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Lark Creek Restaurant Group

All-American restaurateurs put an entrepreneurial spin on 'farm-to-table,' welcoming all to company's fine-dining spots and its casual growth concept

■ BY WADE DANIELS

Is the word "mayonnaise" too French for an all-American menu? That's a question Bradley Ogden and Michael Dellar, the co-founders of San Francisco-based Lark Creek Restaurant Group, discussed as they sought to build a Yankeeified bill of fare for their first venture together during the late 1980s.

The Lark Creek Inn in Larkspur, Calif., just north of San Francisco, opened in 1989. It was the first restaurant in a portfolio that now boasts seven award-winning concepts, each with its own variation on farm-to-table, regional red, white and blue cuisines.

"Even in wording, we wanted to stay true without using European or foreign terms, trying to make an all-American place," says Ogden, perhaps best known for his eponymous Las Vegas restaurant.

Ultimately, the word "mayonnaise" was used because Ogden and Dellar figured that some things just couldn't be changed. Besides, printing something like "sauce of egg, oil and vinegar" on the menu would just sound odd, Ogden notes.

Keeping it American, typically with an upscale spin and a bit of flair is how the Lark Creek group continues to grow.

Along with The Lark Creek Inn, which is located in a remodeled 19th-century farmhouse and offers fine-dining fare that The New York Times called "gutsy, country cooking," the Lark Creek group also operates One Market, which opened in 1993 in downtown San Francisco offering all-American fare with a cosmopolitan twist.

Two years later, the company opened Lark Creek Walnut Creek, also near San Francisco, which is a more casual version of the Lark Creek Inn.

Parcel 104 opened in 2001 in partnership with the Santa Clara Marriott. Its fine-dining menu draws heavily on local Silicon Valley area products and traditions. And Arterra, whose menu also relies heavily on local produce and seafood purveyors, opened in 2002 in partnership with the San Diego Marriott Del Mar.

In addition, the Lark Creek group operates three Yankee Pier restaurants, which are casual cafes styled after New England clam shacks.



THE NRN 50:
MULTICONCEPT
GROWTH COMPANIES
Reigning brands thrive with
diverse cateries under one umbrella



Above: The Lark Creek Inn is located in a restored 19th-century farmhouse.

Left, from left: Michael Dellar, co-founder and co-proprietor; Jon Gologorsky, chief financial officer; John Hullivan, director of beverage and service; Adrian Hoffman, group chef; and Quinn McKenna, vice president of operations

Most recently, the company opened Bradley Ogden, which is located in Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. A Zagat survey called Bradley Ogden the "Best New Restaurant of 2003." It is the company's only restaurant outside of California.

Overall revenues for the 2005 calendar year rose 14 percent over 2004. The company does not provide same-store sales figures, but same-store sales growth is suggested given that no new restaurants opened in either of those years. Dellar notes that the three Yankee

Pier restaurants — the first of which is next to the Lark Creek Inn, while the other two are in an airport and an upscale mall — were the group's star performers in 2005. The Yankee Piers earned \$1,200 per square foot last year, while all other restaurants the company owns — most of which are far more upscale — averaged about \$900 per square foot.

As such, Dellar says Yankee Pier will be the company's expansion vehicle, possibly in the form of fast-casual or kiosk modes. The company also intends to continue

introducing new restaurant concepts, opening two to three new venues a year.

Whatever the concepts and no matter how upscale, Dellar — whose wife, Leslye, is a company vice president, as is Ogden's wife, Jody — says the group will continue to focus on welcoming everyone.

This has been a common and lauded trait of Lark Creek restaurants, even at Bradley Ogden in Las Vegas, which the James Beard Foundation dubbed the "Best New Restaurant of 2004."

"Bradley Ogden is among the first of the fine-dining restaurants in Las Vegas that didn't have that snooty attitude," says Heidi Knapp Rinella, who writes about restaurants for the Las Vegas Review-Journal. "I've seen it where conventioners are treated just as if they are high-rollers."

She gave the restaurant and its food an overall "A."

In conceptualizing new restaurants, (Continued on page 108)

MULTICONCEPT GROWTH COMPANIES

Lark Creek Restaurant Group

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due diligence is involved, but not much time is dedicated to market research or focus groups to see what may sell.

"We open restaurants that we want to eat in," Dellar says.

Such was the case when he and Ogden and their wives founded the business after taking over the Lark Creek Inn in 1988.

At that time, Dellar was an executive at San Francisco's Spectrum Foods Inc., and Ogden was the executive chef at that city's Campton Place Hotel and Restaurant. They were both on the American Institute of Wine and Food's

Ogden's dedication to American foods was formed by his upbringing in the Midwest. For a time, he worked on a farm, cooking with homegrown ingredients, including trout from the farm's pond. His professional career began after graduating in 1977 from The Culinary Institute of America, where he was named most likely to succeed in his class.

Regarding his devotion to American fare, Ogden and his company's fellow chefs explain that in many cases, "American" means a nod to the country's cultural melting pot. Adrian Hoffman, Lark Creek's group chef, even

published a 2002 article in the journal *Gastronomica* on what it means to cook American food. He said that while something foreign like coq au vin may appear on a Lark Creek menu, there would be so many local ingredients used and technique twists taken for the dish that the customer would eventually receive something thoroughly American on their plate.

