



What started as a well-kept dining secret for Boston body builders is poised to ride the healthy food wave across the country.

By Martha O'Connell

The obesity epidemic – our nation's biggest health problem – and the challenge to solve it is reaching a critical point. Restaurants across the board from quick-service to high-end are modifying at least part of their menus to meet the needs of those who desire more healthful choices. But few venues have devoted their fare solely to healthy eating. And few have been as successful as KnowFat! Lifestyle Grille.

The restaurant concept was started six years ago in Watertown, Mass., by body builder Tim Kurtz who partnered with Chef Chris Pappas to come up with healthful fare that also tastes good. Originally called the LoFat, Know Fat Café, the concept expanded to three units in the Boston area. A little over a year ago, foodservice veteran George Naddaff, of Boston Market fame, drove by the original store, saw a line out the door and became enamored with the concept. After doing his own market research, he negotiated with the owners and bought the franchising rights.

What makes KnowFat! Lifestyle Grille unique is its dual concept of quick-casual, healthful food and adjoining retail store, which sells nutritional supplements (vitamins,

minerals, energy bars etc.). Initial customers were body builders and athletes drawn by word of mouth at the gyms, but the concept soon began attracting a hip, urban, healthy-eating clientele.

The fare, defined as "pure-play healthy," meaning all food has a healthful bent, strives to redefine healthy food as food that also has great flavor. Menu items include air-baked fries called Air Fries, high-protein smoothies, high-protein/low-fat soups, steamed vegetables and steak tip entrees, all at an affordable price. Development Chef James Duggan strives to come up with menu items that are not tied to fads and gimmick diets. Menu items range in price from \$4.49 for a sirloin burger to \$10.99 for the large steak tip platter that comes with a vegetable and choice of extra vegetable, brown rice, jasmine rice, roasted potato or Air Fries.

Nutritional content is displayed on menu boards and on printed menus and lists protein, carbohydrate counts, "good fat" and "bad fat" content, and calorie levels. Nutrient and calorie counts are calculated for customers on receipts. The company recently launched a customer loyalty program

called "In the Know" that tracks guests' consumption over time by scanning the loyalty card into the computer. Patrons can monitor their nutrient intake and receive feedback from KnowFat's nutritionist Joan Buchbinder.

How They Cook It

Most food is prepared from scratch on-site, with the exception of the protein "tips" items (chicken, steak and turkey tips), and meats, which are proprietary formulations put together by a manufacturer and finished on-site. Additionally, the soups and chili are purchased from Kettle Cuisine™, Chelsea, Mass., a refrigerated fresh soup company.

Tom Mackey, vice president, field operations, a food and restaurant industry veteran, reveals that with the exception of a special German-made oven for the Air Fries, the equipment is standard fare. "It doesn't take unusual equipment to make healthful food," says Mackey. "It's what's in the food that makes it healthy as long as you aren't frying it. We have no fryers in the restaurants."

Each unit has two steamers, a convection oven and a broiler. A griddle is



At A Glance

Concept: KnowFat! Lifestyle Grille
Headquarters: Boston, Mass.
Owners: Knowfat Franchise Co.
Number of Units: Three
Year Started: 1999
Founder: Tim Kurtz
CEOs: George Naddaff and Eric Spitz
Avg. Unit Size: Restaurant, 2,400-3,000 sq. ft.; Retail, 700-800 sq. ft.
Expansion Plans: 419 units by end of 2008 in seven markets
Number of Seats: 45-50
Service Style: Quick-casual
Equipment: Steamers, convection oven, broiler, smoothie mixers, Trak-Air® machine.

used for egg-white omelets (all-day breakfast fare) and for the high-protein pancakes that are occasionally served as a special. Blenders are used to create smoothies. Vegetables, which accompany all entrees, are prepared in the steamers, as are the brown and white rices. Turkey tips, steak tips, chicken tips, the bison burger and the 85-percent-fat-free sirloin burger are cooked on the broiler. Chicken breast and chicken Parmesan entrées are cooked in the convection oven.

"The only unusual piece of equipment we use is a Trak-Air® machine. It's similar to a RoFry® machine. Basically, 500°F heat blows around the fries at about 30 miles an hour. We put the Air Fries in just before serving the guests," Mackey says. "That's what we're using today, but I'm looking for a new way to do it. We can't cook more than 1.5 pounds of fries at a time and sometimes that's not enough to keep up with the volume."

The company is working to create prototypes for franchise stores. The plan, still in progress, is to add salmon and shrimp items to the menu, both hot and cold, and add a children's menu. "We are experimenting with an Impinger oven for the seafood items and other protein items. It's not a done deal, but we are 80 percent there.

It's a high-cost piece of equipment, but it handles the high-cost protein food well, so it justifies the expense. Initial tests proved very positive," he adds.

Items on the kids' menu will include typical kids' food, but better for them. The company realizes it's not going to "knock kids socks off" with low-fat items, says Mackey. "We want the food to be healthy but still taste the way kids expect them to taste."

Crystal Ball

KnowFat! Lifestyle Grilles may soon be in many metropolitan areas. The company plans to open 24 units in the next year, 70 in the second, 130 in the third, 195 in the fourth year; for a total of about 419 units by the end of 2008. Target markets include Florida, California (San Francisco and San Diego), Texas (especially Houston), Chicago, Denver and more units in the Northeast.

The quick-casual restaurants will range from 2,400 to 3,000 square feet with 45 to 50 seats per unit. The retail sides of the stores are 700 to 800 square feet. Experience with the three flagship stores indicates that most customers either walk in off the street and take the food out, or order ahead

Menu Sampler:

KnowFat! Air Fries	\$1.79
Mediterranean Salad	\$6.99
Italian Turkey Tip Wrap	
Small	\$4.49
Large	\$5.79
BBQ Steak Tip Platter	
Small	\$8.99
Large	\$10.99
Marinated Grilled Chicken Platter	
Small	\$6.99
Large	\$8.99

for pick-up. There is no plan at this time to add a refrigerated piece of equipment for prepackaged takeout items. "We hope to stay at 40-to-50 percent pick-up or takeout so as not to take away from the retail side. At this time, most customers call ahead for pick-up," says Mackey. "Nothing is pre-made, and we have no plan to head in that direction."

With a country in an apparent overweight crisis and the notion that extreme diets don't work well over the long haul, KnowFat! Lifestyle Grilles might have hit on the right formula for serving food that people like, in the right quantities, and chock full of the nutrients we all need to be consuming. ☞