

## What's Hot: Noodles

**A new generation of noodle restaurant chains is moving to the forefront of franchising.**

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They're comfortable and familiar, yet international and exotic. Noodles play a role in the cuisine of cultures worldwide and can range from the simplistic to the divine, making this little starch a great foundation for a variety of restaurant chains, including Mama Fu's Noodle House, Wild Noodles and Zyng Noodlery.

"Noodles work on a range of levels," says Marian Salzman, chief strategy officer with Euro RSCG Worldwide, a New York City-based integrated marketing communications agency. "There is a feeling that a noodle shop is no brow--neither high or low brow--and therefore OK for anyone of any ilk to visit."

While noodles, and restaurants serving noodles, are nothing new, national noodle chains are just emerging. These concepts are in their franchising infancy, some having fewer than 10 operating units. "A lot of cities and markets around the country have never seen a noodle concept. The trend is just beginning, and we're on the forefront of it," says George Krotonsky, president of Wild Noodles, a fast-casual chain serving up noodle dishes from around the world.

Zyng Noodlery, operated by franchise development company Fransmart, is a full-service Pan Asian grill that allows customers to create their own dishes. The concept was founded in 1997 and began franchising two years later. Most dishes are noodle-based, with customers adding in vegetables, protein (meat, chicken, fish or tofu) and sauces, cooked up in one the restaurant's exhibition kitchens for all patrons to see.

While providing different experiences to customers, noodles also have a benefit for the chains that promote them. "Noodles are great from a business perspective, because it's a cheap starch; it's a cheap way to fill a bowl," says Dan Rowe, CEO of Zyng Noodlery.

There are endless possibilities for what to throw into that bowl. Wild Noodles, a concept that was founded in 2001 and began franchising this year, specializes in international noodle dishes. "If I go in with my family and I'm in the mood for an Italian pasta dish and my wife's in the mood for an Asian dish and my kids want macaroni and cheese, I can get all those things at one time," Krotonsky says.

All that variety provides customers with a welcome change from the more traditional full-service and fast-casual fare. "It's not hamburgers or sandwiches--noodles are something different," Krotonsky says.

And noodles have mass appeal. "Noodles appeal to all ages and genders, because noodles somehow feel fun," Salzman says.

Fun is an angle being played up by fast-casual Pan Asian chain Mama Fu's Noodle House, a company that has the word "laughter" written in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese in each of its restaurants. "Our theme is '70s and '80s and disco music. [Employees] yell, 'Come to Mama' when you walk in," says Martin Sprock, president and