



OFFERDAHL'S CAFÉ GRILL

Former linebacker scores a touchdown with growing team of Florida restaurants

By James Gordon



Offerdahl's Café Grills, which debuted in 2002, are strategically placed near office buildings or other high-volume spots to attract 25- to 55-year-old professionals.

chise into Einstein Bros. Bagels outlets.

He soon discovered, however, that the restaurant business, like football, was in his blood, and he missed it.

"The food business is kind of like the stadium," Offerdahl says. "You really influence a lot of people, from your customers, your fans, to your employees, your players. I really loved the ability to do that when I was still playing football, and I wanted to continue."

After sitting on the bench to comply with a five-year noncompete contract, Offerdahl yearned to get back into the game and opened the first Offerdahl's Café Grill in 2002. Five additional locations are owned and operated by the Offerdahls, while three are franchised. To date there are two restaurants in Fort Lauderdale, and one each in Hollywood, Lighthouse Point, Weston, Miami, Pinecrest, Palmetto Bay and Boca Raton.

All of the restaurants are near office buildings or other high-volume spots — areas that attract the typical fast-casual target demographic of 25- to 55-year-old professionals, Offerdahl says.

Plans for expansion also reflect Offerdahl's football history. Paraphrasing the old sports cliché of taking one game at a time, Offerdahl says, "Instead of saying I'm going to be a thousand-store chain in the next five years, I'm just going to keep it at one restaurant at a time."

Offerdahl says his immediate goal is to remain in South Florida, and, since the current stores are spread out over a large geographic area, he wants to fill in where there is distance between them. "We plan to kind of work our way through a market," he says.

As any sports fan knows, coaching is a very hands-on profession. While Offerdahl spends time on the sideline, running things from corporate headquarters, he also spends plenty of time on the field, in the restaurants, making sure that his 250 employees are sticking to the game plan and the fans are happy.

General manager Cathy Dematteis, who has been with the company for six months after spending seven years with Einstein Bros., says customers enjoy seeing their former sports hero up close and in person.

"People know John, especially in the Weston Store," Dematteis says of the neighborhood

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John Offerdahl is no longer a football player, but he still thinks like one. More accurately, the owner of the Sunrise, Fla.-based fast-casual concept Offerdahl's Café Grill, thinks like a coach.

The retired five-time Pro Bowl linebacker for the Miami Dolphins sees his employees as his team and his customers as his fans. He also

makes it clear that his chain of nine restaurants in the tri-county area of Dade, Broward and Palm Beach is quick-casual rather than fast-casual, using as an example his reputation as a quick, not fast, linebacker.

"McDonald's and Burger King are fast food," Offerdahl explains. "We can't do it that fast," he says of his menu of freshly prepared steak and chicken served over rice, salad, or pasta, as well as soups and sandwiches, "but we get the job done."

In addition, like a coach preparing for a big showdown, Offerdahl keeps his game plan close to the vest, preferring not to disclose certain financial information, such as annual or per-unit sales, or labor and food costs. He does allow, however, that the business is operating in the black.

Offerdahl's units offer café seating, a dining room and a lounge area. Each restaurant's floor plan differs based on regional considerations but all locations feature an open kitchen.

Benefiting from the public-relations advantage afforded a popular local sports star, the bagel shops were such a success that they attracted the attention of a bigger fish, which made Offerdahl an offer he couldn't refuse. In 1995 he retired from both football and bagels when Boston Market took controlling interest in his 10-unit business and converted his fran-

Offerdahl and his wife of 15 years, Lynn, are on their second startup food business in as many years. In 1990, realizing that John's football career wasn't going to last forever and with no previous restaurant experience, they opened Offerdahl's Bagel Gourmet.



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where Offerdahl once lived. "I think people find him bigger than life. I don't see that. I'm a New Yorker, so I'm not really a Dolphins fan. To me he's just John, but to see him interact with the customers is fun."

Offerdahl's marketing manager, Jeff Gorton, agrees that fondness for a local sports icon, not a fancy advertising campaign, is what brings many people to the restaurants.

"He has so much history in this market. The customers recognize his name. We spend some money on advertising," Gorton says, "but I don't think that's what's really driving people to the stores."

In another marketing strategy, Offerdahl this year has joined forces with his former team in a promotion called "Shutout and Comeback," which awards free menu items to fans who attend Miami Dolphins home games. Ticket holders to a game in which the team has shut out its opponent or embarked on a come-from-behind victory get the free food. Unfortunately, only one game has fallen into those categories this season.

