



ONES TO WATCH | BY JUDY KNEISZEL

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Rising Roll Gourmet

The name Rising Roll brings to mind homemade yeast bread, which requires time to expand, and that's exactly what the Atlanta-based sandwich purveyor has been doing since partnering with Mike Lassiter of Franchising Concepts in 2003—taking time to grow.

The gourmet sandwich shop concept was founded in 1996 by father-and-son team Jeff and Bob Weiss. It quickly expanded to two Atlanta locations, and then in 2003 Lassiter became a 50 percent partner, helping to facilitate franchising. Lassiter bought the founders out in 2007.



There are 12 Rising Roll Gourmet stores operating, and five ready to open later in 2010.

“We sold an initial group of stores and then pulled back,” Lassiter says. “We were converting a mom and pop operation into a franchise organization and we needed to modify the concept for long-term growth. We wanted to focus on cost of entry for franchisees and increasing volume. We needed the right equipment. We studied the flow and the through-put capacity of our facilities.”

During this transition period, the menu was trimmed from 120 to 70 items.

“The founders were chefs who were excited whenever they could offer something new, so the menu just kept expanding,” Lassiter says. “We did food cost analysis and modified the menu to where we offer great selections for the customers, yet enable the franchisees to sell profitable items.”

Lassiter says despite some menu cuts, Rising Roll Gourmet prides itself on offering cutting-edge options not seen in other sandwich shops, like the new Ham and Brie with Granny Smith apples, or the Portobello Mushroom with goat cheese and roasted red peppers.

“Food quality is our focus,” Lassiter says. “The potato salad, the chicken salad, the carrot salad, and two types of tuna salad are all made fresh, on premises, daily.”

He says the food focus has paid off with a Zagat rating of Excellent in food quality for 11 straight years. The quality can be seen in the bread, which comes into each Rising Roll location par-baked and is finished in house. Sandwiches are offered on multigrain, asiago and basil, sourdough, and French boules (rolls), or on croissants or wraps.

Rising Roll Gourmet

President: Mike Lassiter

HQ: Atlanta

Year Started: 1996

Annual Sales: Undisclosed

Total units: 12

Franchise units: 11

www.risingroll.com (<http://www.risingroll.com>)

“Throughout lunch, customers see the baker coming out with trays of fresh bread and adding it to the bins,” Lassiter says. “And it smells great.” The average ticket at Rising Roll, including a drink, is \$9.25 for men and \$8.25 for women. Why the difference?

“Our sandwiches are so bountiful, women will often split them or at least gravitate toward smaller items,” Lassiter says.

He cites the BBLT as one of those bountiful offerings. The extra B accounts for the eight slices of bacon.

Breakfast at Rising Roll includes “stuffers” —tortillas filled with eggs and cheese and then put in a Panini press and served warm—and other breakfast sandwiches, including egg and cheese croissant sandwiches and breakfast Panini.

There are also gourmet oatmeals, muffins, cinnamon rolls, and fresh fruit available for breakfast.

Rising Roll has several locations around Atlanta and a scattering of stores in Ohio, Texas, Colorado, and North Carolina. Arizona, Indiana, and Tennessee are on the radar to get stores soon.

“We want to grow in the Southeast, but we're committed to outlying markets when we've found the right person,” Lassiter says. “For example, we had good prospects in Houston and Denver. We felt very good with the individuals in those outlying markets, so we've gone there.”

Lassiter says he thinks Rising Roll will begin to pick up the pace this year as far as growth is concerned, but during the economic downturn, the company focused more on what it could do to keep the brand strong and help existing franchisees.

“We decided we would not deviate from our model; we would not offer any big discounts but rather focus on customer loyalty and service,” he says.

Lassiter says the company also came up with ways to enhance existing store volume through multiple

distribution channels.

“We developed express units, which means a franchisee can sell product shuttled over from their main store in a second location,” Lassiter says.

One express unit is already operating in an Atlanta office tower. Other possible sites include airports, universities, and hospitals.

A grab-and-go option was also developed for Rising Roll franchisees.

“This is where a Rising Roll can go to corporations and give people a new option for lunch,” Lassiter says. “We set up a table with a nice tablecloth and about 80 box lunches and we sell them until they are gone.”

Initially, Rising Roll offered lunch and lunch catering only.

“Since they already had the vans and equipment, we came up with some gourmet breakfast items and started breakfast catering too,” Lassiter says.

Breakfast catering soon led to the in-store breakfast items.

Lassiter says it takes more than love of the food to become a Rising Roll franchisee.

“People will love our food and have a great site, but unless they get into the service component, we turn them away,” Lassiter says.

We were converting a mom and pop operation into a franchise organization and we needed to modify the concept for long-term growth.”

Part of the modifications made after the company began franchising was the addition of a five-week training program emphasizing that level of service.

“It is thorough enough and repetitive enough that people really get the systems down and they can be very efficient,” Lassiter says.

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