

## Thinking Small Yields Big Results for Parker's

The 2018 *Convenience Store News* Foodservice Leader of the Year found success by focusing on its core offering and executing a well-thought-out plan By Angela Hanson

**LOCALS AND VISITORS** to South Carolina and southeast Georgia know Parker's Convenience Stores as a reputable chain of 53 locations where they can buy fresh, hot, Southern-inspired food, along with fuel and the usual convenience items.

But, if it were possible to turn back the calendar, they'd see a single store with CEO Greg Parker in charge of all the food — and the cash register and car services, too.

Parker, the 2018 *Convenience Store News* Foodservice Leader of the Year, acknowledges that he wore “a lot of hats” when opening his first store in 1976, although he says the store wasn't very busy in those early days. Still, he didn't take a day off for more than three years. The hands-on experience he gained not only gave him direct knowledge of what his customers wanted, but it also helped set the course for the chain's eventual foodservice evolution.

More than 40 years ago, Parker's didn't even offer dispensed beverages because it couldn't get a soda company to supply a fountain. Today, the retailer considers itself a fried chicken specialist and offers made-from-scratch food at more than 30 stores.

“It really has been an evolution,” Parker told *Convenience Store News*.

Parker's started out with fried food before

growing into made-to-order and hot food cases. Its offering continually expanded before paring down the menu. The driver for that, he explained, was Parker's growth into a more data-centric company that understood “being good at foodservice doesn't mean you're good at everything — it means you're good at a few things.”

In Parker's case, that means fried chicken as its core product and the items people like eating with it. “We knew what Southern preferences were,” he noted.

Focusing on the Southern staple caters to Parker's market, but it also sets up the c-store chain to compete directly with other chicken programs, including fast-food restaurants and locations outside the convenience channel.

To differentiate itself, the retailer uses hormone-free, antibiotics-free, never-frozen, hand-selected chicken tenders cooked in premium oil with fryers that are filtered every fourth fry. Parker's made a major investment in a fresh oil monitoring system that tracks the oil's quality.

“We're really focused on quality; on cooking smaller amounts more often, rather than 48 tenders at a time,” Parker said, stressing the importance of the “first crunch” when biting into a chicken tender, which he says is easy to lose over time when cooking in large batches. “Consistency matters.”

When Parker's conducted a blind taste test against seven competitors, the results were positive. “Our chicken was by far the preference. ... It means we're doing a good job,” Parker said.

Along with improving its product, the company has gotten





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better at educating the consumer.

The retailer is committed to its food program as it continues to grow in store count. All new Parker's stores will offer Parker's Kitchen, and it's been added to existing stores where possible. Some of its highest-traffic stores are generating sales on par with many top fast-food competitors. This is good news for Parker's, which sees a food-focused future for itself.

"We want to be a foodservice company that sells convenience items, rather than vice versa," Parker said. "There is an enormous, seismic shift going on in the world of retail."

**The Power of Data**

As the competitive landscape changes, Parker calls upon his experience from multiple terms as vice chairman of research for NACS, the Association for Convenience &


Fuel Retailing. That tenure gave him a deep appreciation for data and metrics.

"Metrics give you a scorecard, a report card, so you can look and evaluate," he said, adding that Parker's is now "knee-deep" in a software solution that provides real-time data and analytics. "Before, we wanted to be everything to everyone."

Previously, removing an item from the menu might have caused customers to complain, and store managers might not have had an accurate understanding of how popular the item truly was. Now, however, real-time, up-to-date sales data provides the objective information that Parker's needs, leading it toward the right decisions.


Looking back, Parker can identify a number of mistakes the company made, such as venturing too far from its core product and operating as a Quiznos franchise, but he views these as important learning experiences. He also credits the "three legs of the stool" of his foodservice team for the chain's success: Chief Marketing Officer Brandon Hoffman,

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To take a foodservice program from good to great, it requires a true team effort, according to Parker's CEO Greg Parker.

Director of Foodservice Heather Davis, and Serena Davis, the company's top foodservice training specialist.

"It really does take a team, and we have an extraordinary team," he said. "Good foodservice is hard — it's so different from typical c-stores."

To take a foodservice program from good to great, Parker believes operators must "hyperfocus" on the consumer, understanding what their regional desires are. A focus on food quality is also integral to success, he said, as is upholding food safety standards.

Although Parker's has come a long way from the single store with its do-everything owner, the company isn't content to rest easy. As a foodservice leader, it remains hungry.

"We have a culture of continuous improvement in our company," Parker explained. "We're never

satiated, never satisfied. We never think we've got it all right, even though our numbers are pretty extraordinary."

The insights Parker's is gathering from its new focus on being data-centric, along with the efforts of its Chief Innovation Officer Eric Jones, will generate new initiatives for the Parker's Kitchen program and beyond.

For now, the chain is exploring things like drive-thrus — with which it has experienced limited success — and a future with delivery. C-stores used to be about the last mile, according to Parker, but "now, it's like the last 10 yards."

Both home delivery and ordering for pickup via mobile app will be part of showing customers that Parker's is a destination to get what they want, when they want it.

"Speed is going to matter. We're teaching consumers it's OK to be impatient," Parker said. "At Parker's, we're very focused on that — and on quality products delivered in a consistent, delicious way." **CSN**