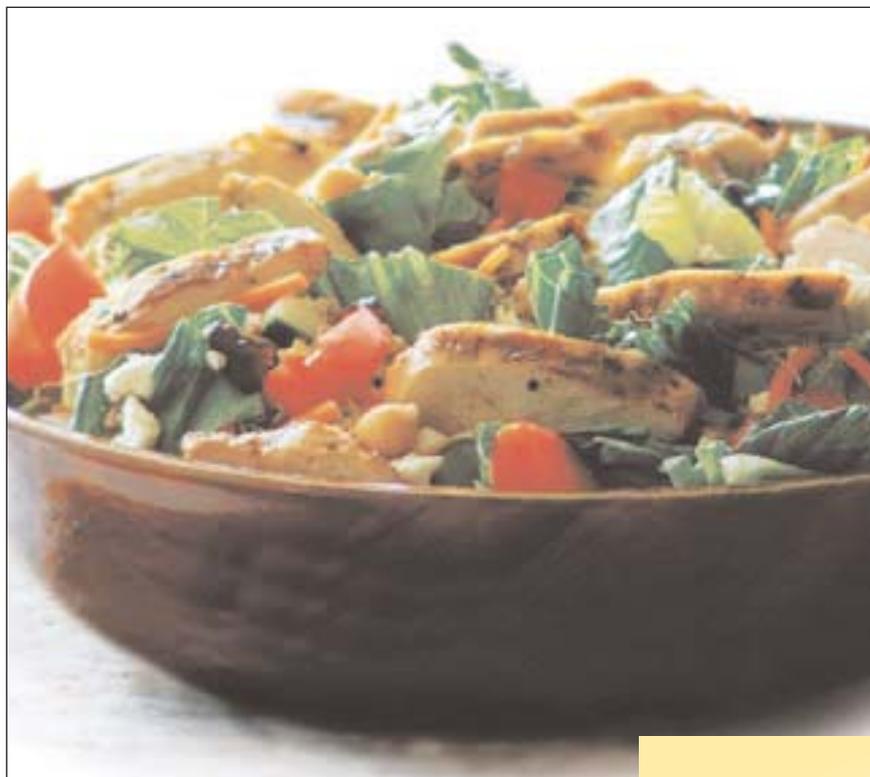


Left: John Offerdahl, a retired five-time Pro Bowl linebacker for the Miami Dolphins and owner of Offerdahl's, sees his employees as a team.

Below, left: The cafe offers a number of salads, including Johnny's House, which features romaine lettuce, garbanzo beans, cranraisins, feta cheese, sunflower seeds and more.

size or \$8.49 for the large.

"What's unique about us in another way is that we have multiple ethnicities within our product line, unlike a Baja Fresh, which only



and capers for \$5.99. There is also a Garden Quiche sandwich with egg, portobello mushrooms, scallions, tomatoes, Swiss cheese and ham for \$4.29, as well as muffins and Danishes.

The highlight of the menu, however, is the bowls, the favorite of which, according to Dematteis, is the Johnny's Chop, which contains grilled chicken, romaine lettuce, tomatoes, scallions, yellow rice and curry sauce for \$5.99 for the regular size and \$7.49 for the large. Another favorite is the Steak Pasta-bowl-a, consisting of grilled steak, portobello mushrooms, broccoli, sun-dried tomatoes, Parmesan cheese, fusilli pasta and lemon wine sauce. It is priced at \$6.99 for the regular

has Mexican food," Offerdahl says, referring to such bowls as the Tokyo Teriyaki, Ginger Thai and Baja Steak Chop.

The warm and cozy ambience also attracts customers, Gorton says.

"We've spent a lot of time and effort on the interior of our stores; they are not your typical plastic layout," he says, adding that the restaurants have couches where customers can kick back and relax. "It kind of has that Starbuck's feel, where you want to go there and hang out," he adds.

Lori Wegman, owner and president of Wegman Design Group, the firm that designed the interiors for eight of the nine Offerdahl's locations, says the idea was to take a quick-casual concept and make it more upscale and comfortable for everyone.

"We developed different concepts for seating," Wegman says. "There's the lounge area; then there is more of a cafe seating area, where it's quick in and quick out. Then we have a dining room, where there is a combination of larger tables for families or groups, some booths and banquet seating. So people can come in different modes and find the right space for them."

Wegman says each restaurant has a different floor plan depending on the configuration of the properties as well as regional considerations. However, she notes that a central theme shared by all of the restaurants is the open kitchens.

"John laid out the kitchens with a consultant," Wegman says. "Then we looked at what we could do to really play up the features of the kitchen, like the grill, which has a big copper exhaust fan, and some of the baking equipment."

Other touches that add to the character and the feel of the restaurants are the porcelain tiles, lush carpeting and a lot of wood as well as bright colors on the walls, including blues, greens, oranges and reds, Wegman says.

Wegman, whose design firm has operated from Naples, Fla., for four years, says working with John and Lynn Offerdahl was ideal because they "were very respectful of the design process." She says Offerdahl "had strong concepts," and they spent a lot of time up front, looking at the competition and coming up with a design concept.

But, she recalls, "when it came down to what material to use, the lighting and furniture choices, John said, 'That's your area of expertise; just make my dream come true.'"

Atagance

CONCEPT NAME: Offerdahl's Café Grill

OWNER: Offerdahl's Eat Fresh Inc., owned by John and Lynn Offerdahl

HEADQUARTERS: Sunrise, Fla.

YEAR FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF UNITS: 9

CHAIN'S ANNUAL SALES: N/A

AVERAGE ANNUAL SALES PER UNIT: N/A

PER-PERSON CHECK AVERAGE: \$8

TARGET DEMOGRAPHICS: Adults aged 25 to 55, professionals or families, depending on location

WHERE IT TRADES: Florida

NEW MARKET TARGETS: South Florida

TOP EXECUTIVES: John and Lynn Offerdahl, owners; Cathy Dematteis, general manager; Jeff Gorton, marketing manager

"If Dan Marino were playing, we'd probably have about five of these redemptions," laments Offerdahl about his former team's dismal season.

Gorton notes, however, that customers come into the restaurants for more than a chance of glimpsing Offerdahl or getting autographs. "Once they come in to the store and try the food, we have an incredible customer return rate," he says.

Offerdahl adds that the memories of his bagel shops, the new restaurant's menu, the specialty grill and the comfortable setting all attract people to his stores.

"What makes us unique is that we are a specialty grill," Offerdahl says. "What we're able to do with a real char-broiler grill, not one of those little toaster ovens, is grill steak and chicken and put them over different substrata, such as rice, pasta or salad. We even have grilled skillet egg bowls for breakfast."

While still paying homage to the bagel, which started it all for Offerdahl, the cafe's other breakfast treats include sandwiches, such as the Nova Nosh, featuring salmon, cream cheese, tomatoes, onions