

Having words with Craig Culver, founder, Culver's ButterBurgers and Frozen Custard

By MIKE DEMPSEY



Craig Culver, Founder, Culver's Butterburgers and Frozen Custard

(July 13, 2009) *Craig Culver, one of the founders of **Culver's ButterBurgers and Frozen Custard**, is readying for a busy second half of 2009. The Prairie du Sac, Wis.-based quick-service concept is celebrating its 25th anniversary this month, with giveaways planned at the first Culver's in Prairie Du Sac and a free concert for the community in September.*

In addition to the celebration, business is pretty good, despite the economic climate, Culver says. He projects that the chain will open about 20 restaurants by the end of the year. With 401 restaurants in 17 states, Culver's is tipped pretty heavily towards the franchising side. Just nine units are company-owned, or what Culver likes to call, "family-run restaurants."

How are you planning to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Culver's?

Primarily the celebration is taking place in Sauk City and Prairie du Sac, the week of July 18th. Every day that week, we are going to have something going on at the original restaurant on a daily basis. We are giving away a car. We are also celebrating with the community. We are putting in a concert for the community. We are hiring the gentleman from Styx, Dennis DeYoung. We are putting on that concert for the community over Labor Day weekend. All in all, we are still trying to take care of business.

What are some other things the chain has planned for 2009?

We have other things going on as well. We will be moving into a new headquarters building. That won't happen until the end of the year. We are also giving our [old] building to the village of Prairie du Sac. That is going to become a library, named the Ruth Culver Community Library. That is my mother. She is one of the co-founders of Culver's, along with my father and my wife and myself. So there is a lot going on.

When was the decision made to move to a new headquarters? Before or during the recent downturn?

We have had this thought process going for a couple years. I bought the property a couple years ago. And this would not have stopped us from building our new building. We are OK. Our business is all right.

FAST FACTS

HOMETOWN: Sauk City, Wis.

EDUCATION: bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Wisconsin, Osh-Kosh

HOBBIES: gardening, golf, wine collecting

PERSONAL: married; three daughters

Being a heavily franchised concept, has it been tough for prospective franchisees to find financing?

That is the toughest thing going on right now, especially for new operators. Existing operators that have a track record, they are still able to get decent financing. However, new folks coming into our system, they are having a harder time. Money just is not flowing freely yet. In spite of that, we will probably open 20 restaurants this year.

How has the chain remained successful for 25 years?

Well, the concept works. Quality stuff. We have a great group of people that really believe in what they do. As I say, they bleed blue. They really care. You put the two together, you've got great people and great product, that will pretty much guarantee you a success every time.

You are centered in the Midwest. Are there any plans to go out toward the coasts or are you sticking to tried-and-true areas?

Our philosophy on growth, is, you know, where we are, the Madison area, is the center of our universe and we go out from there. I don't like island hopping. I want to continue to grow concentrically. So we take our brand along with us as we go, and that takes risk out of it for each one of our franchisees.