Olive Garden Celebrates 20th Anniversary

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The first Olive Garden opened in Orlando on December 13, 1982. Today, as Olive Garden celebrates its 20th anniversary and the achievement of an industry-leading 32 consecutive quarters of same-restaurant sales growth, this family of local restaurants is inspired by the food, wine, culture and warmth of Italy as it delights 2.8 million guests weekly. This recipe for success draws from strong Italian partnerships with companies throughout Italy in the development of new menus, innovative wine initiatives, new restaurant designs and employee training programs.

( Photo: http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20021220/OLIVEGARDENLOGO http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20021211/FLW016 )

"From the beginning, Olive Garden has celebrated the joys of Italian life," said Olive Garden President Drew Madsen. "What we have done and will continue to do is delight guests by bringing the best of Italy to our restaurants through our food, wine, atmosphere and service. The friendships and partnerships we've established in Italy allow us to draw upon Italy as a source of inspiration for everything we do. That's our vision now and for the future."

Italian Food and Wine

At the center of the company's culinary initiatives are Olive Garden Riserva di Fizzano restaurant and Olive Garden's Culinary Institute of Tuscany, in the rolling hills of Castellina in Chianti. Both were established in partnership with Sergio and Daniela Zingarelli, an Italian family that owns and operates Rocca delle Macie, one of Italy's leading producers of Tuscan wines.

Throughout the year, Olive Garden culinary managers train at the Culinary Institute and visit the Olive Garden Riserva di Fizzano restaurant, which serves as the source of many new dishes on Olive Garden's menu such as Mixed Grill, Spaghetti delle Rocca and the award-winning Pork Filletino.

Culinary managers work side-by-side Olive Garden Riserva di Fizzano Executive Chef Romana Neri to bring the time-honored traditions of authentic Italian cooking -- using the freshest ingredients of the season, layering sauces to build the most flavor, and preparing perfect al dente pasta -- back to Olive Garden kitchens in North America.

The Italians' love for great food cannot be separated from their passion for great wine. In Italy, wine is food and it plays an integral role in the meal by enhancing food flavor and creating a sense of celebration at the dinner table. Twenty years ago, Olive Garden's wine list featured 11 wines. Today, Italy's finest wine regions are represented, including Tuscany, Piedmont and Tre Venezia. Rocca delle Macie, Marchesi di Barolo, Cavit and Bertani are among the Italian wineries with selections on Olive Garden's list of 45 wines.

However, while Olive Garden takes pride in its award-winning wine list, the restaurant's primary goal is making guests comfortable when they order a glass of wine with their meal. Elevated wine service at Olive Garden is designed to make wine approachable as more guests continue to make it part of their overall dining experience.

Enhanced wine service by the Olive Garden service team, food and wine pairing menus and a program of educating guests about wine through weekend wine samplings are all ways in which Olive Garden is introducing guests to a dining experience in which food and wine are intertwined. In fact, last year, more than 30 million guests enjoyed samples in the lobby of Olive Garden restaurants throughout North America.

To ensure more guests are comfortably led to a wine they will enjoy with their meal, Olive Garden has invested more than 400,000 hours in wine training for managers and service team members, including first-hand experiences in the heartlands of food and wine. Last year, Olive Garden established the Wine Institute of Napa Valley in partnership with the Robert Mondavi Family of Wines, Trinchero Family Estates and Gallo of Sonoma Winery where 60 Olive Garden managers a year study the history of wine, and food and wine dynamics. And since 1998, Olive Garden's annual Wine Ambassadors program takes a group of select servers to Italy to learn firsthand about Italy's passion for food and wine.

Italian-Inspired Designs
Just as Italy has directed food and wine initiatives, so too has Olive Garden drawn from that source to inspire the design and decor of the company's restaurants. Working closely with an Italian architect and designer, Olive Garden's design team has created two unique designs for all of its new restaurants.

The first is the Tuscan Farmhouse design, which recreates the rustic warmth and simple charm of a farmhouse in the Tuscan countryside. A spacious cafe with a bartop created from lava stone, then painted by Italian artisans; imported Italian fabrics that adorn seats and windows; and a warm, welcoming glow from Italian-made light fixtures invite guests to a comfortable dining atmosphere that pays homage to Tuscany.

The second design and latest news from Olive Garden is the opening of urban-design restaurants, inspired by the look and feel of ristorantes and cafes found in Italy's metropolitan cities like Milan and Rome. Already open in Seattle and Manhattan, and soon to open in Chicago, Philadelphia and Minneapolis, the signature-defining characteristics of the restaurants' interiors are rich, warm woods; traditional, dark cherry finishes; prominent wine displays; terra cotta tiles and brick; subtle lighting; and diverse wall textures adorned with black and white photography and bold, colorful prints. On the exterior, restaurants maintain the unique architectural characteristics of the urban neighborhood where they are located.

Olive Garden's existing restaurants, recently updated, also reflect an Italian influence. RevItalia, a five-year revitalization of 407 existing restaurants in 47 states and two Canadian provinces, that concluded in 2002, incorporated many of the design elements found throughout Italy. A signature design element is the Italian family table, a reproduction of a table found in The Osteria, a landmark Italian cafe in Florence, and a gathering place for family and friends.

Community Service

What has remained unchanged in Olive Garden's 20-year history is its support of communities where employees live and work. Most notably, since 1988, Olive Garden has been involved with Pasta for Pennies, a school-based national program in partnership with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. Olive Garden has worked with students to raise more than $15 million for leukemia and lymphoma research and patient care.

Ultimately, Olive Garden is in the business of nourishing people and, to help feed the hungry in communities across the United States, Olive Garden has made more than $1 million in donations, including 600,000 lbs. of food, to food banks across the country through its Drive Against Hunger campaign. Established in 1999, Drive Against Hunger is part of the company's sponsorship of the Team Olive Garden racecar in the American Le Mans Series.

And, during the last six years, nearly 50,000 students have entered Olive Garden's Pasta Tales national essay-writing contest designed to inspire young writers to voice their opinions through creative writing and motivate them to be more involved in their community.

"Olive Garden's growth and development over the last 20 years are attributed to our passion for bringing the best Italian food, wine and culture to our restaurants," said Madsen. "We are focused on delighting each guest with a genuine Italian dining experience with fresh, simple, delicious Italian food, complemented by a great glass of wine, in a comfortable home-like Italian setting welcomed by people who treat you like family. We will continue to look to Italy for all of our inspiration."

Olive Garden is the leading restaurant in the Italian dining segment with 496 restaurants, more than 60,000 employees and $1.9 billion in annual sales. Olive Garden is a division of Darden Restaurants Inc., the world's largest casual dining company. Visit Olive Garden's Web site at www.olivegarden.com.

DID YOU KNOW?

* Olive Garden is the largest purchaser of wines in the restaurant industry, purchasing more than 5.7 million bottles of wine annually.
* Last year, more than 30 million guests enjoyed wine samples at their local Olive Garden.
* Olive Garden serves approximately 2.8 million guests weekly, which is greater than the population of Rome.
* In 2002, the company sent more than 150 managers and employees to Italy. The trips included training at Olive Garden's Culinary Institute of Tuscany, under the direction of Executive Chef Romana Neri, or visits to Olive Garden's Italian wine partners to learn more about wine making and food and wine pairing.
* Olive Garden imports more than $36 million in goods from Italy annually through companies such as Colavita, San Pellegrino, Cavit, Bertani and Illy Espresso.
* To date, Olive Garden has invested more than 400,000 hours in wine training for 30,000+ employees including food and wine pairing sessions.
and role-playing exercises.

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