Darden to Test Casually Sophisticated Fresh Grill and Wine Bar

Seasons 52 Will Feature Exceptional Dishes That Are Seasonally Fresh, Nutritionally Balanced and Lower in Calories

ORLANDO, Fla., Dec 5, 2002 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX/ --

Darden Restaurants, Inc., the country's largest casual dining restaurant company, announced today that it is testing a new casually sophisticated fresh grill and wine bar in Orlando.

The new restaurant -- to be called Seasons 52(SM) -- will feature high quality, seasonally inspired menus that change weekly to reflect the freshest products available. The exceptionally flavored, satisfying and nutritionally balanced meals taste great and are lower in calories than similar restaurant meals.

"Our goal is to be the best in casual dining and this is another step forward," said Joe Lee, chairman and CEO. "Seasons 52 is an example of how Darden, as the leader in casual dining, continually searches for leading-edge concepts that could become important nationally. From time to time we are willing to undertake limited tests of new concepts to uncover potentially large markets."

Seasons 52 is currently under construction at 7700 Sand Lake Road in Orlando and is scheduled to open in February 2003. Located on the lake at Plaza Venezia, Seasons 52 will feature an attractive, casually sophisticated atmosphere with an international wine list, piano bar, warm contemporary design and artwork. The restaurant will seat about 250 guests and will have an outside dining deck overlooking the water.

Seasonal Focus and Lighter Preparations

"First and foremost, Seasons 52 is about being a great restaurant with exciting, terrific-tasting dishes and wines all served with passion and pride," said Blaine Sweatt, president of the new company, as well as Darden's New Business Division. "But, it is also more than that, with very creative, bold-flavored menu choices that taste great and yet are lower in calories because of the ingredients we select and the way we prepare them."

The Seasons 52 kitchen is built around a continually changing array of the freshest seasonal vegetables, fruits, fish and meats available. Selecting products that are at the peak of their flavor ensures that each dish will have the best taste possible, without relying on added fats or high-calorie sauces as flavor enhancers. The name, Seasons 52, was derived from the fact that every week, all year long, different products are continually coming into their own seasons, so the menu is designed to change at least that often.

"We have expert buyers who comb markets across the country every day for the finest ingredients," said Barry Moullet, senior vice president of Purchasing at Darden. "When Marvel-Striped tomatoes in Sonoma County are perfectly ripe in August; when Delta asparagus reaches its peak in Victoria Island in March; or when Copper River salmon runs for a few weeks in late May, that's when Seasons 52 will have them on its menu."

The opening of Seasons 52 comes after several years of planning and consumer research by Darden.

"We have seen a long-term growing interest in grilled foods, fresher ingredients, bolder flavors and lighter preparations," said Roger Thompson, Darden's senior vice president of research and strategic marketing. "We have created Seasons 52 to give us a better vehicle to explore these specific trends."

Chef-Driven Cuisine

"The Seasons 52 culinary team is a group of exceptionally talented professionals," said Doug Green, senior vice president of Operations for the new company. "Executive Chef Clifford Pleau and colleague Toni Robertson have overseen the kitchens of some of the finest restaurants and hotels in the world and now they are bringing those skills to this concept."

Pleau and Robertson also collaborated with nationally known nutritionist and best-selling author Pamela Smith to prepare the restaurant's seasonal fare in ways that accentuate its freshness and deliver nutritional balance and great flavors to every meal.
"We will be using natural cooking methods at Seasons 52," said Chef Pleau, "that include open fire oak and mesquite grilling, and stone hearth roasting. But we won't need any fryers."

"Best of all," adds Smith, "nutritionally balanced, lower-calorie meals does not have to mean small portions! Every entree, salad and sandwich contains satisfying portions of delicious, nutrient-rich food. You will be able to indulge your taste buds without overdoing the calories."

The new menu will change weekly and feature offerings such as:
- Fisherman's Bowl of Black Mussels steamed in orange ginger broth with roasted garlic crisp (appetizer);
- Herb Ricotta Ravioli with julienne vegetables & roasted garlic broth (appetizer);
- Wild Caught Pacific King Salmon on fresh gourmet greens, chilled asparagus & ginger soy dressing (entree salad);
- Grilled Filet Mignon, garlic sauteed spinach & grilled wild mushrooms with roasted big steak potatoes (entree); and
- Grilled Jumbo Sea Scallops with sauteed fresh asparagus & toasted pearl pasta (entree).

A Concept with Broad Appeal

"We have created Seasons 52 to appeal to a broad group of consumers, including many of the same guests who already may be coming to our existing Darden restaurants," said Sweatt. "We also think Seasons 52 may be particularly appealing to baby boomers who are ready for new taste experiences and who may be watching what they eat a little more closely these days."

"We are committed to making this the kind of place where busy people can come often, have great, nutritious meals and be comfortable, without spending any more than they would at many other casual dining restaurants."

Seasons 52 will also offer a wide-ranging international wine list selected by respected Wine Director and General Manager George Miliotes. There will normally be up to 100-110 bottles on the list, with 60-70 of those selections available by the glass.

"Many wine selections will be old familiar friends," said Miliotes. "But, there will be pleasant new discoveries, too. Whether our guests are relaxing with a glass of wine at the bar after a busy day, or enjoying a nice Pinot Noir over dinner, we should be able to offer just the right choice."

A cozy piano bar is planned as well, with live entertainment several nights a week. The entire restaurant, including the outside lakefront dining area, will be non-smoking. To better accommodate a clientele with busy schedules, reservations will be accepted, although they are not required.

Ed Binkley of Bloodgood, Sharp, Buster Architects of Oviedo, Fla., created the restaurant's warm contemporary design, along with the interior design firms of Theresa Palmer Interiors and Raleigh Design.

Casual Dining Leadership

As the largest casual dining restaurant company in the world, Darden Restaurants, Inc., (NYSE: DRI) owns and operates over 1,200 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones BBQ Sports Bar restaurants with annual sales of $4.4 billion. Darden is headquartered in Orlando.

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