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The Magazine for Latino/Hispanic Bar, Restaurant & Club Innovations

BY TAD WILKES • tad@oxpub.com

FROM STAGNATION TO INNOVATION

Fred Wolfe and El Torito Recharge Casual Mexican



For a man who eats his restaurants' food every day, keeping things new and exciting is a top priority. Fred Wolfe worked with Acapulco Restaurants for 14 years and served as vice president of operations at California Pizza Kitchen Inc. for four years before returning to the Acapulco fold as

CEO when it merged with California-based El Torito Restaurants Inc. in 2001. Upon his return to casual Mexican, the task before him was to revamp an ailing chain and turn it into what it is today – part of one of

for us to retool and reinvest in quality and reinvest in development and make ourselves 100 percent relevant in today's market. That's what we set about to do and I think we've accomplished."

In a segment that, at the time, was plagued by sameness from brand to brand, Wolfe led El Torito into its new position as the purveyor of "Real Mex" cuisine. "That was essentially based on authenticity," he says.

"There were two things we did. There were quality upgrades across the board, starting with our Margarita, which we make with Cuervo Gold, and the development of new recipes across the board. Everything is made from scratch on a daily basis, and we gave some depth and character to our savory recipes."

The introduction of exciting new items – on a regular basis – is proving to be a key marketing tool for the chain, Wolfe says. Like high-end independent Mexican eateries, El Torito has gone to the source for ideas on flavorful menu additions, adding specialties from different regions of Mexico and rotating them out every eight weeks.

Wolfe sends executive chef and 22-year El Torito veteran Pepe Lopez to Mexico, along with marketing staff, three times a year to tour the country's different regions to research

dishes. For instance, authentic Mexican guru Rick Bayless led them through Oaxaca recently.

All in all, the goal is authenticity. "I think we lead the Mexican segment in that area," Wolfe says. "Particularly with regard to tequila, Americans have become very well educated and brand-aware."

MEETING AND CREATING DEMAND

Wolfe sees ethnic foods in general garnering heightened interest as consumers increasingly lean toward experimentation. "Particularly in our markets, they're looking for more flavorful food," he says. "They're willing to take a chance and order something new."

"Our regional specialties garner about 16 percent of menu mix each time we do them, which is significant. If you've got 16 percent of your guest base who are adventurous and want to try something new and unusual, that's quite a story these days. Even only five years ago, you couldn't sell a mole entree." Today, among El Torito's regional offerings, mole enchiladas are No. 1.

"You have to be mindful of your heritage with a lot of your guest base, and you also have to be very innovative," Wolfe says. "You can't stop." ☺



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– Fred Wolfe, CEO, El Torito Restaurants Inc.



By revamping everything from its dishes to its Margaritas, El Torito has found a new vitality in casual Mexican dining.

the world's largest casual Mexican conglomerates, with 69 El Torito locations, 45 Acapulcos, seven El Torito Grills and various other regional concepts.

PUTTING THE 'REAL' IN 'REAL MEX'

"I think the general climate in the Mexican food industry at that time was pretty stagnant," says Wolfe, who is a member of the *¡Salud! y Buen Provecho* Advisory Board. "There had been a lot of new entries into the casual dining segment who were drawing interest away. It was time