Darden Restaurants Names Its 2004 'Distinguished Supplier Award' Winners

Nine Innovative Foodservice Suppliers Recognized For Outstanding Service

CHICAGO, May 25, 2004 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX/ -- Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI), the world's largest casual dining company and owner and operator of 1,300 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones restaurants, today recognized nine of its most innovative suppliers with the company's annual William B. Darden Distinguished Supplier Award.

Companies honored as 2004 Distinguished Suppliers include Bernardi Italian Foods Company; Finn Marketing Group; Future Brands LLC; International Associates Corporation; Marzetti; S & D Coffee; Sterling Foods, Ltd.; and Trident Seafoods. Additionally, MBM Corporation was presented with the William B. Darden Distribution Center Recognition Award for its center in Lakeland, Florida.

Darden presents the Distinguished Supplier Awards annually at the National Restaurant Association Restaurant & Hotel-Motel Show to suppliers whose innovative solutions significantly contribute to Darden's growth. The award, in its seventh year, is named for Darden's late founder, who in creating the company, helped establish the casual dining industry more than 65 years ago.

"Bill Darden understood the importance of offering guests excellent food, beverages and hospitality when he opened his first restaurant in 1938," said Joe Lee, Darden Restaurants chairman and chief executive officer. "These Distinguished Supplier Award winners share Bill's passion for outstanding customer service."

Darden's culinary, marketing, total quality, supply management and purchasing teams selected the winners from the more than 2,000 suppliers with which Darden partnered in fiscal 2004 (which ends May 30).

"The nine Distinguished Suppliers honored this year represent people who are among the most talented in the foodservice industry," said Barry Moullet, Darden's senior vice president of supply chain and development. "Whether they created new packaging to make sure food arrived safely to our restaurants, or helped our culinary teams secure a new ingredient that added an extra touch of magic to our recipes, these teams are committed to delivering extraordinary service to Darden and the 300 million people we serve each year."

Darden 2004 Distinguished Supplier Award recipients were honored for the following reasons:

Bernardi Italian Foods Company -- The Toluca, Ill.-based pasta company contributed to the success of Olive Garden's January lasagna promotion. Bernardi designed and developed new packaging for Olive Garden that allowed single and double lasagna layers to be shipped separately, which significantly helped improve its quality.

Finn Marketing Group -- Based in Safety Harbor, Fla., this food service manufacturer has partnered with Darden for more than 20 years and produced and installed new char broilers in all Bahama Breeze restaurants this year. The char broilers significantly enhanced the flavor of Bahama Breeze's new lunch and dinner menu offerings.

Future Brands LLC -- The Deerfield, Ill.-based spirits and wine distributor assisted in the creation of Bahama Breeze's signature beverage, the "BahamaRita," as well as the creation of a new bottle to help lower production costs.

International Associates Corporation -- The Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.-based crab fishing and processing company developed a long-term strategic plan to provide all of its crab production for Darden, which includes building a new plant in Port Williams, Chile, based on Darden's specifications and requirements. In addition to providing a new species of crab to Red Lobster, International Associates provided ingredients for Olive Garden's Shrimp and Crab Ravioli.

Marzetti -- This Columbus, Ohio-based manufacturer of specialty food products has been instrumental to all of Darden's brands for more than 22 years. The company developed a new Caesar dressing, a spicy cocktail sauce and a citrus barbecue sauce for Red Lobster and a new pot pie crust for Smokey Bones. Marzetti also continues to support Olive Garden with its Italian salad dressing, and this year partnered with bottle suppliers to develop a new bottle design.

S & D Coffee -- The Concord, N.C.-based coffee company was instrumental in the launch of Olive Garden's new Caffe la Toscana program. S & D assisted in research and development, and trained more than 25,000 managers and servers on the
new coffee in all Olive Garden restaurants. Additionally, S & D helped Olive Garden develop a new thermal coffee pot that improved coffee temperature.

Sterling Foods, Ltd. -- This San Antonio-based leader in bakery products provided research and development for Smokey Bones' new cornbread recipe. Sterling also supplies Olive Garden with its popular Lemon Cream Cake.

Trident Seafoods -- The Seattle-based seafood harvester and processor provided Darden's restaurants with Alaskan Snow Crab and Large Bristol Bay King Crab, as well as pollack, flounder and mahi-mahi. Trident has partnered with Darden for more than 10 years to jointly develop and implement innovative quality assurance and purchasing practices. Trident has been a leader in the U.S. seafood industry for decades and has been instrumental in educating the public and about the seafood industry and key policy issues.

MBM Corporation -- This custom food distributor, based in Rocky Mount, N.C., was presented with the William B. Darden Distribution Center Recognition Award for its center in Lakeland, Fla., which leads all of Darden's 11 distribution centers in reliability scores, on-time deliveries, and overall quality.

Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI) is based in Orlando, Fla., and employs 140,000 people. The company records annual sales of $4.7 billion and serves more than five million people each week. For more information, please visit www.darden.com.

SOURCE Darden Restaurants, Inc.

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