

Asian eatery chains find EP appealing

By Vic Kolenc
EL PASO TIMES

Two companies are expanding El Paso's Asian food offerings.

Panda Express, a growing California-based chain of Chinese fast-food restaurants, has found success with its first two El Paso locations and is adding two more East Side locations in June and September.

It plans to add eight more El Paso-area locations in the future. It's looking at an area around Interstate 10 and Mesa Street as a possible site for another West Side restaurant.

Meanwhile, Mama Fu's Asian House, a small Austin-based Asian food restaurant chain, which has fast Asian food for lunch and sit-down service for dinner, expects to have two or three locations in El Paso and at least one in Las Cruces through a recently completed franchise

Update

agreement with a San Antonio restaurant group, said Randy Murphy, Mama Fu's CEO and president.

The first Mama Fu's El Paso restaurant is expected to open in nine to 12 months, he said.

Thien Ho, a spokeswoman at Panda Express' Los Angeles-area headquarters said, "El Paso has been a great market for us."

Sales at its East Side and West Side locations, which opened in summer 2009 and September 2010, have shown "it's a sustainable market for us," she said.

It plans to open its third El Paso location in mid-June at 1434 N. Lee Treviño, near Pellicano Drive. Construction is being completed on a new building at the site, which previously housed a Silver Streak hamburger restaurant. The local Silver Streak chain has closed.

Panda Express' fourth restau-

At a glance

- ▶ **Panda Express** has about 1,400 company-owned restaurants nationwide, including 27 in Texas.
- ▶ **The California-based chain** already has two restaurants in El Paso and is adding two more.
- ▶ **On the Web:** pandaexpress.com
- ▶ **Mama Fu's Asian House** expects to have two or three locations in El Paso and one in Las Cruces.
- ▶ **The Austin-based chain** has seven Austin-area locations, three in Florida, two in North Carolina and one in Arkansas.
- ▶ **On the Web:** mamafus.com

rant is to open in September at North Loop Drive and Zaragoza Road.

The company had a job fair last week to hire people for its new restaurants, and for an existing restaurant in the El Paseo Marketplace at Joe Battle Boulevard and Montwood Drive, said Jorge Ramos, manager of the new Lee Treviño location. It still has job openings and will probably have another job fair next month, Ramos said. Each restaurant has 25 to 35 employees, he said.

Ho said Panda Express plans to open about 100 locations na-

tionwide this year.

It now has about 1,400 company-owned locations nationwide, including 27 in Texas.

This year, it expects sales to exceed the company's 2010 sales of \$1.4 billion, Ho said.

Sales remained steady through the recession, but the problem Panda Express faced was finding good, new locations because development of shopping centers and restaurant sites slowed, Ho said.

Mama Fu's CEO Murphy said

Asian

Continued from **1E**

Panda Express is a competitor because it's in the Asian-food segment. However, he said, Mama Fu's is a different concept with made-to-order food in five Asian categories: Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean.

Panda Express' expansion in El Paso confirms it's a good market to enter, Murphy said.

Mama Fu's recently completed an agreement with a San Antonio-based restaurant development group, Food Management Partners, to open six restaurants in six markets: in El Paso, and in Las Cruces, Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, Santa Fe and Farmington, all in New Mexico. Murphy said he expects at least three of those restaurants to be in the El

Paso area.

Brian Padilla, a managing partner for the San Antonio group, said in a written statement, "We believe the fast-casual Asian segment is still relatively untapped in West Texas and New Mexico, and we look forward to developing one of today's hottest concepts in the (restaurant) industry."

Padilla's company operates 70 restaurants in seven states, including Buffalo Wild Wings, Smashburger and Little Caesars. It operates the Buffalo Wild Wings franchises in El Paso.

Mama Fu's now has seven Austin-area locations, three in Florida, two in North Carolina, and one in Arkansas. It plans to make franchise agreements to open 130 restaurants nationwide in the next five years.

Vic Kolenc may be reached at
vkolenc@elpasotimes.com;
546-6421.