

R&I EXCLUSIVE

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MARK PI'S

No concept goes untried in effort to build a national chain.

You have to give Mark Pi's leaders credit: They're certainly not narrow thinkers. From the company's white-tablecloth China Gate restaurants to its quick-service Express units, to its branded entree and B&I business, the Hilliard, Ohio-based company is building on the rising popularity of Asian food from several angles.

As the Asian dining segment shows signs of exploding in the mid-1990s, the race is on to see who can develop the first viable national, fast-food concept. Besides Mark Pi's, the field includes Toronto's Manchu Wok and Los Angeles-based Panda Express and Yoshinoya Beef Bowl, all



Mark Pi, president

of which chalked up impressive gains last year.

The segment's growth reflects the overall trend toward healthier eating, says Mark Pi's marketing spokesman John Boyers, and chain restaurants such as Mark Pi's are succeeding because they're doing a better job of offering consistent, high-quality food.

"The Oriental style of cooking—using less oil, stir-frying, using better cuts of chicken, fresh vegetables, all cater to the health-conscious consumer of '90s," he says.



All Mark Pi's Express units will introduce delivery service this year. The company hopes to begin national expansion.

"With the central commissary we built in Columbus, we now have better control over the product [in our franchises]. Consistency is less of an issue."

GROWTH

The company hit a brisk stride in 1993, with 37.8% systemwide sales growth, from \$35.7 million to \$49.2 million. Equally striking was the its unit growth, leaping from 54 at the end of 1992 to 80 in 1993. Boyers won't commit to a specific number of targeted openings this year, although he says the company hopes to begin developing master or area franchises nationally. (Mark Pi's concepts are currently clustered in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky.)

"We definitely want to push out as far as we can, but we want to make sure we have the operations systems in place to accommodate [the growth]," he says.

CONCEPT

With 51 units, Mark Pi's Express has been tapped as the company's growth vehicle. But Mark Pi's also operates three other formats, including 21 full-service China Gate restaurants, five China Gate delivery units and three Feast of China buffet restaurants. The company plans to introduce delivery service at all its concepts, including Express units, by the end of this year.

Boyers says the company is also putting increasing focus on its commissary business and on selling branded entrees to B&I contractors and retailers such as K mart and Columbus' Big Bear supermarket chain. College campuses are also targeted

AT A GLANCE

Concept: Mark Pi's
Headquarters: Hilliard, Ohio
1993 sales: \$49.2 million
Units: 80
Management: Mark Pi, president; Mark Pi Jr., executive vice president of operations
Synopsis: Mark Pi's is looking to build name recognition through its diversified restaurant formats, as well as retail and B&I sales of its branded entrees.

franchise market this year, he says. Student-union versions of Mark Pi's Express are up and running at the University of Kentucky, Indiana State and Ohio State University.

MENU

The company's menu is based on Mandarin-style Chinese cooking. Dishes include War Su Gai (almond boneless chicken, \$4.25 at Express), General Tso's Chicken (spicy chicken and rice dish, \$9.45 at China Gate) and pork egg rolls (\$1.10, systemwide). Average dinner check at Express units is \$5; at China Gate, \$8.95.

MANAGEMENT

Corporate operations for the privately held company are shepherded by Mark Pi, president, and his son, Mark Pi Jr., who is executive vice president of operations.

At the unit level, all stores are owned by franchisees, who pay \$20,000 plus a 4% royalty. In addition, they are required to devote 2.5% of sales toward marketing.

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