

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

On comeback trail, Bonanza sheds its Western image

November 06, 2015 4:30 am • By Lisa Brown



The redesigned interior of Bonanza, set to open in Eureka next week.

A Bonanza restaurant opening next week in Eureka marks a new chapter for the buffet and steakhouse chain that once had dozens of local restaurants but then disappeared.

Cowboy-themed art is out, and brighter, contemporary light fixtures and wall décor are in. The menu has been revamped. And the chain chose Eureka to be the site of its first store with this new format.

At its peak in the 1980s, the Bonanza restaurant chain had more than 600 international and domestic locations, including about 25 in the St. Louis region. After its parent company Metromedia bought the rival Ponderosa chain in 1988, most Bonanza franchisees switched to the Ponderosa brand, leaving only about 15 Bonanza restaurants open in the U.S. today.

Now executives at Dallas-based Homestyle Dining, which is owned by privately held Metromedia, are planning a comeback for Bonanza, beginning with a new name — Bonanza Steak & BBQ.

Changes include steaks, ribs and brisket slow-cooked for eight hours in an on-site smoker.

Menu items have also been redesigned to put a fresh spin on familiar items, and wine and beer are now part of the offerings. And, the chain's beer can chicken is marinated in beer made locally. For St. Louis, it's Schlafly beer made by St. Louis' largest craft brewer, the St. Louis Brewery. In Texas, the marinade will be Shiner Bock.

The new Bonanza design has a salad bar, but the chain is positioning itself to compete with Outback Steakhouse and Texas Roadhouse instead of its buffet-centered sister chain Ponderosa. Bonanza's salad bar is modeled after Chipotle: an attendant serves guests their salad customized to their preferences.

Diners should expect to see a contemporary design with few remnants from Bonanza's old days.

"You won't find any cowboys, country and Western, or anything that relates to the Bonanza TV show," Homestyle Dining's CEO Tom Sacco told the Post-Dispatch.

The first updated Bonanza in the country to open with the new look and menu is at 80 Hilltop Village Center Drive in Eureka, with a planned grand opening on Thursday.

Homestyle Dining, which still owns Ponderosa Steakhouse, plans to open as many as 100 Bonanza Steak & BBQ restaurants nationwide in the next five years, primarily franchises.

Another new Bonanza Steak & BBQ is slated to break ground in Indiana this winter, and existing Bonanzas will convert to the redesign and updated menu, Sacco said.

"Our goal is to build a lot of them," he said. "We're going to start filling in the Midwest."

LOCAL FOLLOWING

The Eureka location was chosen to debut the revamped look because of the strong Bonanza fan base in the St. Louis area. "We chose greater St. Louis because of the history we have there," Sacco said. "We have an incredible following, and the Bonanza name has a lot of value in that market."

Bonanza is just the latest restaurant chain attempting a comeback.

A food blogger in California revived the Naugles brand after a 20-year hiatus, opening a Naugles Mexican restaurant in Orange County in August.

And after emerging from bankruptcy and shuttering about 200 locations, Sbarro is remodeling restaurants and opening stand-alone restaurants outside of malls, a departure from the pizza and pasta chain's past practice.

Lauren Hallow, a restaurant industry analyst with Chicago-based research firm Technomic, said many restaurants are looking to customization like Bonanza's salad bar to tap into the success of the growing fast-casual restaurant segment.

Fast-casual restaurant sales, including Chipotle and Panera, are growing, while family-casual, which includes Bonanza, is the only limited-service segment that experienced a decline in sales last year.

"A lot of restaurants are trying to be more fast-casual, because that's where the sales are growing the most," Hallow said. "They can add some elements, but they have to do what works with their brand, or they may end up alienating current customers."

Copyright 2015 stltoday.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.