

E-brands' evolution

In a mere three years, the multi-concept restaurant group has moved past its corporate origins to focus on quality, boutique-style dining.

By Eyal Goldshmid

Orlando, FL -- Thanks to its acclaimed eateries Timpano Steakhouse and Martini Bar, Aquaknox and the Samba Room, among others, and its dedication to fine dining, quality ingredients and top-notch service, \$48 million E-Brands Restaurants has achieved a staggering amount of success in only three years. However, reaching those high standards has taken considerable effort.

Rashid Choufani, seasoned restaurateur, real-estate mogul and personal friend of legendary French chef Paul Bocuse, purchased E-Brands from the Carlson Group in late 2001, soon after the 9/11 tragedy. Carlson Group, who also owns the T.G.I. Friday's brand, founded E-Brands a few years earlier and, under the leadership of chef Stephen Pyles, hoped to use its concepts to stretch its multi-concept operations.

But after three years of operations, Carlson's version of E-Brands failed to produce profits, and when 9/11 hit, the company chose to unload its less successful brands and stick with what it knew best -- family style dining. That was when Choufani stepped into the picture.

"After 9/11, corporate expenses were gone," says Choufani. "Companies were no longer going to steakhouses. So I saw an opening. We'd serve the same steak and same wine for less, prices around \$35-to-\$40 a bill instead of \$75-to-\$80. That was going to be our niche. It's fine dining for the average American. It's the highest quality food you can get but we charge reasonable prices for it."

Choufani's first step after acquiring the company was to hone the E-Brands image so that it better reflected his sense of fine dining. To Choufani, the concept always meant the use of fresh ingredients, foods prepared classically, attentive service and a welcoming, elegant atmosphere -- not a complex fusion of cultures or ingredients. None of these characteristics were present in E-Brands' current incarnation.

"Steven Pyles created these great concepts, but he couldn't manage it. He was fighting a confused message of identity. The Samba Room was called a 'Cuban Bar and Latin Café.' What does that mean? That's what we had to solve," says Choufani.

"It takes a lot to educate people. I don't want to educate people. I want to do beautiful work for our guests. We're not selling them sand in the desert. They're responding to what we're sending. People love to know what they're eating. You don't want the customer to come to your restaurant and have his steak hidden behind a mound of French fries or some fancy presentation. He wants steak to look like steak and chicken to look like chicken. That's what we do."

Of course, envisioning this result and putting into practice proved too tall order for Choufani to handle alone. So to help him, he assembled a talented staff of restaurant industry professionals, including Wolfgang Puck protégé Robin Stotter as his Corporate Chef and Hyatt and Sheraton veteran Charles E. Robinson as his Chief Operations Officer. Together, the team revamped E-Brands' concepts entirely.

“We wanted to get away from the corporate culture and do boutique restaurants, to express a more entrepreneurial mentality,” says Choufani. “We didn't want to think of ourselves as part of a corporation. This was my chance to bring my sense of fine dining to the public.”

In its first 18 months, Choufani and his team distanced the company from its Carlson origins and honed the focus of its brands. In the following 18 months, the company positioned itself nationally as a cornerstone of sophisticated dining. To accomplish this, E-Brands installed Timpano Steakhouse and Martini Bar locations in destination cities like Las Vegas, Orlando and Chicago and created the Aquaknox concept, a fine seafood restaurant set in the Venetian Hotel-Resort-Casino. Meanwhile, so as not to seclude itself from the general public, Choufani and his team made sure their restaurants kept their prices low enough so people didn't visit solely for special occasions.

“I don't want to define myself as fine dining for the casual segment,” says Choufani. “I want to serve a good steak, good salad, good soup. I want us to be professionals, and we're very professional in everything we do. We don't do average things. If you're going to buy ingredients, buy fresh ingredients. If you're doing something with saffron, use saffron, not colorant. People will respond to that. People can see it in your face that you're faking it. You don't fake things in this industry.”

Since its expansion, Timpano restaurants have averaged \$4-\$5 million per year in sales, while the company's lone Aquaknox location has produced \$5 ½ million -- staggering numbers, Carlson Group failed to come close to those numbers during its reign.

Choufani, never one to deny a trend in motion, expects this current momentum to guide E-Brands into its next phase of evolution, which involves doubling the size of the company over the next 18 months. To do this, Choufani and his team will lift the total number of Timpano locations to 12 nationally and install Aquaknox restaurants in Orlando, Chicago, New York City and Atlanta.

“In the multi-concept operations, you have to be successful. You cannot be average,” says Choufani. “T.G.I. Friday's are cookie-cutters. They don't do multi-concept. It's a big challenge, taking a company like this that was failing and turning it into fine-dining, boutique restaurants and spreading it across the nation. It's very challenging, and we're succeeding, and we're doing it right, and that's what we want to sell to the public. E-brands will be a player in the industry.”

For more information, please visit <http://www.e-brands.net>.