

BRICKELL AREA

Restaurant owners put their time into fast food

The co-founders of Pasha's, a Miami-based Mediterranean fast food restaurant, stay hands on while their chain expands.

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It's noon on Brickell Avenue and the sun beats down on Antonio Ellek as he runs trays of kebabs and freshly squeezed juice to a table of first-time Pasha's customers.

It doesn't matter to Ellek that this should be a job for his employees. The co-founder of the growing food chain said he wants to personally assure that every customer leaves feeling like a "pasha."

That attitude -- pasha was a term given during the Ottoman Empire to one who lived and ate well -- and prime locations have attracted a growing customer base.

Pasha's, which opened in Brickell in 2004, now has four Miami-Dade locations -- and a fifth to be opened at the University of Miami's Wellness Center this summer.

Ellek, 37, co-founder and CEO of the company, and partner Nicolas Cortes, 38, dreamed up the burgeoning Mediterranean-styled fast food restaurant while earning their MBAs at Harvard University.

Most of what Ellek and Cortes have incorporated into Pasha's has been as unconventional as the original idea. Pasha's offers wraps, cracked wheat, vegetarian spreads and juice squeezed seconds before reaching the lips of customers.

Instead of maximizing profit, Pasha's throws away leftovers at closing time and has ingredients delivered in the morning.

Ellek and Cortes said that every step taken has been backed by research. Ellek, upon the urging of Harvard professor and Staples co-founder Myra Hart, spent four years working for PepsiCo Restaurants International -- now Yum! Brands, Inc. -- at KFC and Pizza Hut outlets around the world, simply for the experience.

All the research has paid off, as former bosses and professors of the two businessmen have invested in the chain. The two said that even customers have invested, bringing the company a total of more than 100 investors from 20 countries.

The co-founders have had some good timing, too.

When Ellek and Cortes opened their first location, the two worried that advertising their food's absence of trans fatty acids would scare customers away by the mere mention of the alien-sounding fat.

That was just before the health risks of trans fats reached the public's attention, which led to "No Trans Fats" labels on bags of potato chips and cereals.

Also, Pasha's opened its location on Lincoln Road in October 2003, around the peak of the South Beach diet. Dr. Arthur Agatston's South Beach Diet Cookbook features a Pasha's recipe for artichokes in olive oil.

Cortes said that he and Ellek always envisioned Pasha's becoming a national chain, but they know that to maintain their lofty standards they have to be methodical.

Now Ellek and Cortes visit at least one Pasha's location a day, and often eat Pasha's food once or twice a day, which Ellek said is a testament to the taste and nutritional value of the food.

Of course, Ellek may be a little biased. His sister Carla Ellek helps create the recipes.