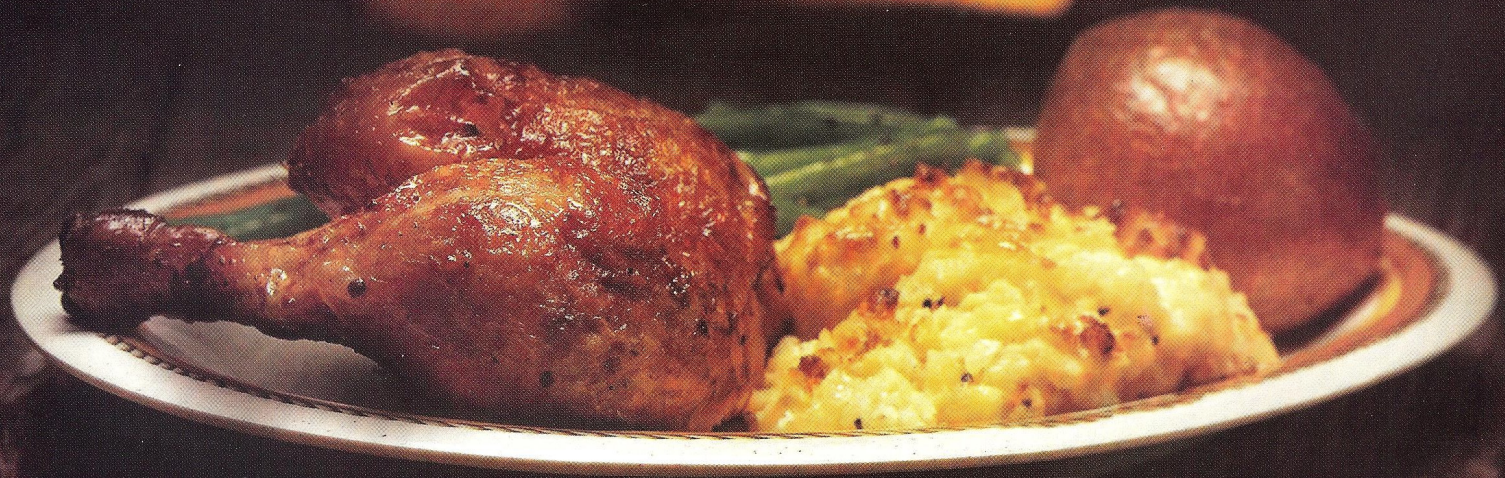


Fast-Casual Cowboy Chicken Adds First Drive-Thru



A Three-Piece Chicken (Dark) Platter

by Heather Blount/*staff writer*

Cowboy Chicken Wood Fire Rotisserie, a fast-casual brand focused on—you guessed it—roasted chicken, has opened its ninth location in Forney, Texas. And it features a first for the Dallas-based brand—a drive-thru.

Drive-thrus come with added convenience for the customer and often headaches for operators. With a drive-thru, operators have to produce speedy, accurate service for customers who often are in a hurry and won't return if their order is wrong, but they might post about it online, hurting the brand's reputation. Quick-service concepts like McDonald's constantly work to improve order accuracy and speed to ensure a good experience at the window and through the meal's consumption.

At Cowboy Chicken, the drive-thru is expected to boost sales while not changing anything inside the restaurant. And to ensure that the dine-in experience stays the same, the company decided that, in addition to another point-of-sale system and beverage station for the drive-thru window, the Forney location should have a separate team handling it.

"We have a lot of dine in and takeout, even delivery," Sean Kennedy, president of Cowboy Chicken, tells *Sunbelt Foodservice Magazine*, "so we didn't want the drive-thru to be an additional focus of that same team. We felt like, at first, it's best to separate it and let it be two businesses under the same roof."

According to Kelly Weikel, senior consumer research manager at Technomic, a dedicated drive-thru team is a good idea and will likely do exactly what Cowboy Chicken hopes it will.



Sean Kennedy,
Cowboy Chicken

"It makes sense for them, as they probably want to do (business) at a higher level of service than your typical QSR," she tells *Sunbelt Foodservice* in an email. "Having a separate team for the drive-thru is always ideal, but isn't usually the case."

Having a dedicated team should allow dine-in experiences to remain the same, and according to Kennedy, the company doesn't expect the sales mix to be too one-sided in terms of drive-thru vs. dine-in customers. He owes the company's confidence to its "great interior design" and "comfortable atmosphere." In addition, he says it's likely that customers who opt for the drive-thru will visit the restaurant when they might not have otherwise.

"The added convenience of the drive-thru will really help with those families that really don't want to get out of the car," he says. "I would argue (those customers) probably aren't coming to see us on those occasions now."

Many fast-casual brands hinge on customization, often having an assembly-line format like Chipotle, and have longer ticket times as a result, but Kennedy says Cowboy Chicken's ticket times are "just a few minutes, which is very conducive to the speed required to execute a drive-thru."

While companies often test new features in corporate stores, the Forney location is owned by multi-unit franchisee Vesta Restaurant Group, which operates three other locations in the area. Kennedy says Vesta is a "strong operations partner" that invests in its restaurants, so it makes sense to test a new feature like a drive-thru with Vesta.

The Forney location has 25 employees and offers the same menu as the rest of the Cowboy Chicken system, including rotisserie chicken cooked over a wood-burning fire, Twice-Baked "Potaters" and Homemade Southern Blackberry Cobbler, among other items. Many of the menu items are prepared to

order, including chicken enchiladas, chicken salad sandwiches and tacos.

According to Kennedy, the drive-thru is another added convenience for Cowboy Chicken customers, though the company is well aware of what a drive-thru can implicate: that a restaurant is in the fast food category, “which we are not,” he says.

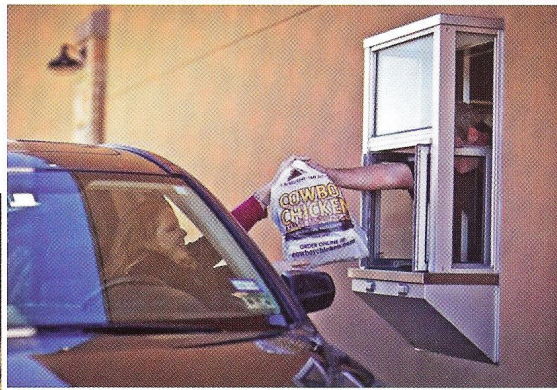
Noting that several national fast-casual brands like Panera Bread and Starbucks have successfully added drive-thrus without hurting their reputation for quality, Kennedy says the key is a brand’s reputation in the market.

“If you have already built a reputation in a market as a fast-casual brand, I think offering the added convenience (of a drive-thru) can be a great feature,” he says.

The company expects the Forney location to be a great success and, where the real estate allows it, is considering adding more drive-thru locations in the future.

In 2014, the company expects to expand throughout the state of Texas and beyond, though Kennedy adds, “We don’t project numbers... We’re looking for the right partners that want to bring the Cowboy Chicken brand to their market, and it’s more about the right people than it is about shooting for a number.

“When it comes down to it, it’s all about people. I think the right people and the right brands with the right real estate—sometimes with a drive-thru—is a recipe for success.”



A customer takes a turn in Forney’s new drive-thru.



Chicken Enchiladas