolled out as successfully.

An attempt to bundle individually sold tacos into two was not received well by customers. The test was halted and plans were scrapped to move forward.

"We had to regroup and think about the on-taco people," she said. "Sometimes the best laid plans ..."

Drake also helped to create the first co-op of Moe's owners in the Birmingham area. The group

of business owners has joined together to give money to the community and buy radio and television advertisements. Moe's owner co-ops are now cropping up across the country, she said.

Hal Craig, an owner of the local Momma Goldberg's franchise, said smaller franchises, like his and Moe's, are more open to change, unlike a McDonald's, which is more structured. But the lines of communication between franchisee and franchisor have to be open, he said.

"When we try to do something, we try to keep them in the loop, so they are not surprised," he said of the Auburn-based franchisor. "And, too, they may follow up and say 'How did that go?' and 'Can you give any feedback?'"

In one instance, Craig said he realized his restaurants were not making much money between the hours of 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. on certain days. He rolled out a "Beat the Clock" campaign where customers pay for a meal corresponding to the time on the clock.

"We started to see a huge volume uptick and we may now have 120 to 150 people come in at 3 p.m., which is great for the restaurant," he said. "That change came from a need."

And now several Momma Goldberg's delis, including Craig's, are trying their hand at breakfast, he said. It's targeted toward the business person looking to eat breakfast before work and take advantage of free Wi-Fi access.

In the wake of the recession, consumers are hungrily looking for value, said Brian Pia, senior vice president and director of public relations at Luckie & Co. And the business owners that can give it in products that make consumers' lives better are guaranteed to succeed.

"It doesn't have to be hard and it's not difficult," Pia said. "When you think about it, the person shopping in the store or eating the food, they are filled with all this information. Pick their brains

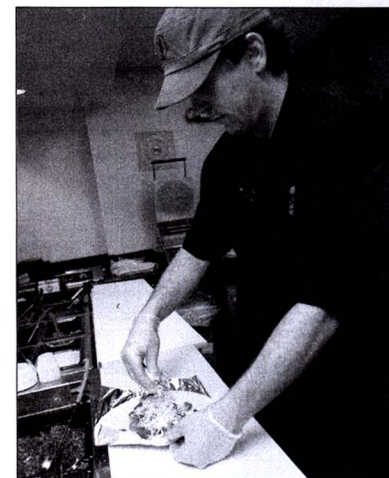
because they will give you the information you need to succeed."

Craig said effecting change throughout a franchise takes patience, an open mind and the ability to handle feedback, because a lot of different people are involved in the process.

But simply listening to customers and monitoring their needs has been a successful recipe, said Drake, who recently bought the rights to open Moe's in north Alabama. She currently owns Moe's in Vestavia Hills, Riverchase, Birmingham and Wildwood, as well as two in Auburn.

"It's important to match your strategic plan with listening to what your customers' need are," said Drake.

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Jeremy Stephens makes one of Moe's signature burritos, the Jr. Homewrecker, at the franchise's Southside location.