

## Wing Zone taking flight overseas

By Lisa R. Schoolcraft  
STAFF WRITER

**M**att Friedman is the first to admit he's a wing man. Friedman co-founded Atlanta-based Wing Zone, a chicken wing fast-casual restaurant, while in college when he couldn't find decent chicken wings.

Now he plans to spread his Wing Zones internationally, starting with 50 units in Japan, five in Panama and six in the Bahamas.

He's also just struck a deal with the **Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES)** to put Wing Zone on up to 160 domestic military bases and 60 international U.S. bases.

Friedman, 38, and his business partner, Adam Scott, started Wing Zone in 1993 in Gainesville, Fla., as they were finishing college at the **University of Florida**.

"I had a passion for wings and I didn't think there were enough places that did it well," Friedman said of the company's start. "And I thought there was a demand for food-to-go."

Friedman and Scott grew the company, **WZ Franchise Corp.**, opening their first Wing Zone restaurant for \$20,000 in Gainesville, then adding several more in Florida, before franchising into Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

They moved the company to Atlanta about five years ago.

Today, Wing Zone has nearly 100 units in 25 states, primarily through franchising, and serves chicken wings, with 15 proprietary sauces developed by Friedman and Scott, as well as burgers, chicken fingers and salads.

"But 60 percent of our volume is in wings," said Friedman, who said wings are still his favorite food.

He is not alone.

The **National Chicken Council**, based in Washington estimates about 12 billion chicken wings, or 2.55 billion pounds, were marketed as wings in 2008, the most recent data the council listed.

► See **WING ZONE, 14A**



**Matt Friedman:** "I had a passion for wings and I didn't think there were enough places that did it well," says the University of Florida graduate.

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Of those, 8.5 billion wings, about 1.8 billion pounds, were sold through food-service channels, the council's data said. Another 3.5 billion wings, or 750 million pounds, were sold in retail grocery stores.

Chicken wing concepts are growing, said Keith Gellman, publisher and CEO of **Restaurantchains.net** in New York, a division of **Research Report for Foodservice**.

Chicken wings, while not growing at the clip of pizza or Mexican concepts, still "seem to be grasping around 5 percent market share of today's [growing concepts]," Gellman said.

**Buffalo Wild Wings** is one of the larger chicken wings concepts, he said.

In 2009, other chains, such as Buffalo Wings and Rings, the Wow Cafe and Wingery, and Wings, Pizza and Things, made **Restaurantchain.net's** Top 10 list of fastest-growing chains with fewer than 50 units, or its Top 20 list of fastest-growing chains with more than 50 locations, Gellman said.

Chicken wing concepts "have been growing in the past three years," he said. "They are becoming a segment of their own."

The entire fast-casual segment of the restaurant industry, which includes concepts like Wing Zone, has been booming, said Ron Wolf, CEO of **Georgia Restaurant Association** in Atlanta.

The fast-casual segment has "really grown in the down economy, but I think it was coming into its own anyway," he said.

Wolf believes people aren't eating out less in the Great Recession, they are eating out differently, trading down to lower price points, such as fast-casual, which is a factor in the growth of the segment.

"The current economy has not given birth to fast-casual, but it expanded it more rapidly," he said.

### Taking wing

Wing Zone's first international unit will open in June in Panama, Friedman said.

"The growth opportunities in Japan and Panama are incredible," he said. "Wings are popular, but no restaurant chain has penetrated these countries yet."

Wing Zone is also going to grow through military bases, he said.

Wing Zone signed a franchise development deal with AAFES, initially to open 10 units on U.S. military bases throughout the country, more depending on how the first units perform, Friedman said.

AAFES operates more than 3,100 facilities worldwide, in more than 30 countries, five U.S. territories and 50 states. AAFES operates some 174 main stores and more than 1,300 fast-food restaurants, such as Taco Bell, Burger King, Popeyes and Cinnabon.

"We've got six bases already slotted to open in 2010," he said. Two will be in Georgia, at Fort Benning in Columbus and Fort Gordon in Augusta, he said.

The company's growth comes after strong growth in 2006 and 2007, but then very limited growth the past two years, Friedman said.



**Winging it:** Wing Zone has nearly 100 units in 25 states, and serves chicken wings, with 15 proprietary sauces, as well as burgers, chicken fingers and salads.

Revenue in 2008 was about \$45 million, and remained flat in 2009, he said. The company did not expand much during those years, either.

"But that allowed us to work on the AAFES deal and our international plan," Friedman said. "You don't just wake up one day and say 'I'm going to go international.' It's been about a 15-month process."

He expects Wing Zone to grow 15 percent in 2010 to between \$50 million to \$55 million in revenue.

Friedman also wants to grow in the metro Atlanta market, where he only has two corporate-owned Wing Zone locations, one in Marietta and the other in Kennesaw.

Friedman had intended to expand the Atlanta market through corporate locations,

but now will do so through franchisees.

"We're looking at 35 to 40 stores in the market," he said. Wing Zone is in the process of selecting franchisees for the area.

Wing Zone, usually taking up to 1,500 square feet in an in-line shopping center, is also introducing a freestanding location. The first one will open in Atlanta in the third quarter, he said.

The freestanding Wing Zone will be about 800 to 900 square feet, but in higher-profile shopping centers, and will cater to takeout business, Friedman said.

"We might put in a few picnic tables," he said, much the way **Bruster's Ice Cream Inc.** and **Checkers Drive-in Restaurants Inc.** operate.

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