



# Firing on All Cylinders

*Rockit Ranch Productions continues to grow its dining and nightlife concepts in the Windy City*

BY AMBER DREA

**E**ight years after launching in 2002, Chicago-based Rockit Ranch Productions shows no signs of slowing down. In an economy where restaurants have been closing in droves, the company actually opened two restaurants last year, bringing its total on-premise portfolio to four venues. The new, upscale Asian concept Sunda debuted in March 2009 in the city's River North area, while a second location of its more casual Rockit Bar & Grill was unveiled near Chicago's Wrigley Field baseball stadium in April.

"It was extremely challenging to double the size of the company within one month, especially in the middle of one of the worst recessions that most of our work core has ever experienced," says CEO Billy Dec.

But business is booming. Sunda and Rockit Wrigley both opened second floor spaces late last year to offer more space and seating, and the company's 2009 sales remained consistent with 2008, according to chairman Brad Young. "For Sunda, we were very conscious of people's spending habits," he explains. "We created a menu that gave people multiple options and gave customers the ability to choose the dining experiences they can afford or that they want on any given night."

Indeed, Rockit's approachable menu is attracting consumers who still want to dine out during the recession. "We were able to gain a lot of the business that four-star restaurants could no

longer capture because consumers were looking for value," Young says. "Rockit Bar & Grill was able to offer that value." Even the company's high-end nightclub, The Underground, is experiencing a boom. "We had a better year (for The Underground) in 2009 than we did in 2008," he adds.

Company president Arturo Gomez also attributes Rockit Ranch's strong performance to the popularity of downtown Chicago, where three of the company's venues are located. "It's a very high-traffic area, and there's a lot of tourism," Gomez says. "It happens to be the hottest area in the city right now." He adds that Sunda is doing exceptionally high volume. "Since the day we opened, it's been jam-packed," he says.

The company no longer owns the luxury lounge Le Passage, which it sold in 2007 to focus on the newly launched The Underground. "At that time, we realized it would be too much of an undertaking to have two nightclubs that would arguably compete against each other, so we let that one go," Gomez explains. "It was already 7 years old, and we had the opportunity to sell it, so we moved on."

## Recession Strategy

While Rockit Ranch is doing well, that doesn't mean the company has remained unscathed. "I don't think there's anybody who can say they haven't been impacted in some way (by the recession)," Gomez says. "The economy has had an effect on other areas of our profit and loss, so we've definitely been impacted. Over the course of the year, we've been proactive about keeping a pulse on all those areas and trying to find opportunities to save money and drive profits."

Gomez and his two partners, Dec and Young, have taken steps toward easing financial burdens on the company, while continuing to provide consumers with the same level of

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*Rockit Ranch Productions' two new venues, the casual Rockit Bar & Grill (top) in Chicago's Wrigleyville neighborhood and the sophisticated Sunda (bottom right) in River North, provide a range of options for consumers with different budgets. Signature cocktails like the Rockit Bomb Pop (bottom left) and upscale appetizers like Sunda's Lemongrass Beef Lollipops (bottom center) offer something for everyone.*



(FROM LEFT) Rockit Ranch Productions' three partners—CEO Billy Dec, chairman Brad Young and president Arturo Gomez—have become a mainstay of Chicago's dining and nightlife scenes with their measured approach to developing the company's roster of concepts.

quality and service to which they're accustomed. "We're really focused on the controllables—including liquor costs, food costs and labor—which we're religiously watching on a daily basis," Gomez says, adding the Rockit Ranch hasn't had to lay off any of its roughly 500 employees so far. "A lot of companies out there are wondering whether or not they need two people to do a job that perhaps one person can perform. So we're certainly looking to maximize efficiency across the board."

The company has also taken advantage of a buyer's market for advertising space. "There are tons of deals on ad purchases," Gomez notes. "So we actually spent what we intended to spend in our 2009 budget, while a lot of people were scaling back."

In terms of discounts, Rockit Ranch hasn't made adjustments to the menus at any of its concepts. Rockit Bar & Grill has always been focused on a more casual audience, offering daily deals like Monday's half-price wine and \$6 appetizers, such as smoked salmon flatbread with lemon crème fraîche. "From the time we opened in 2004, (we've been) actively involved in marketing specials for specific days of the week that offer different environments," Young explains. "So it's not like we had to shift gears, because what we did in the past is exactly what we've needed to do in this economic climate."

