



WALK-ON'S: A CLASS ACT

In sports, the term “walk-on” refers to a college athlete who makes a team despite not having a scholarship. But now, for both sports fans and non-fans alike, that term refers to a fast-growing casual restaurant chain that’s serving delicious Louisiana-style food in a fun environment.

Beginnings

In the late 1990s, Brandon Landry and Jack Warner were walk-ons on the Louisiana State University basketball team. The two became friends, and although they didn’t always get a lot of playing time on the court, they did get to travel widely with the team and experience different cities and cuisines. Flying home from a road game at the University of Tennessee, the two friends came up with a restaurant concept, sketching out their ideas on the back of a cocktail napkin from the airplane. In 2003, they opened the first Walk-On’s Bistreaux & Bar near LSU’s Tiger Stadium.

Over the next nine years, more Walk-On’s units were opened throughout the southern Louisiana area. The concept drew the attention of all-star New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, who became a co-owner in 2015.

That same year, Walk-On’s started expanding through franchising. There are now 21 Walk-On’s restaurants with plans for another 15 units by 2019. The typical Walk-On’s has around 250 seats, but especially in older properties that are being converted, that number can vary significantly.

The Three Cornerstones

Walk-On’s Director of Construction Eric Kindon credits the chain’s success to three things which differentiate them from other sports bars. “When you think about our slogan, ‘Game Day with a Taste of Louisiana,’ it reflects three components: the food, the atmosphere and the culture,” he says. “We really push to hit on these 100 percent of the time. It’s nonnegotiable.”

Unlike some other sports bars, which focus primarily on their drinks and rowdy atmosphere, the menu takes center stage at Walk-On’s. The food selections are based upon authentic Louisiana cuisine, and are all prepared from scratch. “We try to give the utmost attention to ingredients, preparation and presentation,” Kindon says. Such specialties as Voodoo Shrimp (Gulf shrimp stuffed with cream cheese and jalapenos), duck and andouille gumbo, seafood po’ boys, and crawfish étouffée harken back to the chain’s





Walk-On's plans to expand from its traditional Louisiana base into Texas, Alabama, Florida and the East Coast.

origins, while a large selection of half-pound burgers, wraps and sandwiches appeal to those who prefer more typical sports-bar fare. The dessert menu is highlighted by a bread pudding made with Krispy Kreme donuts, and there's a full selection of wines, specialty drinks and soft drinks to round out the menu.

The atmosphere at Walk-On's provides a sharp contrast to the typically male-dominated sports bars. As Kindon explains, "We don't hang jerseys from the walls. It's about creating a 'game day' atmosphere but doing it in a classy and inviting way." As a result, the male-to-female ratio of customers is split just about evenly. "It's a place where guys bring their buddies, girls bring their girlfriends, people do dates or even just [come with] family," he says.

Finally, the culture of Walk-On's reflects true Louisiana warmth and hospitality. "Louisiana is renowned for its friendly culture. It's not artificial," Kindon says. "It's genuine." That friendly culture starts with the top management, he says, and it works its way throughout the organization and into the restaurants.

The chain's expansion plans are taking them further away from their Louisiana base into Texas, Alabama, Florida and the East Coast

states. And sites are under development in 12 other states. That leads to what Kindon calls his biggest challenge — conveying the Walk-On's culture to the new units. "How do you scale the food, atmosphere and culture into a marketable package to present to franchisees? How do you mirror that?" While Walk-On's can create systems and processes to duplicate the food and the atmosphere, the chain's success is due to "a continual infusion of culture from our corporate team and finding the right partners," he says. In fact, during the franchisee selection process, if the potential franchisee isn't a good fit with the Walk-On's culture, he or she won't be selected to get a franchise.

Giving Back

There's one further way that Walk-On's distinguishes itself from other sports bars: through its history of community involvement. "It's huge with us," says Kindon. "We believe in giving back and creating that bond with the communities that allow us to be part of their world." As part of that, the chain has signed up as major corporate sponsor of the Independence Bowl, a college football competition for teams from the Texas-Arkansas-Louisiana region. During the game,

Walk-On's sponsors their Walk-On of the Year award, in which the two teams each nominate one of their walk-on players for the award and the winners split \$25,000 in scholarship money.

Walk-On's Game On Foundation is a community-based support operation. During the NCAA March Madness tournament, customers are asked to round up their checks by an additional amount, usually somewhere between \$1 and \$10. The funds collected are then used to refurbish run-down basketball courts in public parks. The first court refurbished was in Walk-On's home city of Baton Rouge, and further collections will be used to redo courts in communities where Walk-On's has a restaurant. "We definitely try to infuse ourselves in the local culture, being grateful for being in that market with those people," says Kindon.

All About Relationships

That same commitment to building relationships with the community carries over to the way Walk-On's builds relationships with its suppliers. As an example, Cayard's, Inc., of Baton Rouge supplies Walk-On's with their Scotsman ice machines. "When they got into the business,"

Scotsman ice machines have been part of Walk-On's equipment package since the chain first started. For Walk-On's, the innovative technology is as important as the chain's relationship with the distributor and manufacturer.



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says Cayard's Vice President and Owner Rudy Ourso, "they had a dream and didn't really know where to turn. They came to me for assistance in doing their first location. We've been with them ever since." Rudy suggested Scotsman ice machines from the very beginning, and they've been solid customers since that day. "It's a long-standing relationship we've had from their starting point," says Chris Molitor, regional sales manager, Scotsman Ice Systems. "They're great people to work with." Kevin Clark, CFSP, President of Scotsman Ice Systems, agrees. "They're about providing their customers a great experience and great product. That matches very much with what we do — providing them a great experience and a great product."

Kindon says Walk-On's is pleased with the Scotsman relationship and products, too. "When most of the talks with an equipment company revolve around innovations and pieces of equipment as opposed to repairs and dissatisfaction, as it has with Scotsman, then you know you have a winner," he says. "We really work hard to find true partners that we can build and maintain a good relationship with going forward. We definitely consider Scotsman one of those partners."

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