Darden Restaurants Announces 2006 'Suppliers of the Year'

World's Largest Casual Dining Company Honors Its Best Suppliers With Top Award

CHICAGO, May 22, 2006 /PRNewswire-FirstCall/ -- Whether it's blending traditional flavors together in a test kitchen to introduce a completely new one to America, hosting wine education classes for thousands of people or distributing products around the country, suppliers have a critical role in the success of a multi-unit restaurant company. And some are the "cream of the crop."

(Logo: http://www.newscom.com/cgi-bin/prnh/20050203/FLTH026LOGO )

Darden Restaurants, Inc., the world's largest casual dining restaurant company, today announced the 10 recipients of its prestigious William B. Darden Supplier Recognition Award. The award is presented each year at the restaurant industry's premier trade show and is named for Darden Restaurants' founder, whose vision helped establish the casual dining industry nearly 40 years ago.


Darden, which owns and operates more than 1,400 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze, Smokey Bones Barbeque & Grill and Seasons 52 restaurants, presents the awards annually at the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant & Hotel/Motel Show to suppliers whose innovations significantly contributed to Darden's growth during the company's previous 12 months.

"The 10 companies winning this year's 'Supplier of the Year' awards are trendsetters in our industry," said Clarence Otis, Darden Restaurants' chairman and chief executive officer. "They go above and beyond the ordinary in providing us the products and services we need so we may provide the best dining experiences at a good value to our guests."

Darden's culinary, purchasing, total quality and marketing teams selected the winners from the more than 2,000 suppliers Darden partnered with in fiscal 2006, which ends May 31, 2006. Each winning supplier was chosen for exceeding expectations and demonstrating a distinguishing point of difference in the areas of quality, service, innovation and value.

"Darden is proud to have such outstanding companies as our strategic partners," said Barry Moullet, senior vice president of supply chain and development. "Suppliers who understand our business goals and bring us exciting products and ideas are integral to our company's continued success and growth."

These organizations are the 2006 William B. Darden Supplier Recognition Award recipients:

The Bama Companies. The Tulsa, Okla.-based company developed wheat dough for Seasons 52's popular flatbread appetizers.

Colavita USA. The Linden, N.J. provider of olive oil helped Olive Garden's culinary development, including participating in ideation tours in Italy, which is a key source of inspiration for Olive Garden's authentically Italian menu.

Golden-Tech International. Based in Redmond, Wash., this company consistently helps Darden gain access to seafood providers in Asian markets and provides valuable information relating to new seafood resources.

King & Prince Seafood Corporation. This Brunswick, Ga. seafood purveyor successfully completed a cost-saving freight program that enhanced the profitability of Red Lobster's menu promotions.

Lotito Foods. This Edison, N.J.-based supplier of cheeses and gourmet products to all of Darden's restaurant companies supported their goal of freshening core menus and creating compelling food news with superior new products such as smoked mozzarella, asiago and provolone, while delivering exciting opportunities to share culinary expertise such as seminars presented by Italian culinary experts for Olive Garden.

Mullins Food Products. Based in Broadview, Ill., Mullins enhanced Bahama Breeze's signature Jerk BBQ and Habanero wing
sauces.

Palm Bay Imports, Inc. This Syosset, N.Y. wine vendor helped Olive Garden enhance its wine offerings and contributed to the curriculum for its Culinary Institute of Tuscany.

Shaw's Southern Belle. This Jacksonville, Fla.-based supplier of specialty seafood products provided support and innovation throughout the year, helping Red Lobster develop a new gourmet crab cake and successfully accommodating market change with a new lobster bisque.

T. Marzetti Company. Based in Columbus, Ohio, this famous sauce and dressing company developed the signature berry vinaigrette for Smokey Bones’ new grilled Oregon Pear and Spinach Salad. The salad, featuring grilled pears, grapes, mandarin oranges, warm pecans, crumbled bleu cheese, red onions and tomatoes, debuted in December and has become one of the most popular salads on Smokey Bones’ menu.

Maines Paper & Food Service. This Hanover Park, Ill.-based company was named 2006 Distribution Center of the Year because Darden's restaurants gave it the highest satisfaction scores of all the company's distribution centers.

Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI), based in Orlando, Fla., operates over 1,400 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze, Smokey Bones and Seasons 52 restaurants. With annual sales of $5.3 billion, the company employs nearly 160,000 people who serve more than 300 million meals annually. For more information, please visit http://www.darden.com.

SOURCE Darden Restaurants, Inc.

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