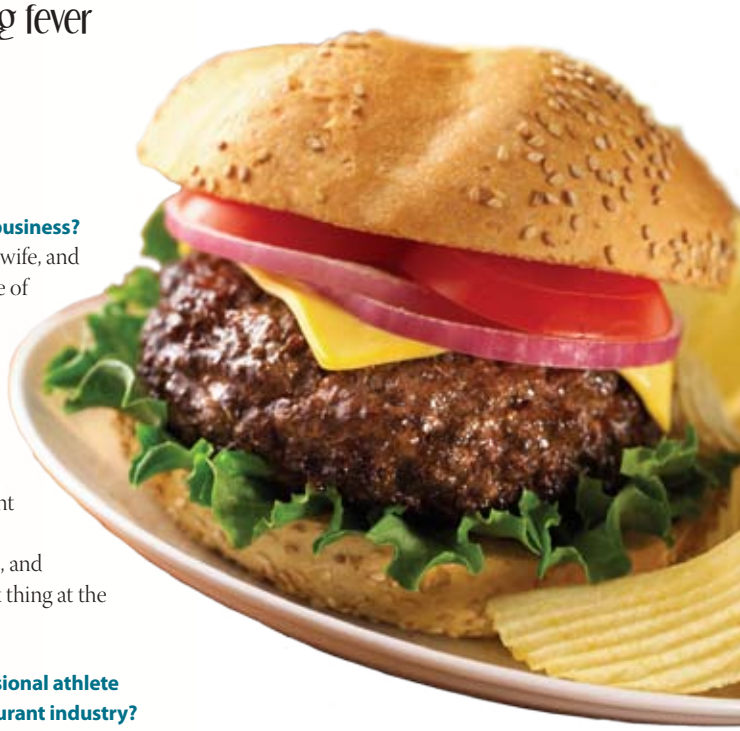
Who's hot

Q&A with

John Offerdahl

Florida's former bagel king catches grilling fever



John Offerdahl opened his first restaurant in 1990, while he was a linebacker with the NFL's Miami Dolphins. True to its name, Offerdahl's Bagel Gourmet Inc. focused on freshly prepared bagels. Offerdahl and his wife, Lynn, grew the chain to 10 locations and then sold it in 1995.

Five years later, the couple decided to get back into the restaurant business. They opened Offerdahl's Café Grill and have grown the brand to nine locations throughout Florida. The chain still serves bagels, but its new claim to fame is a specialty grill that prepares menu items such as steak, chicken and salmon.

We recently had the opportunity to speak with Offerdahl about his career in the restaurant industry.

— Valerie Killifer

Photos courtesy of Offerdahl's

What led you to the restaurant business?

I was getting married to my wife, and she said I had to start a life outside of football. In Florida there were a lot of delis, but not a lot of bagel joints. We went to our lawyer and told him about the idea, and he started laughing. About a week later, he called us back into his office and gave us a present — it was a bagel toaster.

Lynn and I are hard workers, and we just did it. We just hit the right thing at the right time with the right product.

How did your career as a professional athlete prepare you for one in the restaurant industry?

There are so many things that you can relate sports and athletics to in the food business. Certainly, teamwork is one of them. When I look at the athletes out there going into their post-athletics careers, they're prime targets for excellent general managers and business owners, because they're very gifted in working with and leading people. There is untapped potential in the food business for them.

What prompted you to open Offerdahl's Café Grill five years after selling the bagel concept?

We got back into the food business because I absolutely loved the ability to impact an organization and people. It's what I feel I'm being called to do. It was really fun and unique, and to this day it is.

We wanted to go back into it with a different angle. We looked at the bagel thing, but it was really limiting in our minds. Quick service is really good at that; they limit themselves and focus on a product line, a daypart or an ethnicity. But we'd go out to a casual dining restaurant and were sold on the experience.

That might be the genesis of fast casual. People want more. They want more than just a product. So that's what we wanted to create. We wanted to serve fresh, quality food in an atmosphere a step above fast food that would make them feel great about their dining decision.

How has the launch of Offerdahl's Café Grill differed from that of Offerdahl's Bagel Gourmet?

The first time around, the customers just came. This time around, there was a lot of confusion, and they didn't come as easily. We had hurricane Wilma, and that created a lot of chaos, too.

Getting customers to give us a try has been our biggest challenge. Once they're in, we have an easy time bringing them back.

We have repositioned ourselves around the grill, and that is what we're excited about. Having a specialty grill communicates our message of fresh, made-to-order food, which, by its nature is better for you. I even created a syndicated grilling spot called the Gridiron Griller to showcase my passion for grilling.

If you were to give any restaurant-industry advice to those just starting out, what would it be?

Work in a restaurant, and do it for at least three to six months. If you walk away from that life having enjoyed it, you are ready for the restaurant business.

If you don't take that advice, find a very encouraging lawyer and a bagel toaster.