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Eddie Matney, local chef and founder of Wild Noodles, plans to franchise his fast-casual pasta concept nationally. So far, 10 new stores are slated for the Valley.

Chef goes wild with noodles, expanding concept nationally

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Maybe the popular Atkins diet forbids carbs — but partners-in-pasta Eddie Matney and Dave Andrea think a taste for them will fatten their Wild Noodles eateries into a hearty national franchise.

Matney, the high-profile chef and owner of Eddie Matney's in Phoenix, and Andrea, also a local restaurateur, launched the first two Phoenix restaurants in 2001, originally as World Noodles. They started franchising their fast-casual pasta concept this summer and already have 10 Valley franchises and contracts pending in outside markets.

Chain President George Krotonsky said the company expects to open 60 restaurants in Arizona, Colorado, Texas and Georgia in the next four years. Additional locations are targeted for other states such as New Mexico, Oklahoma, Nebraska and Pennsylvania.

"The idea is to have them all over the country," Matney said. "We like to sell them in blocks of five. It makes more sense."

Fast-casual restaurants such as Chipotle, Pei-Wei and Baja Fresh, tout the quality of the food and lower prices than a traditional eatery. Such restaurants sell higher-quality fare than a McDonald's and offer a take-out line, but also bring the food to a customer's table. John Schwimmer, owner of Scottsdale-based Schwimmer Enterprises Consulting, calls it "semi-self-help" service.

"The prices usually are 15 to 20 percent cheaper than casual restaurants. And if the

food is ordered to go, the packaging is more than paper and cardboard. With fast-casual, the food is not remarkable. It's something you can prepare at home if you put some effort in it. But if they can exceed your expectations they'll do great," he said.

"Eddie (Matney) is well-known, which will help marketing-wise to have his name attached. What they'll have to do is put out a quality product and pay attention to the healthy aspects of it," Schwimmer said. "Quick-service spots are little businesses designed to crank out money."

Wild Noodles offers a variety of pasta dishes from mama's marinara and creamy pesto to lasagna in a bowl and mushroom mania, along with twists on classics such as macaroni and cheese and beef stroganoff. Matney said dishes run from \$5 to \$8 for individual servings.

The initial investment for franchisees ranges from \$247,500 to \$332,000 per store for a turn-key package, including equipment and leasehold improvements. Each restaurant seats about 80 people and measures about 2,400 square feet.

"There's a lot of catering and meals to go. It's also very kid-friendly. Most don't have liquor licenses but if a location wants to get one, we don't discourage it," Matney said. "Everybody loves noodles or pasta."

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Wild Noodles: 602-952-9777