



Love Field's new food vendors hope sales take flight

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The city of Dallas and a select group of restaurant operators will begin to learn Tuesday if expanding food options at the revamped Love Field helps revenue soar.

At an open house Wednesday, operators including chef Stephan Pyles and Dickey's Barbecue Pit's Roland Dickey (Jr. and Sr.) were decidedly upbeat, even as they work around logistical challenges such as a ban on wood burning for smoked meats.

"This is a jewel," said a smiling Pyles as workers handed out samples of spicy chili and salmon ceviche. "I see this as a great cross-marketing opportunity to help me market my restaurants in Dallas."

On Tuesday, the central city airport will welcome the traveling public to 11 new gates — and accompanying restaurant and retail outlets — that are part of the \$519 million Love Field Modernization Program. That's a joint upgrade effort backed by the city, federal grants and Southwest Airlines, the airport's main tenant.

Construction is continuing. A 12th gate is expected to open in the summer, and by the time the project is finished in late 2014, there will be 20 new gates and up to 38 food, drink and retail options, many of them new to the airport.

October 2014 is when the airport will be freed from long-distance flight restrictions imposed by the 1979 Wright amendment, and both the city and Southwest are expecting use of the airport to jump.

Each of the Love Field retailers and restaurant operators pays rent to the airport. The rate varies but can go up to about 15 percent of gross sales. That makes the city as eager as the vendors to see the new options draw crowds.

"Because of the design of the old terminal, we were fairly limited in where we could put concession spaces," said Mark Duebner, director of aviation for the city. "As we were designing and building the new terminal, we were able to put in a lot more space for those concessions.

"Air travelers really want more choices," he said. "It's not just a hot dog and hamburger."

The revamped airport will offer burgers, from San Antonio-based Whataburger. But it will also have more upscale, sit-down spots such as Cool River and Sky Canyon, a partnership between Pyles and airport concessions veteran Gina Puente.

At about 1,800 square feet, Sky Canyon — its name is a takeoff on Pyles' former Star Canyon restaurant — is about the size of his Samar restaurant in the Dallas Arts District. He and Puente expect first-year sales of \$2.6 million, which would place it between Samar and Pyles' new Stampede 66, in Uptown.

It's Pyles' first venture into air space. But he's not alone.

A new market

Across the nation, chains running out of prime real estate in urban areas and independents looking to spread the word about their brand are considering airports.

For many operators, airports are a new market, said Brett McAllister, chief financial officer of the Airports Council International-North America, the "voice of airports."

"Everybody from Papa John's to Steak and Shake and Whataburger, they all want in," McAllister said.

This will be Whataburger's first airport restaurant, out of its 740 locations. Another, at Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, is expected to open in the summer.

Duebner said the aim with the Love Field expansion was to have a good mix of local and national brands. National or international chains include Starbucks, Dunkin' Donuts and Ontario-based Manchu Wok.

Local favorites include Campisi's Pizza, Cantina Laredo and Dickey's.

Next year the airport will add food options including Brueggers Bagels, Chick-fil-A, Chili's Too and Paciugo Gelato.

Not all of the new vendors were open Wednesday. Of those that were open, Dickey's had the longest line, with airport workers and construction crew members queued up for free bright yellow T-shirts and samples of brisket, sausage, coleslaw and potato salad.

Father and son Dickey stood off to the side, watching.

Dickey's, the largest barbecue chain in the nation, has 291 locations. This will be its fifth in an airport.

The first four are at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Based on the success there, the company "fought everybody tooth and nail" when Love Field sent out its request for proposals, joked Dickey Jr.

He said the airport units do a brisk takeout business, with both travelers headed home and those who plan to eat on the plane.

"The D/FW stores have just been phenomenal," he said. "Fifty to 100 percent more [in sales] than a free-standing store. We think this location will be our highest-volume airport location."

Logistical challenges

There are some logistical challenges, the operators said.

The meats at Dickey's will be smoked at a restaurant on Forest Lane and trucked to the Love Field location. To reach the food concourse, the delivery drivers must drive onto the tarmac, creating potential safety challenges.

Puente noted that vendors and delivery people must be screened by the Transportation Security Administration.

"Anybody can pull up to my back door" at his free-standing Dallas restaurants, said Pyles. "Not here."

And Pyles had to adjust his cooking methods to mesh with a kitchen with no equipment that needs ventilation.

"Smoked brisket? We're not going to be making that here," he said.

Despite the challenges, the operators were looking forward to the crowds that they anticipate will come Tuesday, and as the airport's popularity grows.

For workers like Tracie Branch, who sells sunglasses at the airport for the Hudson Group, the addition already is a change for the better.

“This gives me more options on what I want to eat,” said Branch, 20. “I might want barbecue one day or a sandwich. I have Whataburger to choose from. So it really opens a lot of variety for us to pick from.”

Follow Karen Robinson-Jacobs on Twitter at @krobijake.

AT A GLANCE

These venues open Tuesday:

Campisi's Pizza
Whataburger
Cool River (kitchen & restaurant)
Dunkin' Donuts
Moe's Southwest Grill
Manchu Wok
Dickey's Barbecue Pit
Texpress Gourmet
Sky Canyon
Cru Wine Bar
BaskinRobbins
La Madeleine
Cantina Laredo
Starbucks
Spectacles (sunglasses)
West End News
Creative Kidstuff
Travel & Leisure Travel Store
The Cowboy Store—Famous Boots
Hudson News
Billy Bob's Texas
Fire CZ
Tech On the Go
Soybu Bliss
D Magazine News
Texas Monthly