ORLANDO, Fla., Jan 2, 2003 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX/ -- Darden Restaurants, Inc., (NYSE: DRI) today reported same-restaurant sales results for the five-week December fiscal month ended December 29, 2002. This period is the first month of Darden's fiscal 2003 third quarter.

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

Same-restaurant sales at Red Lobster were up 2% to 3% for fiscal December, which reflected a 2% to 3% increase in check average and flat guest counts. The check average increase was a result of a 1% to 2% increase in pricing and an approximately 1% increase from menu mix changes. This fiscal December, Red Lobster had one week without any national television advertising followed by four weeks of advertising featuring "All You Can Eat Shrimp." During fiscal December last year, Red Lobster featured "Pound of Crab for $10.99" for five weeks, and its same-restaurant sales increased 8% to 9%. This reflected a 7% increase in guest traffic, which, along with a 2% to 3% increase in pricing, more than offset a 1% decline due to menu mix changes.

Same-restaurant sales at Olive Garden for fiscal December were down approximately 1%, which reflected a 2% to 3% increase in check average and a 3% to 4% decline in guest counts. The check average increase was primarily a result of increased pricing. During the month, Olive Garden had three weeks of national television advertising featuring "Chicken Marsala" and also promoted its signature "Soup, Salad, and Breadsticks" offering. During fiscal December last year, Olive Garden advertised "Chicken Marsala" for three weeks. Last year, Olive Garden had an 11% to 12% increase in same-restaurant sales driven by a 7% to 8% increase in guest counts and a 4% to 5% increase in check average.

This December's sales results at Red Lobster and Olive Garden were adversely affected by a shift in the Thanksgiving holiday. Both companies' restaurants are closed on Thanksgiving Day, and traditionally sales are relatively weak for this holiday period. The holiday, which typically falls in fiscal November, was in fiscal December this year. Darden estimates that the shift adversely affected same-restaurant sales at both companies by approximately two percentage points. In addition, more severe winter weather this year than last year across much of the nation adversely impacted same-restaurant sales at each company by approximately one percentage point.

Darden Restaurants, Inc., headquartered in Orlando, FL, owns and operates over 1,200 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones restaurants.

Forward-looking statements in this news release, if any, are made under the Safe Harbor provisions of the Private Securities Litigation Reform Act of 1995. Certain important factors could cause results to differ materially from those anticipated by the forward-looking statements, including the impact of changing economic or business conditions, the impact of competition, the availability of favorable credit and trade terms, the impact of changes in the cost or availability of food and real estate, government regulation, construction costs, weather conditions and other factors discussed from time to time in reports filed by the company with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

SOURCE Darden Restaurants, Inc.


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