ORLANDO, Fla., Jan 06, 2005 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX/ -- Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI) today reported same-restaurant sales results for the five-week December fiscal month ended January 2, 2005. This period is the first month of Darden's fiscal 2005 third quarter.

Same-restaurant sales at Olive Garden were up approximately 14% for fiscal December, which reflected a 12% to 13% increase in guest counts and a 1% to 2% increase in check average. The check average increase was mostly due to pricing. Last year, Olive Garden had an increase of 3% to 4% in same-restaurant sales during fiscal December.

Same-restaurant sales at Red Lobster were up approximately 14% for fiscal December, which reflected an 11% to 12% increase in guest counts and a 2% to 3% increase in check average. The check average increase was a result of an approximate 1% increase in pricing and a 1% to 2% increase from menu mix changes. Last year, same-restaurant sales at Red Lobster declined 12% to 13% during fiscal December.

Darden estimates that approximately 5.0 percentage points of the growth in same-restaurant sales at both Olive Garden and Red Lobster reflected favorable holiday shifts, as Thanksgiving moved from fiscal December in 2004 to fiscal November in 2005 and New Year celebrations moved from fiscal January in 2004 to fiscal December in 2005. The Christmas Day shift from a Thursday in fiscal 2004 to a Saturday in fiscal 2005 had minimal impact on this month's same-restaurant sales results. Nearly all of Darden's restaurants are closed on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Darden Restaurants, Inc., headquartered in Orlando, FL, owns and operates over 1,300 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze, Smokey Bones, and Seasons 52 restaurants with annual sales of $5.0 billion.

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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