

# Business

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## A sizzling business

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Eric Anders, left and Ofer Shemtov, founders of Wood Ranch BBQ & Grill, made their college dreams of having their own restaurant a reality when it opened in Moorpark in 1992.

When they were 21, Ofer Shemtov and Eric Anders were working 100 hours a week as managers of a Los Angeles restaurant.

Then roommates, the two spent countless hours dreaming about creating their own business.

"We kept thinking, we could do it better," said Anders, now 43.

The two friends parted as time passed Anders went on to earn his master's degree in business from UCLA, and Shemtov and his cousin launched a restaurant in 1988 called Rattler's Bar B Que in Santa Clarita. But Shemtov eventually sold his share in the restaurant, and he resurrected the idea of building a dream restaurant to Anders.

Soon, they devised a "cocktail napkin business plan," with each of them borrowing \$40,000 from family and friends.

In 1992, they founded Wood Ranch BBQ & Grill in Moorpark. It was a wise investment. Shemtov and Anders celebrated the restaurant's 15-year anniversary last week.

During that span, the two Westlake Village residents also opened nine other restaurants, including locations in Agoura Hills and Camarillo in 1995 and 1997, respectively.

But the founders aren't done. They plan to more than double the company's size over the next three to four years, adding 14 stores, including another one in Ventura County.

Negotiations are ongoing for almost all the locations, so the owners are tight-lipped as to when and where the restaurants will open, though they say most stores will stretch from south of Santa Barbara to San Diego. There's also great potential to expanding into other Western states, such as Nevada and Arizona. Their 11th location is scheduled to open late May in Corona.

The growth has been "slow enough that we keep our culture," said DeDe Commans of Westlake Village, the company's area director, who started as a general manager 11 years ago. "We don't want to lose who we are."

Commans describes the restaurant as having "that family feel, where the guests' needs always come first."

While the cost of conducting business is driven up by increases in the cost of food, real estate, taxes, workers' compensation, energy and minimum wage, passing the additional overhead onto the customer is always the last resort, the owners say.

To adjust for the rise in minimum wage, menu prices have increased by about 2.5 percent, Shemtov said.

From dream to reality

In the beginning, there were doubts and fears of being roasted in a fiercely competitive industry, and plenty of 110-hour work weeks. But what they lacked in experience, they made up for with passion, Anders said.

"We were definitely afraid of losing our friends and family's money," Anders said, "but it was more of a motivator, instead of a paralyzer."

On a Saturday night in 1992, after Shemtov and Anders signed the lease, the two watched traffic for an hour from the first location in Moorpark only two cars passed on sleepy New Los Angeles Avenue.

But as the city grew, so did business at the restaurant. The city of Moorpark today is much different, with many new developments and about 10,000 more residents. As of Jan. 1, the city's population was 36,150.

"We eat here all the time," said Kathleen Driscall of Moorpark. "I've never been let down by the food it's always delicious."

Jon Dillehay, also of Moorpark, said the restaurant has the best tri-tip around. The 18-year-old high school senior said that with entrées between \$10 and \$25, it's too expensive to come to the restaurant with friends, so he typically frequents the place with his mom.

About 40,000 customers patronize the chain's 10 restaurants every week. In 2006, Wood Ranch generated well more than \$50 million in revenue, just shy of a 10 percent year-over-year growth, the owners say.

"We compete against the big boys now," such as Cheesecake Factory and other restaurants that offer a "premium casual" dining experience, Anders said.

The company employs an estimated 1,100 people, about 110 at each of the stores, which average about 7,000 square feet, not including patios. Other locations are in Anaheim Hills, Arcadia, Los Angeles, Cerritos, Northridge, Rancho Santa Margarita and Valencia.

The chain also features a catering business that has great growth potential, the owners say.

No plans to go public

Despite the company's financial growth, the owners intend to keep the business private.

"We have a lot of obligation to a lot of people," said Shemtov, 44. "Our goal is to work with our people, pay well and give good benefits, and give managers the opportunity to not work every weekend. We have a lot of single moms and dads who work here and earn a decent living, and we're proud of that."

Fifteen years ago, the restaurant industry was not as competitive with most other industries because it was known for its unappealing hours and low-to-mediocre wages, Shemtov said.

"Now we're in an environment where, as an industry, we have to be much more competitive" to hire the best, he said.

Many of the restaurant's managers make a six-figure salary, while servers make minimum wage plus tips.

Adam Garcia, 24, who is studying to become a massage therapist, has worked for more than two years at Wood Ranch as a server, bartender and caterer.

Even after he gets his license, Garcia plans to continue working a few days a week at Wood Ranch.

"This definitely pays the bills," he said, "the money's great."

On the Net: <http://www.woodranch.com>