

By Alison Ramsey

In the busy breakfast market, Ben & Florentine is an assertive newcomer that marries upscale taste with moderate pricing and pairs solid planning with ambition.

“By the end of 2012 we should have 30 locations,” says Co-Founder and CEO Derek Massad. Having mastered the system in Québec, the rest of Canada is next. The first step is expansion into greater Ottawa and greater Toronto, beginning with two locations set to open early next year.

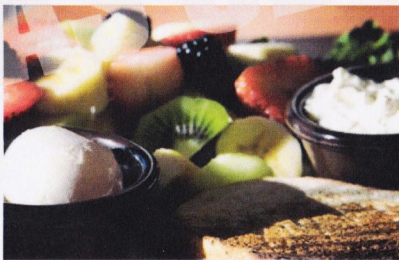
Massad started Montréal-based Ben & Florentine in 2008 after two years as a franchisee with another popular breakfast chain. His experience as a restaurant owner coupled with his five years as a financial consultant with RBC left him well equipped to start his own franchise.

But breakfast remained his passion. “I love going out for breakfast. As long as I can remember, we’ve been a family that went out for breakfast. I love my coffee and sitting down for a casual meal.”

Inspiration struck when he connected with Vice-President Suzanne Bernier, who fleshed out a concept by taking characteristics from her family: “Ben”, a hearty food lover, and his wife, “Florentine”, who appreciated higher-end, refined plates. It didn’t take long for Lorne Cassoff, a franchise consultant with 25 years’ experience linking potential franchisees to franchisors, to come on board as President.

Both the concept and the team behind it are earning rave reviews from franchisees. Hosein Moavenian, a long-time

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Bell Canada engineer and enthusiastic home cook with no previous restaurant experience, opened a location in Prevost, north of Montréal, in March 2010. While Moavenian enjoys Ben & Florentine's food, "most of all, I like the people running it. They are very enthusiastic and looked and sounded like they knew what they were saying and doing."

This past year solidified his opinion.

"These guys are just a phone call away. I haven't asked them anything that they've said 'no' to." When asked if he is worried that this close relationship might change as the franchise system grows, Moavenian doesn't hesitate. "No. I was store 6; now they're at 15, and they haven't changed a bit."

Nick Facchino, a hotel food concession manager, was initially hooked because he loved the colours (soft orange and browns, a zing of spring-leaf green) and the Zen feel of the chain. "A lot of time, people eat with their eyes," he explains. He opened two locations, as have many franchisees.

Profitability, says Massad, is three-pronged: branding and marketing, group buying power, and location selection.

Modern branding

A modern, fresh style permeates Ben & Florentine's look and menus. "We have a very clean product: grease-free and made with topnotch ingredients," says Michael Elian, one of three corporate managers who visit each franchisee once every two weeks to answer questions, analyze business, and suggest improvements. "Instead of using sliced tomatoes, we use sundried. Instead of regular mushrooms, we use Portobello. We don't use butter, we use canola spray on the grill when making crepes and omelettes." A juice bar pumps out an array of fruit smoothies.

Ben & Florentine devised a strong lunch menu to supplement its vast array of breakfasts (there isn't one Eggs Benedict;

there are 15 variations) and attract Monday to Friday's working crowd. First-time customers are drawn in by radio spots (125 weekly, mainly mornings), blanket mailings, coupons during slow times, and, most recently, a TV ad on CBC's evening news.

Once in, customers find a sleek décor. "I've been told that, on a rainy day, you walk in and it feels like sunshine," says Massad.

True to its concept, prices are lower than customers expect. At lunchtime,

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– Michael Elian, Corporate Manager

Moavenian reports, residents tired of paying heftier lunch prices elsewhere are driving from a town 15 kilometres away for take-out.

Group buying power helps to keep customer prices stable and low even in winter, when strawberries fetch \$50 a crate, and this past spring, when coffee beans for the Brazilian house blend tripled in price.

Locations balance reasonable rents – negotiated hard by head office – with high-traffic storefronts. Parking is essential in suburban markets. The downtown Montréal location is just around the corner from the main strip on Ste. Catherine Street and servers occasionally venture out to the street with free smoothies and coffee to lure passersby.

Nudged up against profitability is another reason for happy, successful franchisees, says Massad: head office support. To prepare for steady growth, head office reorganized and supplemented staff – like hiring a marketing director – to create a group of seven servicing 15 franchises. "We want to keep that personal relationship as we grow," Massad explains.

To that end, the company makes it a priority to accommodate the needs of its franchisees. For example, head office sent a manager and a cook to one

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Ben & Florentine's juice bar blends up tasty combinations for its fresh fruit smoothies.

franchise to fill in for a few weeks, free of charge, when an owner needed time off for a personal family matter. When another wanted to add a terrace, head office helped design it, laid the groundwork for filing for a permit, and liaised between city hall and the landlord. When franchisees complained that the fidelity program was financially cumbersome, head office made all transactions virtual.

Head office also helps franchisees secure financing by acting as a liaison between current franchisees and banks. Franchisees fill out monthly profit/loss statements, which head office compiles then submits to banks. "It makes [bankers] comfortable, and the more comfortable they feel, the more money they typically lend to franchisees," Massad says.

Ditto for suppliers. Purchases are tracked, and head office ensures that no payments are in arrears. This gives suppliers the confidence to allow franchisees longer terms of credit, improving their cash flow.

Finally, head office provides comprehensive training so that anyone can succeed even without prior experience. In fact, only one franchisee has restaurant experience (one is a ship's captain, another a used car salesman), so learning to manage inventory and other administrative tasks is part of two weeks' classroom training. Another four weeks are spent on location learning by doing every aspect of front and back-of-house work.

"The number one quality we seek is someone who is not afraid of getting their hands dirty," says Massad. Number two?

“They need to be personable with their own employees and with customers,” since providing quality customer service is a top priority for the company (head office personally e-mails each customer who comments on its website and any negative feedback is sent to the appropriate franchisee and followed up on at the next regular visit).

Finally, all franchisees must be faithful to the system and share a good work ethic. Potential franchisees get a brief psychological profile test and a restaurant tour early on to see if they can picture themselves there. “It’s more fascinating when they qualify themselves than when we do,” Cassoff notes.

Personable franchisees, a strong menu, and good prices are drawing much positive feedback on the company’s busy web site, a testament to the brand’s growing popularity. Although there are several other breakfast and lunch restaurants in Québec, Massad isn’t worried about a soft market; he says that there’s room for all. Half of all breakfast spending in the province is on weekends, he reports, and demand outstrips supply. Massad’s father eats

breakfast every single morning at a Ben & Florentine location near him.

Like his own family, Quebecers adore leisurely brunching, and it’s catching on elsewhere. “I used to think the trend would pass,” Massad says. “But, 30 years later it’s still going strong. Now, I think that it’s so embedded in the culture that it’s here to stay.” 🍁

BEN & FLORENTINE STATS

Franchise Units in Canada: 12

Corporate Units in Canada: 3

In Business Since: 2008

Franchising Since: 2008

Franchise Fee: \$30K

Investment Required: \$450K – \$550K

Training: 6 weeks

Website: www.benandflorentine.com

Available Territories: All of Canada, US, Int

CFA Member Since: 2010

