

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2009

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Big plans in store for Wing Zone

By Joni Simon
Contributing Writer

Brad Meltzer has high expectations for a chicken wing franchise he hopes will fly, despite the sluggish economy. The longtime South Texas businessman has just signed a development deal with Wing Zone, which, he said, will take the business to the next level.

The takeout and delivery chicken wing concept now has a recently developed prototype to originate in South and Central Texas. What's new is a wait staff for indoor and patio dining.

The San Antonio restaurants, he said, will have a distinctive regional flavor. Diners can watch the Spurs on large screen televisions as they munch on the wings, paired with local beers and Hill Country wines. Wing Zone also offers salads, grilled sandwiches, burgers and a variety of appetizers.

"We'll have a special French fry that's to die for, onion rings that are delicious and sweet tea," Meltzer said. "You know how people in South Texas like their tea."

The first of five initial restaurants opens in May or June of 2010 at Interstate 10 and Call-

aghan, near Meltzer's Japanese eatery, Benihana. Although he's uncertain at this point where he'll establish the other four, the current real estate market, Meltzer said, is making the site purchases effortless.

"In this economy, I feel like a kid in a candy store. With 100 sites to choose from, I can pick and choose," Meltzer said. "I don't know exactly where they're going to be right now, but they'll be strategically located."

Matt Friedman and Adam Scott founded Wing Zone in 1991 while they were students at the University of Florida. They cooked wings in homemade sauces in their fraternity house kitchen and delivered orders to fellow students.

The business, which took off in 1993 in Gainesville, Fla., now boasts 100 locations nationwide, primarily in the Southeast.

"We began with limited resources," said Friedman, co-founder and CEO of Wing Zone. "We started with \$500. This year, we'll make \$50 million."

Friedman, who said he's also known as "the sauce man," initially created seven flavors, and then added to them after

receiving feedback from customers and employees. The company now offers 15 flavors, including Nuclear, Honey BBQ, Lemon Pepper, Ragin' Cajun, Garlic Parmesan and Spicy BBQ.

A native of Buffalo, N.Y., Friedman enters his wings in the annual Buffalo Wing Festival there and won top awards for the Thai Chili wing this year and for the Garlic Parmesan in 2008.

The two men said they've become friends during the deal making process, with Meltzer adding that Friedman has his own bedroom in Meltzer's home. Both agree they see huge success in Meltzer's undertaking.

"Wings are an under-penetrated restaurant

concept and I wanted to introduce San Antonio and Austin to the best wings in the nation," Meltzer said. "Wing Zone has the winning formula and I'm going to make it well-known in south Texas."

Friedman predicts that under Meltzer's direction Wing Zone will become a household name in San Antonio. For Meltzer, with the help of son, David, and award-winning chef Moses Gomez, the sky's the limit. "This is just the beginning because I own the territory, which I can sub-franchise," Meltzer said. "This could be the next Subway."

