

# ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE

June 22-28, 2007

## Rivalry rises for sandwich niche

By Rachel Tobin Ramos

STAFF WRITER

Rising soon in Atlanta will be a new sandwich franchise that is set to give **Panera Bread**, **Blimpie** and **Atlanta Bread Co.** a new challenge in the lucrative lunchtime market.

**Rising Roll Gourmet** is a home-grown Atlanta sandwich shop, with 13 units across the Southeast, seven that are in Atlanta.

The sandwiches are meaty, and a family-secret potato salad recipe has gotten rave reviews from newspaper food reviewers and customers.

After slowly rolling out in the Southeast while developing the franchise

system, Rising Roll is set to tackle new markets. The chain is looking to grow to 100 units in the next five years.

But don't expect to see one on every street corner, like **Subway** or **Quizno's**.

Rising Roll is very restrictive on its development footprints, and looks for areas with a high number of white-collar workers and a good lunch catering business.

"We study the demographics," said Mike Lassiter, president of **Rising Roll Sandwich Co.** "We won't grow to areas where the demographics don't make sense. It's not a numbers game for us."

The concept was founded by the father/son duo of Bob and Jeff Weiss, who created **Uptown Gourmet** in Norcross and Midtown.

When they decided to franchise, they realized it would be tough to trademark the "uptown," so after working with branding specialists, they came up with Rising Roll.

They also hired Lassiter, once the second-largest area developer of **Schlotzky's** sandwich shops.

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**On a roll:** Augusta Introini and

Mike Lassiter, the company's president, were enticed by Rising Roll.



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Lassiter also founded **Franchising Concepts LLC**, a company that helps grow franchise businesses. Clients include **Justix Food on a Stick** and **Ageless Remedies Medical Spa**.

With Lassiter's help, the Weisses redesigned the store design and the logo, tweaked the menu and began franchising in seven markets, including Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Arizona, Texas, North Carolina and South Carolina. Their strategy next is to go west, to Oklahoma and Colorado.



"You can't put them everywhere. We're willing to wait for the right opportunities to come along."

**Harold Shumacher**  
Restaurant real estate broker

Restaurant real estate broker Harold Shumacher has been working on leasing deals for Rising Roll.

"You can't put them everywhere," he agreed, which he said has made it difficult to find locations in mature office markets. He said they've been looking for a Perimeter site for several years, and are finally working on a deal.

"We're willing to wait for the right opportunities to come along," he said. He's still looking for real estate at Cumberland Mall, in Decatur, Buckhead, Northlake, Peachtree City and near Emory University.

That's because Rising Roll is a lunch-only concept. The stores don't do breakfast or dinner, so they need a high lunch volume to compensate.

Those limited hours are also attractive to franchisees.

Augusta Introini, a co-owner of the franchise on Northside Drive in Atlanta, said she "really wanted to have a life" after working in retail for the past 17 years.

Now she's home by 5:15 p.m. on most days, and gets more Sundays off than she ever had in retail.

The Rising Roll menu is full of fresh items, and one thing Lassiter said sets it apart is that the chicken is grilled on the premises, fresh each morning. And the potato salad, which is known for its rich, almost smoky flavor, is handmade daily.

Sandwiches, which come cold, grilled or pressed, are about \$7 each, and come with a choice of potato salad, pasta salad or coleslaw and a large pickle.

Choices include chicken salad, topped with bleu cheese dressing, bacon and Granny Smith apples, or muffaletta, with Italian salami, ham, Swiss, provolone, olive salad and spicy oil dressing.

Large salads are about \$7.50.

Still, Rising Roll will have to break through an already crowded sandwich market.



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**Tasty franchise:** Rising Roll stresses food quality, with potato salad and chicken prepared on premise each morning. Pictured is the chicken and apples sandwich.

There are six sandwich shops on QSR magazine's list of top 50 quick-serve restaurants.

The top-ranked sandwich shop chain is Subway, which is also in fourth place overall after hamburger powerhouses McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's.

Subway has 20,000 units, more than any other chain on the list. Systemwide sales in 2005, the latest data available, were \$7.17 billion.

Panera was second among sandwich shops, and 18th overall, with 877 stores and \$1.6 billion in systemwide sales.

Walter Butkus, a partner in **Restaurant Research LLC** in Redding, Conn., said that despite the "phenomenal growth" of Subway and Quizno's, which have been adding 1,000 to 2,000 units

a year, there's still room to grow in the sandwich segment. That's because unlike burger chains, sandwich shops are a relatively immature market.

Still, it is a competitive segment, and already Subway has added pizza in select markets to boost sales.

"It's just going to get more competitive for sandwich players," said Butkus.

If Rising Roll can compete on quality, consumers will notice that, he added.

"There is a difference between Panera Bread and Subway. Panera has better bread and more meat, and gets higher ratings for its products."

And Rising Roll's prices shouldn't be a deterrent, either said Butkus, as a recent Subway's combo meal he ordered set him back about \$8.