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Red Lobster chain rolls out new look in Sacramento-area restaurants

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Red Lobster introduced the nation to Maine lobster and snow crab and even helped popularize Key lime pie and white zinfandel wine.

When the first Red Lobster opened in 1968 in Lakeland, Fla., the biggest competition facing the restaurant was home-cooked meals. America."

Forty-two years later, Red Lobster has nearly 700 locations throughout the United States. It has become the world's largest overnight shipper of seafood, sourcing its fish from 30 countries. The elaborate distribution system gets fish from the water to a restaurant within 24 to 48 hours.

Success, said company executives, means keeping the restaurants and their menus as fresh as the fish.

So last month, Red Lobster unveiled a redesign of the restaurants, and Sacramento is among the first markets to witness the transformation.

The seafood chain is revamping the decor to evoke the feel of a New England coastal hideaway, and they've added more fresh and grilled fish to the menu.

Red Lobster wants to differentiate itself from other casual dining chains while remaining relevant to its customers, said Darren Tristano, executive vice president of Technomic, a food industry consulting and research firm.

"It's important to contemporize," he said, and restaurants generally show a "nice uptick" in sales after such overhauls.

"It's like remodeling your home – you can expect to get money back through increased value in the home," he said.

Becky Green and Leslie Beach, co-workers who grab lunch at Red Lobster every few months, said they've noticed the changes at the Howe Avenue restaurant.

"They made it look more upscale," said Green, who described herself as a loyal customer. "I like the improvements a lot better."



Shrimp bruschetta

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At the Red Lobster on Howe Avenue – one of five in the greater Sacramento region – Adirondack chairs line the wood-planked walkway leading to the restaurant's doors. Nautical flags hang in the dining room and a plaque above a doorway reads: "May you have fair winds and following seas."

The economic downturn could be the wind in Red Lobster's sails, said Tristano, the industry analyst.

Loyal customers of casual dining restaurants are eating out less, but fine-dining customers have been downsizing to casual dining spots.

"Baby boomers are tightening belts and becoming more conservative; expense accounts are smaller," he said. "But people are still looking for quality as well as value."

Red Lobster's not the only chain taking advantage of the shift.

Burger King has launched Whopper Bar restaurants in Miami Beach and Orlando and is planning more.

The idea? A "premium dining experience" where customers can get an ice-cold beer to accompany their Bourbon Whopper, which is topped with onion rings and a bourbon- flavored sauce.

Mid-scale full-service restaurant chains like Mimi's are adding options such as counter dining for customers who want quick entrees and don't mind doing without full service.

The venerable Coco's Restaurant & Bakery chain has added several upmarket appetizers to its menu, including a charcuterie plate called the Vineyard Duo Platter. It features a wedge of brie, pork p ate, a caprese salad and other items for \$9.99.

At the revamped Red Lobster outlets, wood-fired grills have been added and are tended to by "grill masters."

"For me, the best way to eat a great piece of fish is grilled," said Michael LaDuke, Red Lobster's senior executive chef.

LaDuke himself has been raising the profile of Red Lobster, appearing on popular cooking shows like "The Next Food Network Star" and judging fellow chefs on "Iron Chef America."

As part of the revamp, LaDuke has increased the varieties of fresh fish on the menu each day and bases it on what's available. He's also added regional flavors in some parts of the country – maple-glazed fish in the Northeast, for example.

The restaurant that invented popcorn shrimp and created generations of cheddar biscuit junkies is banking on newer menu items such as the lobster pizza and salmon BLTs becoming crave-worthy. "We want people to say 'I have to go to Red Lobster because of X,'" LaDuke said.

Advocates of the slow-food movement criticize chains for their large carbon footprints – Red Lobster flying fish around the globe, for example, instead of using what's caught locally. And environmentalists raise an eyebrow at the prospect of species being overfished.

Fan or not, there's not a whole lot of arguing with Red Lobster's success.

The chain has adopted a commitment to sustainability, refusing to serve overfished species such as Chilean sea bass and orange roughy, company officials said.

Last year, Red Lobster was rated the "No. 1 Best Seafood" among chain restaurants by Zagat.

Red Lobster's third- quarter sales, which hit \$655 million, landed 1.9 percent above the prior-year period, according to financial statements from Darden Restaurants, Red Lobster's parent company.