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CHICAGO, May 22 -- Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI), the world's largest casual dining company, awarded Turano Baking Company with its top award for vendor excellence today -- recognizing the bakery's product quality, innovative development and service-oriented approach.

Darden, which owns and operates more than 1,100 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones BBQ & Sports Bar restaurants, presented the Berwyn, Ill.-based company with its William B. Darden Distinguished Vendor Award. The award is named after the founder of the Orlando-based restaurant company.

"Turano is as much a partner with us as they are a vendor for us," said Joe Lee, Darden Chairman and Chief Executive Officer. "We work very well together to serve our restaurant guests a great dining experience," he said.

Turano supplies all of the Olive Garden restaurants in the Midwest region with breadsticks, one of the restaurants' signature items. Additionally, Turano created the Cuban bread served at Bahama Breeze restaurants. Continuing on their strong development focus, the company also developed a series of cookies for Olive Garden that will be featured on its new menu this summer.

"They have been such a valuable ally for us in supplying our breadsticks that when we decided we were going to add cookies to our list of desserts, Turano was the logical choice to develop and then supply our restaurants," said Brad Blum, President of Olive Garden.

The William B. Darden Distinguished Vendor Award salutes world-class vendors for outstanding quality, service, innovation and value. Darden purchasing, marketing, and culinary experts chose Turano from over 1,200 vendors that did business with the restaurant company during fiscal 2000 (which ends May 31).

"Turano has done an outstanding job of focusing on the four key drivers in our supply chain, those being Quality, Service, Innovation, and Cost," said Barry Moullet, senior vice president of purchasing for Darden. "We look forward to many more years of friendship."

Turano Baking Company's roots go back to 1962, when Mariano Turano founded the Campagna Bakery in Chicago. The bakery currently operates three plants in Illinois that produce more than 120 varieties of rolls and different Italian, French and specialty breads as well as sweet goods like cakes and cookies. Today, the Turano Baking Company, Inc. is still a family-owned business that is run by Renato Turano, President; Tony Turano, Executive Vice President, Production and Operations; and Giancarlo Turano, Executive Vice President, Sales and Marketing.