Rockit Ranch didn't have to change its approach when launching Sunda either. "We started the project four years ago, and we opened right in the middle of this economic storm," Young says. "If we had opened up even six months earlier, we might have had more challenges because we wouldn't have seen what was coming." At the time of the economic collapse, the company was still in the process of hiring a chef for Sunda, eventually selecting Rodelio Aglibot, formerly of Koi Restaurant and his own Yi Cuisine, both in Los Angeles. "So we were able to adjust the concept while we developed it, as opposed to make adjustments after the fact," Young explains. He speculates that more consumers might have been buying \$300 bottles of wine rather than \$100 bottles if Sunda had opened under different conditions, but adds that the company is extremely happy with sales. "(The timing) helped us as opposed to hindered us," Young says. "I'm comfortable moving forward now that we've got a menu and concept that will be good in any economic conditions, so I'm glad that we chose that path."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROCKIT RANCH PRODUCTIONS

### ROCKIT RANCH PRODUCTIONS AT A GLANCE

<b>Headquarters</b>	Chicago
<b>Founded</b>	2002
<b>Key Executives</b>	Billy Dec, partner and CEO; Brad Young, partner and chairman; and Arturo Gomez, partner and president.
<b>Concepts</b>	The casual eatery Rockit Bar & Grill (two units), the upscale pan-Asian restaurant Sunda and the high-end nightclub The Underground.
<b>Food to Beverage Ratio</b>	Varies by venue. The Underground's sales are 98-percent spirits. Sunda is 55-percent food to 45-percent beverage. Rockit Bar & Grill River North is 40-percent food to 60-percent beverage, while the Wrigleyville unit is 60-percent food to 40-percent beverage.
<b>Annual Revenues</b>	Undisclosed, but the company says sales were consistent in 2009 with 2008.
<b>Web Site</b>	Rockitranch.com

## Beverage And Cuisine

Each of Rokit Ranch's three concepts targets a different audience, but there is some overlap in the clientele. The core brand, Rokit Bar & Grill, caters to the 21- to 35-year-old, T-shirt-and-jeans crowd, while Sunda has a more sophisticated environment for a slightly older demographic. The Underground, an exclusive, upscale lounge that features DJs, live bands and celebrity appearances four nights a week, also attracts a younger audience.

While Rokit Bar & Grill's price points are low enough that a guest could eat there three to four times a week—and they often do—Sunda is more of a “special treat,” Gomez says. “The prices are actually very competitive though. We wanted to emphasize that it was a place where you could spend \$25 to \$30 per person or up to \$80 per person. It's a very approachable menu.”

While The Underground does offer some food items, including Grilled Cheese Sandwiches (\$8), Chicken Skewers (\$9) and Mini Kobe Burgers (\$12), Gomez says 98-percent of sales come from spirits. “Grey Goose is a monster there,” Gomez notes. “(Consumers drink) traditional cocktails like Vodka and Soda or strictly go the bottle service route.” Signature drinks (\$10 to \$12) at The Underground include the popular Red Flag, made with Grey Goose La Poire, raspberry purée, and pomegranate and lemon juices, topped with 7-Up. Bottle service starts at \$250 for a 750-ml. bottle of Jameson Irish whiskey and tops out at \$2,500 for a 3-liter bottle of designer Marc Newson's limited-edition Dom Pérignon. Wine (\$12 a glass) and beer (\$6 a bottle) are also available.

Young admits that bottle service has slowed in the recession. “We still get people buying bottle service, but where we used to have a table that requires a three-bottle minimum attract



*The Underground (right), a high-end nightclub designed with a bomb shelter theme, caters to a younger crowd by bringing in big-name DJs, bands and celebrities four nights a week. With cocktails like the Red Flag (left), spirits soar at the venue, which also serves some food.*

Rokit Ranch culinary director James Gottwald oversees the food programs at all the company's venues and serves as executive chef at Rokit Bar & Grill. Appetizers at the restaurant range from \$9 for the Rokit Cheese Fries, made with brie and shiitake mushrooms, to \$14 for the Rockcorn Shrimp; entrées start at \$14 for the Turkey Meatloaf and go up to \$32 for a 9-ounce filet mignon. The eatery also serves burgers and sandwiches (\$10 to \$21), as well as salads (\$6 to \$15) and soup (\$6 a bowl). Featured desserts include the White Album, a warm banana rum bread pudding, and the Black Album, a chocolate bread pudding (both \$8). The venue does a brisk lunch business, and its popular weekend brunch features the Build Your Own Gourmet Bloody Mary Bar (\$5 per drink).

Sunda focuses on Asian-inspired dishes spanning Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Thai and Filipino cuisines. The menu is broken down into categories, such as Noodles, Dim Sum Style, Asian Grill and Sunda Signature Sushi, and features dishes like Oxtail Potstickers (\$12), Pancit Canton (\$14), Thai Fried Chicken (\$19) and Korean-style NY Strip Steak (\$28).

customers who would buy 10 bottles, we now have people who are getting the minimum and then ordering cocktails after that,” he explains. “But we're seeing increased foot traffic as well, so it's not like we see it on the financial end. It's just a shift in the business—more foot traffic, less bottle service, and hopefully that will equal a similar level of sales.”

