



## Nation's Restaurant News selects 2010 MenuMasters

Neither a sour economy nor consumer reluctance to dine out dampened the creative capacity of American restaurant operators in 2009. Over the past year, seven chains in particular deployed food innovations that Nation's Restaurant News will recognize as the industry's best during its annual MenuMasters awards celebration on May 22 at the Drake Hotel in Chicago. The event, sponsored by Ventura Foods LLC, also will honor restaurant legend Jon Luther, executive chairman at Dunkin' Brands, with an induction into the MenuMasters prestigious Hall of Fame.

Jim Goggin, vice president of food service groups for Ventura Foods, said the company is pleased to sponsor this tribute to menu creativity and foodservice excellence.

"We are also thrilled to celebrate the career accomplishments of Jon Luther on his Hall of Fame selection," Goggin said. "Congratulations to all our award winners for going the extra mile to exceed expectations of consumers from coast to coast."

"Each year the restaurant industry outdoes itself by serving an ever growing crop of outstanding MenuMaster candidates," said Nation's Restaurant News' executive food editor, Pamela Parseghian. "The winners were selected for their success with guests by offering affordable, out-of-the-ordinary foods that are often healthful and delicious."

The honorees for 2010 are:

**Best New Menu Item:** *Sweet Glazed Roasted Pork Tenderloin, Outback Steakhouse* - Well known for beef seared "on the barbie," Outback delivered a somewhat unexpected twist with this roasted pork tenderloin. Appealing at multiple levels, the dish cleverly offsets tastes and textures by blending sweet and savory with tender and crunchy. The secret? Slow roasting the meat in an apricot glaze, plus a finishing sprinkle of crushed corn flakes. That this isn't classic Aussie food makes it a great example of Outback's "No rules. Just Right." mantra.

**Best Menu Revamp:** *Tropical Smoothie Cafe* - With the word "smoothie" as part of its name, customers might not immediately think of Tropical Smoothie Cafe as a meal destination. But that's exactly what Tropical Smoothie Cafe started delivering when it debuted a fully revamped menu last August. Commingling input from franchisees and customer focus groups, the 280-unit Destin, Fla.-based chain toiled 18 months to broaden and improve its lineup and reemphasize the brand as a meal destination, not just a snack stop. It even reformulated some of its higher calorie smoothies to fit its new health-focused tagline, "Eat Better, Feel Better."

**Menu Line Extension:** *Chicken Artichoke Sandwich, Au Bon Pain* - Amid the buzz about healthful eating and "the value proposition," Au Bon Pain made a statement with its Chicken Artichoke Sandwich: that food is first and foremost about vivid flavor. To construct the sandwich, the 250-unit Boston-based, fast-casual concept combined lean grilled chicken, artichoke hearts, goat cheese, red onions, tomatoes, lettuce and a vibrant sofrito vinaigrette, and buttressed that between slices of savory sundried tomato bread.

**Limited-Time Offer:** *Southwest Ancho Chicken Salad, Red Robin Gourmet Burgers* - When your menu's core includes America's classic sandwich topped with non-traditional ingredients, it's easy to see how Red Robin would extend such diverse flavor combinations to its salad menu. The Denver-based chain's Southwest Ancho Chicken salad features chicken seasoned with ancho chile and tossed with black beans, corn, grape tomatoes and pepper-jack and cheddar cheeses served atop fresh greens. The dish is finished with fried jalapeño rings, avocado slices, fresh cilantro, tortilla strips and avocado-ranch dressing.

**Healthful Menu Innovations:** *Kentucky Grilled Chicken, KFC* - Last year's successful rollout of KFC's Kentucky Grilled Chicken marked the culmination of years of effort to create a non-fried chicken offering for the mega-chain's menu. KFC also created a "better for you" product in "KGC" that — depending on the piece — slashes calories and sodium by half and fat by two-thirds compared to its namesake fried classic. To meet the Colonel's standards for a zesty flavor profile, a proprietary spice blend was created, and new, custom-designed, patented ovens were built to slow roast the chicken on grill plates.

**Menu Trendsetter:** *Burgerville* - Burgerville's innovative menu achieves that rare balance between fun-to-munch indulgences and tasty healthful alternatives. The lineup at the 39-unit, Vancouver, Wash.-based chain contrasts offerings such as Half Pound Colossal Cheeseburgers with Spicy Anasazi Bean Burgers; Walla Walla Onion Rings with Asparagus Fries; and rich Northwest Cherry Chocolate Milkshakes with fruit-laden Chocolate Monkey Smoothies. In addition, even after nearly 50 years in operation, the company remains true to its commitment to sourcing products locally.

**Innovator:** *Brad Blum, chief executive, Romano's Macaroni Grill* - In seeking to invigorate sales and menu excitement at Romano's Macaroni Grill, it might appear Brad Blum merely recognized the obvious: diners are more price- and health-conscious than ever. Creating meals that fit both profiles, however, is no easy accomplishment, yet those are among the many changes Blum helped complete in less than a year at the helm of the Dallas-based chain. Of its 21 new menu items, 10 cost less than \$10, an option welcomed, no doubt, by cash-strapped customers.

**Hall of Fame:** *Jon Luther, executive chairman, Dunkin' Brands* - In one of Jon Luther's many restaurant industry jobs, he traveled to Paris to recruit top chefs for Aramark's white tablecloth operations. Forty years later, his focus is on the opposite end of the food spectrum in quick service, yet he's as serious as ever about high food standards. "If you are going to run a company that is involved in food, food better be the star," Luther said. "They come back because of the food, and we never lose sight of that."

Prior to taking the top post at Canton, Mass.-based Dunkin' Brands, Luther oversaw CA One Services' successful assimilation of marquis restaurant brands into airport terminals, and he later led the turnaround of once-troubled Popeye's Chicken and Biscuits. Despite his big-picture executive role, Luther is always involved in the creation of his company's foods. "Everything that comes out of here, I'm in the final taste panel."

The MenuMasters Award winners are selected by the editorial board of Nation's Restaurant News.