Most of the Lark Creek group's expansion has resulted from the prompting of others. That was the case with One Market, whose name is actually the address of the Financial District building, built in 1917, on whose first floor the restaurant resides. Dellar says the building's owners were fans of the Lark Creek Inn and approached his company to open a similar restaurant for them.

Business queries and partnership proposals also led to the openings of the Yankee Pier restaurants, Parcel 104, Arterra and Bradley Ogden.

Despite its many successful restaurants, the Lark Creek group did have one failed venture. The Birch Creek Restaurant, an upscale eatery near Sacramento opened in 2000 and lasted barely two years. Dellar says the community of Roseville, Calif., which had seen only a degree of gentrification, was not ready for such a restaurant. Also, the venue was in the rear area of a shopping mall, giving it poor visibility.

"It was big lesson for us," Dellar says.

As Lark Creek continues to grow, new training and retention efforts are being

implemented. Between new openings and attrition, the company will need to hire some 40 managers over the next two years, says Quinn McKenna, vice president of operations.

He notes that two management-training positions are being created, for which the hires will be brought on board to be groomed, even before it is known where they will be placed. Also under development is a mentoring program to put promising employees on a fast track to management and to improve chances of retaining them.

"We're a relatively small company and it can be hard to find the resources to keep people on staff if there's not a place for them," McKenna says. "Finding 40 new managers in a competitive labor market is a challenge."

One retention and devel-

AT A GLANCE

COMPANY: Lark Creek Restaurant Group

HEADQUARTERS: San Francisco

YEAR FOUNDED: 1989

NUMBER OF UNITS: 9

CONCEPTS: The Lark Creek Inn, fine dining; One Market, fine dining; Lark Creek Walnut Creek, casual; Yankee Pier, casual; Parcel 104, fine dining; Arterra, fine dining; Bradley Ogden, fine dining

ANNUAL SALES: \$38 million

WHERE IT TRADES: California, Nevada

NEW MARKET TARGETS: possibly fast-casual and kiosk eateries and in other states

TOP EXECUTIVES: Michael Dellar, co-founder and co-proprietor; Bradley Ogden, chef, co-founder and co-proprietor

WEBSITE: www.larkcreek.com

opment activity sees groups of managers take off work once a year for a field trip of sorts. For example, one group in 2005 spent the day at a vineyard learning about wine making, and even helped crush grapes.

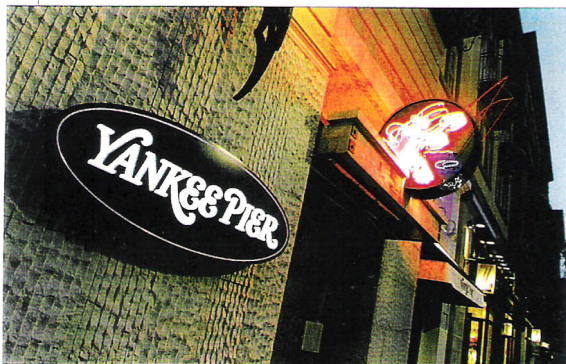
McKenna notes that the company has no formal hiring resources department. McKenna, along with group chef Hoffman and a couple other executives, leads the "grassroots" recruitment and retention efforts.

The Bradley Ogden restaurant is the exception, however. Its recruitment and hiring is handled by Ogden and by Caesars Palace's parent company, Harrah's Entertainment Inc. With so many new restaurants popping up in Las Vegas and competition for staff so fierce, Ogden has enlisted family for help. Specifically, his son Bryan is his senior sous chef. Like his father, the younger Ogden trained at The Culinary Institute of America and helped bring a number of friends from there to work at Bradley Ogden.

Bradley Ogden spends most of his time at the Las Vegas restaurant. Though he usually spends more than a week a month traveling on company business, visiting Lark Creek's other properties and working on expansion projects.

He says he constantly has ideas for new restaurants. One grand vision he harbors is to build a high-end retreat, probably in northern California's wine country. It would have 50 to 60 luxury cottages for visitors and it would double as a culinary school. As such, chefs would receive food and wine training and they would cook for the guests in the cottages.

"I've been around hotels quite a few years, and I think we could do something very interesting," Ogden says. ■



Lark Creek Restaurant Group operates three Yankee Pier casual restaurants. The cafes are modeled after New England clam shacks and specialize in seafood like this oyster platter, right.

board of directors, and along the way began talking about a partnership because they both felt ready to start something of their own.

Dellar visited The Lark Creek Inn as a consultant charged with helping its then-owners plan a renovation. When those owners learned what the project would entail, they started talking about selling, which led Dellar to talk to Ogden about buying.

Dellar and Ogden bought the Lark Creek Inn, renovated it, and saw its revenues hit \$3 million in their first year of operation, up from \$900,000 in its final year under the previous owners.

"When I left Campton Place and opened Lark Creek, I'd wanted to do sort of a country American food," Ogden says. "The Lark Creek Inn was ideal for that because of the quaint setting in this old house. It was so so was perfect for my next step."