Sales at Rokit Bar & Grill in River North break down to 60-percent beverage alcohol and 40-percent food, while that ratio is flipped at the Wrigleyville unit. Gomez attributes the difference to location. “Rokit Wrigley is located directly in front of the Cubs' stadium, so it got a tremendous amount of volume during the baseball season,” Gomez says. “During the off-season, traffic definitely dips down a bit. It's more of a neighborhood establishment, whereas Rokit River North is at the epicenter of tourism and hotels.” When the Wrigleyville unit first opened, the menu was identical to River North's, but it has since evolved to fit better with that particular consumer. The venue now offers more food specials and discounted drinks, the latter being a completely new concept

for the Rokit brand. “Downtown, we don’t offer drink specials, but up in the Wrigleyville location, it’s something we felt we had to do,” Gomez explains. Examples include \$5 Absolut cocktails, as opposed to \$8 Absolut drinks at the River North unit.

The most popular “Rocktail” at both Rokit Bar & Grill units is the Rokit Bomb Pop (all signature drinks are \$10), made with Bacardi Razz and Limón rums, DeKuyper blue Curaçao and fresh lemonade, garnished with five cherries. Beer (\$5 to \$7 a draft pour; \$5 to \$15 a bottle) is big at Rokit, with Bud Light being the top-seller at all four company venues. Rokit Bar & Grill also offers a variety of wines (\$8 to \$13 a glass; \$31 to \$350 a 750-ml. bottle), and La Crema Pinot Noir (\$13; \$52) sells best.

At Sunda, the food-to-beverage ratio is about 55-percent to 45-percent, Gomez estimates. Sake (\$8 to \$11 a glass; \$35 to \$225 a 720-ml. bottle) and wine (\$8 to \$15 a glass;



The St-Germain Kit (\$75) includes a bottle of the elderflower liqueur and mixers, or can be added to a Champagne purchase for \$50.

\$32 to \$175 a 750-ml. bottle) are the main attractions, with top-sellers including Ty Ku, Gekkeikan and A to Z Pinot Noir. Beer also does well, ranging from \$5 to \$15 for bottled selections and from \$6 to \$8 for draft pours. Gomez notes that Hitachino White Ale (\$10 a bottle) is a popular brew at Sunda. In addition, the restaurant sells a large amount of specialty cocktails (\$11 to \$13), with favorites being the Peared Sake (\$13), featuring Grey Goose La Poire, Zipang sparkling sake, pineapple juice and ginger syrup, served in a glass with a cinnamon rim, and the Go Go Berry (\$13), comprising Absolut Mango, St-Germain, DeKuyper triple sec, fresh muddled strawberries and mango juice.

## The Big Picture

Rokit Ranch’s steady approach to growing and maintaining its businesses seems to be working, even in a shaky economy. While their venues continue to thrive, Gomez, Young and Dec remain cautious as they move forward. “We’re definitely focused on getting back to work, meaning the bare bones

method on how we got to where we are today with respect to serving food and drink and experiences to every single person who comes in,” Dec says.

For Dec, who is a fixture of the Chicago scene, that means scaling back his projects outside Rokit Ranch’s immediate interests. The social guru updates his blog, Achicagothering.com, almost daily and posts interviews with celebrities like musician John Legend, actor and comedian Dan Aykroyd, and the late Patrick Swayze. He has hosted local entertainment television shows, served as a spokesperson for the Windy City’s bid for the 2016 Olympics and recently won a regional Emmy for the video “Journey to Sunda,” which chronicles his travels to Asia in preparation for the restaurant’s opening. In addition, Dec sits on the board of directors at the Lookingglass Theatre Co., for which he holds an annual fundraising event with actor David Schwimmer of “Friends” fame. He and Rokit Ranch also support countless charities in the city, from the Children’s Memorial Hospital to the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

One thing the company won’t be scaling back on is social networking. Each of the venues has Facebook and Twitter pages, and Dec, Gomez, Gottwald, Aglibot and Rokit Bar & Grill chef de cuisine Amanda Downing tweet constantly to keep in touch with fans and inform them about upcoming deals and events. The company recently held a contest offering \$25 gift cards for Rokit Wrigleyville to people who became fans of the venue on Facebook and posted photos of themselves in front of the Rokit Ranch billboard near Wrigley Field. “Social media is a big thing (for us) in 2010,” Dec says. “We’re doing a huge amount of evolution in that area.”

Other goals may or may not include opening more venues. “For the first six months of 2010, (the strategy is to) really just tighten all the screws,” Gomez says. “And continue to find opportunities to maximize the current spaces that we have.”

Young agrees, adding that the company is not completely closed to the idea of acquiring new property. “We have four venues, two of which opened in the last year, so the focus is to grow the foundation, keep it strong and look for new opportunities,” he explains.

Rokit Ranch plans to open additional units of Rokit Bar & Grill eventually, and while online platforms help them communicate with people outside of Chicago, the company will most likely stay in the city. “Obviously other restaurants have been very successful (moving into outside markets), but our Chicago outreach is pretty substantial too, so I think opening up different concepts when the opportunities become available in the city that we know is really the most appealing thing to us at this time,” Young says.

The trio is weighing the possibilities. “It would be stupid not to keep our eyes open for any deals that pop up—new spaces, new licenses, new ideas,” Dec says, adding that their priorities lie in the company’s current businesses first and foremost. “We basically created chaos (by expanding so rapidly last year), and things are beginning to settle back into their place.”

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