Darden Restaurants Named 2000 Corporation of the Year by Mexican American Chamber of Commerce of Illinois

ORLANDO, Fla., Dec. 12 - The Mexican American Chamber of Commerce of Illinois (MACC) recently presented Darden Restaurants (NYSE: DRI) with its Corporation of the Year Award for 2000, in recognition of the casual dining leader's commitment and contributions to the Hispanic business community throughout the state of Illinois. Darden, which owns and operates the Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones restaurant brands, is the world's largest casual dining restaurant company.

"We believe very strongly in embracing, celebrating and fostering diversity both inside and outside our company," said Joe R. Lee, Darden's Chairman and CEO. "We are developing an organization-wide diversity sensibility that allows us to respond effectively to differences in the expectations and attitudes of our increasingly diverse guests and employees. This sensibility underlies and strengthens all of our key strategies for growth, and this award shows we're on the right track. Our entire family of restaurants and more than 119,000 employees nationwide are extremely proud of this honor."

MACC's Corporation of the Year Award recognizes exemplary support of the Chamber's mission: to provide resources and be an advocate for economic initiatives that support the Hispanic business community and further the broad economic interests of businesses in Illinois. Darden has supported the MACC of Illinois for years, sponsoring events, participating on boards and teaming up with local Red Lobster and Olive Garden restaurants for community fundraisers.

The Chamber also singled out Darden for its national commitment to diversity through its partnerships with the National Council of La Raza, NAACP, Urban League, National Conference for Community and Justice, and the United Negro College Fund, to name a few. Darden has also established relationships with the Hispanic, Asian and African American chambers of commerce, both nationally and locally throughout the country. Earlier this year, the company was also honored as the 2000 Corporation of the Year by the Greater Los Angeles African American Chamber of Commerce, and for two years in a row, Darden has been selected to Fortune magazine's list of "America's 50 Best Companies for Minorities."

Darden Restaurants, with headquarters in Orlando, Florida, is the world's largest casual dining company, with 1,139 restaurants operating under the Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones brands, over 119,000 employees and annual sales of over $3.7 billion.