

Rocky Mountain News

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★ 50 cents in Denver

WALL STREET WEST

Area to have oodles of noodles

Arizona-based eatery to open six stores over next few years

By Janet Forgnieve
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

A new noodle restaurant hopes to make its Denver debut by the end of the year.

Wild Noodles, based in Scottsdale, Ariz., has found a franchisee to open six stores in the area during the next few years. The company, which offers a global noodle concept similar to Boulder-based Noodles & Co., expects to eventually grow to 18 to 21 Front Range "trading areas," said President George

Krotonsky. A trading area may contain one or more stores.

Started in Phoenix by local celebrity chef Eddie Matney and partner Dave Anderson in 2001, Wild Noodles has two corporately owned eateries, both in the Phoenix area, Krotonsky said. The menu includes Italian, Asian, Mexican and southwestern noodle dishes, plus salads and appetizers.

The company's model calls for expansion through franchisees — about 60 in four states within the next three to four years. Stores will typically be located on the end of strip shopping centers.

Noodles & Co. pioneered the fast casual global noodle concept here when it launched in 1995. Today, privately held Noodles & Co. has 68 stores in eight states, including 24 in the Denver-Boul-

der area.

Unlike its competitor, Noodles & Co. has built its brand in corporate stores and only this year has it begun to seek qualified, experienced restaurant franchisees, said founder and Chief Executive Officer Aaron Kennedy.

Early on, when the Boulder company was struggling, Noodles & Co. considered franchising, Kennedy said.

"The simple answer was 'Don't invest more of your money into this, just franchise it,'" he said. "But that just multiplies the problems."

Kennedy said he is familiar with Wild Noodles. When it first opened, the Arizona eatery had some design features and menu item names that hit too close to home.

"We had some discussions with them and they made some changes," he said.

Wild Noodles never set out to copy Noodles & Co., Krotonsky said, though Matney was aware of the Boulder chain and saw an opportunity to capitalize on the popularity of the global noodle concept.

"It would be hard for a chef to go in and say 'Hey, let's copy what these guys are doing,'" Krotonsky said.

Wild Noodles has been seeking out franchisees with business experience but not necessarily in restaurants, Krotonsky said.

Golden-based franchisee Solid Rock Restaurant Development Co. has an agreement to open the first six stores, and has already identified sites in Westminster and Lakewood, said Solid Rock partner Jeff George.

George, along with dad Phil and brother Chris, have run George Fabrication Services, a steel fabrication shop in Golden, for about eight years. This will be their first foray into food, George said.

"We wanted to branch out, and we looked at several franchise ideas," he said. "Wild Noodles was most appealing."

With only two stores, said Kennedy, the concept likely isn't proven enough yet to attract established restaurateurs as franchisees.

"They don't really have a well-established personality and spirit yet," he said. "They don't have critical mass. When they come to Denver, (success is) going to be heavily reliant on the talent and personality of the franchisee here."

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