

Celebrity theme isn't always a meal ticket

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Here's some sage advice for Sacramento Kings star Tyreke Evans: Think twice before you open a restaurant with your name stamped on it.

Restaurants with themes – particularly those with celebrity names – face particular challenges, which makes them vulnerable and often short-lived, say restaurant experts.

"Before you've even opened, all these odds are stacked against you," said James Sinclair, a principal with OnSite Consulting in Los Angeles, which specializes in advising insolvent and underperforming restaurants.

"It's a natural for sports celebrities to open a sports bar because, by extension, they are sports fans," Sinclair said. "The name is not enough. The brand name brings in the customer for the first time; the quality of the product keeps them coming back. While it's a simple concept in theory – serve food, get money, pay bills – it's not."

Celebrity names inflate expectations about a restaurant for consumers, he said. Diners often drop in just because they expect to see the namesake, and themed restaurants have to remain relevant and fresh on top of all the other requirements that keep people coming in the door, experts say.

In Sacramento, former Sacramento King Chris Webber's restaurant closed recently after a few years. The rock 'n' roll-themed Hard Rock Cafe closed its downtown Sacramento location on Saturday after a 13-year run.

"Do themes get old? Can you go to the Hard Rock three times a week? I still think it's a very strong brand, but it's time to relook at the concept and redefine their model because there's a lot of competition in the market right now," Sinclair said.

There's no shortage of theme restaurants nudging into the region.

Dave & Buster's, a restaurant and gaming arcade combination, opens its first area site – its 57th nationally – on May 3 at the Fountains at Roseville, offering 65 percent of 17,000 square feet to games, from Skee-Ball to Guitar Hero.

"It's interesting because they are looking for that competitive edge. That's the Holy Grail," Sinclair said of the Dallas-based chain.

Statistics on speciality restaurants and how they fare are scarce, but experts like Sinclair can name a slew of celebrities – athletes, actors and, now, celebrity chefs – who struggle to bring their star power to the table.

Scandal scrubbed Clemens

At headlinerdiners.com, Matt Bridgeford has gathered details – such as photos and recollections – on celebrity restaurants in 500 locations. He estimates that just under half were opened by sports celebrities.

Bridgeford, a Seattle assisted-care worker, figures he's visited 50 of them. He's seen the best and the worst of the concept, he said. Major-league pitcher Roger Clemens, scandal-ridden and disgraced over links to steroid use, had to scrap plans for a Houston restaurant before it even opened, he said.

He's also marveled at New York Yankee Mickey Mantle's restaurant that is going strong in the city that loved him, a legend that can draw in tourists and fans years after his death. He's also sampled Danny DeVito's steak house in Miami, an upscale menu that the rotund actor personally developed: try an 8-ounce rib-eye steak for \$60.

"It was the best shrimp I ever had," he said.

"I think there has to be a chance you are going to walk in and see the celebrity there, having fun, and you might take your picture with them or something," he said of the ideal, successful celebrity restaurant.

If a celebrity or athlete doesn't frequent the business, then those \$20 hamburgers will be a hard sell, he said.

He had hoped to make it to Webber's Center Court With C-Webb in Natomas, but after about three years it closed in November as the recession weeded out underperformers.

"It's hard to expect that these places are going to last for 20 years," Bridgeford said.

The food has to be good

The primary pitfall when celebs become entrepreneurs is they bank too heavily on their persona, said a Riverside restaurant consultant.

"I've seen a lot of celebrity restaurants in different parts of the country," said Ron Santibanez. "The inherent problem I see is that they have focused more on the name than on the food and service. It's still a restaurant. There is a still a level of service that needs to be met."

After the initial hype, the aura could fade if execution falls short, he said: "Then you're just left with a restaurant. If customers don't leave a restaurant talking about the food, you've got a problem."

Former NBA great Karl Malone had partnered in a short-lived restaurant that opened in Riverside County, more than an hour from the Los Angeles area where he played briefly late in his career, he said. After the Laker Girls and other teammates opened the place, the fanfare fizzled.

"Once everything was said and done, it wasn't one of his hangouts and the food and service was mediocre," he said.

De Niro doesn't use name

On the other end, a popular concept could get overextended, Santibanez said.

He suggested that Wolfgang Puck, the Los Angeles celebrity chef, might be spreading himself too thin these days, with a couple dozen locations of varying concepts from fine to takeout dining, a line of frozen food and appliances. "No matter how famous a person is, it comes down to the execution," he said.

Some celebrities are less interested in putting their name out there on a restaurant marquee,

Sinclair said. Actor Robert De Niro has invested in two dozen fine-dining restaurants around the world – such as Nobu, his sushi restaurants – but none carry his name, Sinclair said.

"That's a great example of a great product. It just so happens Robert De Niro is part owner."

Owners and operators of themed restaurants realize the odds are stacked against them.

At the Fountains at Roseville, Tres Agaves opened in 2009 with a seemingly narrow theme: tequila.

"There's definitely challenges in it," said Ashley Miller, executive beverage director for the restaurant. "How do we keep it a hot place?"

The first restaurant opened nearly five years ago in San Francisco and tequila aficionado and rocker Sammy Hagar was originally involved but is no longer. The restaurant offers 130 kinds of tequila and cuisine from the Mexican state of Jalisco, the home of tequila.

With two locations, the owners have no intention of going beyond a handful, which narrows the focus, Miller said. "We don't want to be a huge chain."

Tequila is the fastest growing spirit in the country and the restaurant capitalizes on that trend with parties for Mexican holidays, a "passport" program for those who want to track their way through all 130 labels and food that remains true to the region.

"They come for the tequila, stay for the food and come back for the service," Miller said.

Former Sun shines

Almost in the shadow of Phoenix's downtown NBA arena, former Phoenix Sun star Dan Majerle opened Majerle's Sports Grill in 1992 and remains a majority owner of that and two newer suburban locations.

A year after the downtown restaurant opened, A.J. Sulka, the managing partner, realized the restaurant needed a focus besides the bar and bar food.

"If we want to be here for the long term, we need a good lunch," Sulka recalled thinking at the time. The restaurant caters to a business lunch crowd with a consistent and rapidly served menu, Sulka said.

Majerle, a born crowd-pleaser on the court, carried the same personality to the business, Sulka said. At least four or five days a week, Majerle, who left the NBA in 2002, is behind the bar or serving a Cotton Club sandwich, named for the late Suns' coach Cotton Fitzsimmons.

The restaurant has always fulfilled a fan's fantasy with Suns players past and present dropping by, Sulka said. Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, a former Sun, used to lunch at Majerle's. Suns sensation Steve Nash comes by. And so does Suns center Amar'e Stoudemire – who lent his name to a downtown Phoenix restaurant that filed for bankruptcy protection recently.

Majerle's survived recent lean summers in a downtown that saw more than a handful of restaurants come and go, Sulka said.

"If we run Majerle's the way Dan played basketball, loyalty to the team, coaches and fans, and his hard work, determination and the consummate professional he was, no way could we fail," he said.

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