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Bojangles has an appetite for Florida

■ Floridians who long for the Cajun-style chicken and buttermilk biscuits at Bojangles are in luck. The Charlotte, N.C.-based chain is planning to re-enter the Florida market in a big way.

BY JO WERNE
Special to The Miami Herald

Once there were 100 Bojangles restaurants in Florida and at least a dozen in Miami-Dade County. By 1990 all had closed.

You are in luck, Bojangles fans. The Charlotte, N.C.-based restaurant chain is planning to re-enter the Florida market in a big way. Famous for its Cajun-style chicken and buttermilk biscuits, the company has just one restaurant in Florida now — in Jacksonville — but wants to saturate the state within a few years.

Plans are to open a second restaurant by 2008 in Pensacola. The company sees market potential for up to 450 locations throughout the state and will initially focus its expansion on Escambia, Okaloosa and Miami-Dade counties.

BOJANGLES HISTORY

Bojangles was founded in 1977 with a single store in Charlotte and first franchised in 1978. The original owner was Jack Fulk, who is credited with inventing the fast-food biscuit. The co-founder was Richard Thomas.

Then in the 1980s, the Bojangles units in Florida were all closed when New York-based Horn and Hardart moved from restaurant holdings to the catalog mail-order business.

The next two generations of ownership that acquired the Bojangles system then began to rebuild the chain, quintupling its size in revenue from 1990 to the present. The company is now privately owned by several investors, but with 73 independent franchise groups owning from one to 37 restaurants each.

"We are thrilled to bring the concept back to the Florida market," says Eric Newman, executive vice president who has been with Bojangles 23 years. "We believe the people who populate the region are very much like Bojangles' customers in southern Georgia and other markets where the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOJANGLES

SOUTHERN EXPANSION: Bojangles, above, plans to conquer Florida. The company sees market potential for close to 450 locations throughout the state. Its specialties are Cajun chicken meals, below, and breakfast served all day long.

'We are thrilled to bring the concept back to the Florida market.'

— ERIC NEWMAN,
executive vice president of Bojangles

company is experiencing great success."

"Great success" translates into Bojangles' 370 restaurants netting \$500 million in sales annually, Newman reports. Two-thirds of the restaurants are franchises — each doing an average of \$1.6 million in sales a year — and one-third are corporate owned. Every year the company adds 35 restaurants to its roster, mostly in the northeast and southeast United States — 15 states in all — but also in Mexico, Honduras and China.

FLORIDA FRANCHISES

The Florida locations will all be franchises, the company said. Potential franchisees are offered several store options including full-size restaurants in three models, nontraditional and co-branded — those connected to another business such as a grocery store, truck stop or next to a convenience store.

The company hasn't done direct advertising for franchisees in South Florida recently, but plans to do a series of ads



in the Wall Street Journal and in trade publications later this year.

But isn't the chicken restaurant business a bit saturated in South Florida?

"Everybody is selling chicken," agrees Darren Tristano, executive vice president of Technomic, a Chicago-based research and consulting firm. "Chicken sandwiches are sold in almost every type of restaurant. There is a greater demand by consumers for healthier chicken — not fried but grilled, for instance."

But he says he thinks Bojangles is a good concept. "Cajun is a good position to differentiate it from others.

The 450 units planned may not happen in five years, maybe in 15," Tristano says.

Newman doesn't think the chicken restaurant business is over-saturated in Florida, or anywhere else for that matter.

"We have the most loyal customer in quick service," Newman says in a telephone interview from his Charlotte office. "Our customers will return more times a month than other chains'. Our people will drive farther and will pass eight other restaurants to get where we are."

One reason Bojangles has developed an almost cultlike following is that it serves only

BOJANGLES RESTAURANTS

- **Founded:** in 1977 in Charlotte, N.C.
- **No. of restaurants:** 226 franchised and 138 corporate owned in 15 states and three countries.
- **Expansion plans:** 110 more U.S. stores in eight states.
- **Known for:** all-day breakfast menu of Cajun fillets; country ham, eggs and cheese; seasoned sausage or steak; and a core menu of Cajun-style chicken, fresh buttermilk biscuits and 'fixin's.'
- **Claim to fame:** Bojangles makes its famous biscuits fresh, from scratch, every 20 minutes.
- **To learn more:** www.bojangles.com.

fresh food — no frozen chicken is ever used, Newman says. "There are no short cuts. Our biscuits are baked every 20 minutes all day long. Our dirty rice takes 20 minutes to prepare. We are the only people except for the doughnut people who grind fresh coffee all day long."

The all-day breakfast menu offers Cajun filets, seasoned sausage or steak, country ham, eggs and cheese, as well as a variety of breakfast biscuits. Lunch and dinner menus feature Cajun chicken, Cajun pinto beans, seasoned fries and a variety of sides.

SPICY OUTLOOK

Newman thinks Bojangles' re-entry into the Florida market is a natural, partly because people are enjoying spicy, more flavorful foods. "Salsa has passed ketchup in sales," he points out.

The restaurants also do a large take-out business "because people are too busy to cook at home on a daily basis," Newman says.

"Restaurant sales are going up significantly faster than spending income and population growth," he adds. "And people want variety. They don't want the same old burger and fries."