

MONEY

This fast food is not fat food



The Energy Kitchen chain has opened its first eatery in South Florida. Nothing on the menu is more than 500 calories. **ID**

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Energy Kitchen serves healthy, fast



PETER ANDREW BOSCH/THE MIAMI HERALD

The staff of Energy Kitchen opened its first location outside of Greater New York on Friday in Pinecrest. More outlets are planned in Miami-Dade, Fort Lauderdale, Plantation and Boca Raton.

No item on eatery menu exceeds 500 calories

BY FRED TASKER
The Miami Herald

"I'm sorry, dear, I was in such a hurry that I had to grab lunch at a fast-food joint. I didn't have time to find something healthy."

The days when your spouse will buy that excuse ended Friday with the grand opening of Energy Kitchen, a fast-food restaurant with nothing on the menu exceeding 500 calories. That means nothing fried; everything grilled, baked or steamed. And not a sugar-filled soft drink on the premises.

The first Energy Kitchen outside Greater New York City opened in Pinecrest's Sunniland Shopping Center, with another planned next year in Miami Beach, then South Miami, Coral Gables, midtown Miami, Aventura and Bal Harbour over the next four years.

Energy Kitchen also has partnered with businessman Tony Lord in Fort Lauderdale for three more outlets. The first, on Federal Highway at Broward Boulevard, is scheduled to open in November. The other two will be in Boca Raton and Plantation. Lord

"It dawned to me that there was nowhere to go and eat that was quick and healthy."

Justo Pozo, in charge of Miami-Dade's Energy Kitchen outlets

is a former regional sales manager for Glaceau, the maker of Vitaminwater.

With its healthy dining theme, Energy Kitchen plays on the growing trend of restaurant diners who want tasty menus that are calorie- and fat-conscious. A 2010 survey by Mintel, a national industry marketing firm, said 86 percent of consumers see eating healthy as very or somewhat important, and 58 percent would like to see more healthy items on the menu.

And the U.S. Food and Drug Administration last month said it will issue regulations by year's end requiring restaurants with 20 or more locations to list calories on menus and menu boards and provide written nutrition information upon request.

Among restaurants currently serving those needs in South Florida are the Seasons 52 sit-down restaurant chain with "lighter" entrees such as farmer's market vegetable plate and cedar plank roasted salmon; and fast-casual chains Muscle Maker Grill (southwestern and Asian cui-

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sine), Lime Fresh (Mexican) and Chicken Kitchen.

Energy Kitchen brings several twists, including morning offerings and some unusual menu items.

At the new Pinecrest location, at 11421 S. Dixie Highway, the breakfast menu includes a bison and egg-white omelet at \$4.99 and 305 calories; a whole-grain banana muffin for \$1.99 and 238 calories, and an acai berry smoothie for \$5.99 and 239 calories.

Lunch and dinner menus include an ostrich burger at \$6.99 and 275 calories, a sirloin burger at \$7.49 and 465 calories; a grilled salmon entrée for \$13.99 and 272 calories, plus such sides as mashed sweet potatoes for \$2.99 and 145 calories and a corn and edamame salad for \$3.49 and 155 calories.

The man in charge of Miami-Dade's outlets is Justo Pozo, a former wrestling coach turned banker and now businessman.

Pozo was at Columbus High School at the time on its wrestling team. So even though his degree from Florida International University was in finance, he returned to Columbus High as a wrestling coach, working on the side as a personal fitness trainer. Later he worked as a banker at Regent Bank.

"It was then that I started trying to find my niche — something nobody else had or that I could do better. It dawned to me that there was nowhere to go and eat that was quick and healthy."

Into nutrition as a fitness trainer, Pozo says he was always frustrated that he couldn't find anything for lunch in South Florida that was both fast and healthy. So he quit his bank job and started looking for the opportunity to do something about it.

"Then my dad saw an article in Restaurant News magazine about Energy Kitchen in New York. I said, 'Hey, there's my niche.'"

The Energy Kitchen concept began in New York City in 2003 when Anthony Leone, a regional manager for Boston Market, was voicing a lament similar to

Pozo's.

"I would go into a deli in New York City and order an egg-white omelet and the first thing they would do is put oil on the grill. I said I can't be the only person looking to eat healthy in a fast, casual atmosphere."

Leone says his 10 outlets in the New York City area are popular with health-conscious stars, visited by Hugh Jackman, Nicole Kidman, Renee Zellweger, Uma Thurman, Adrien Brody and Paula Abdul.

One of his first customers, however, was Mike Repole, co-founder of Vitaminwater, who sold that company to Coca-Cola for \$4.1 billion.

"He was looking for the next hot thing," Leone says.

With investment from Repole, Energy Kitchen embarked on a national expansion plan, aiming at 1,000 outlets across the country within 10 years. The new Pinecrest outlet is the first outside the New York City area. Pozo paid \$30,000 for the franchise and invested \$400,000 to build the first restaurant.