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2007 Chain Operator

Bravo Cucina Italiana and Brio Tuscan Grille

A steady and sustainable growth plan that focuses on adding units and increasing same-store sales has these two BDI-owned concepts on the precipice of bigger things.



By Amelia Levin, Associate Editor

Take a look around. How often do you see an Italian restaurant that's not a mom-and-pop or a super high-end restaurant? How often do you come across an Italian chain that's somewhere in between? Until recently, your answer would most likely be, "not very often."

Despite being around for the last decade, just in the past year it seems that Columbus, Ohio-based Bravo Development Inc.'s expansion efforts for two of its concepts, Brio Tuscan Grille and Bravo Cucina Italiana, have begun to take noticeable shape, bursting into the "polished casual" scene. That means that although Brio and Bravo both pay homage to the informal but modern atmosphere, timely service and reasonable prices on which many casual, full-service chain restaurants capitalize, they have also bumped everything up a notch. While many consider Brio to be slightly "dressier" and Bravo to be more family- and neighborhood-oriented, both are equally known for their higher quality food, thanks to better ingredients and executive chefs in each restaurant, plus upscale décor, and bar areas where guests linger.

It's pretty clear what's happening. About two years ago, BDI recruited Saed Mohseni, then the chief executive officer of McCormick & Schmick's, to serve in the same role at BDI, although Mohseni was already on BDI's board of directors. One could say Mohseni has done for polished casual, Italian concepts what he's done with McCormick &

Schmick's in the polished casual seafood arena. In short, he's virtually created a whole new segment. Mohseni's job when he came to BDI was to help enhance the Brio and Bravo images, and rev up the expansion engines. Not only has he done that, but to put the concepts' success into perspective, they brought in a combined

\$240 million in sales last year. Bravo increased its sales from \$115 million in 2005 to \$130 in 2006. Brio went from \$83.2 million in sales for 2005 to \$110 million in sales for 2006. Both concepts were able to accomplish these high sales growths with an expansion of just four units each. And what's more, both concepts appear to be in a position to sustain or accelerate their growth in the years to come.

These reasons, and others make it clear why *Foodservice Equipment & Supplies* chose BDI's Bravo Cucina Italiana and Brio Tuscan Grille as co-Chain Operators of the Year.

The Softer Side

Since opening its first location in 1992, Bravo has grown to 37 units scattered throughout the Midwest and East Coast. Seven years later, Brio opened its first unit and now operates 25 locations. In a departure from the past decade, Mohseni says he plans to open 10 total Brio and Bravo units each year for the next three to five years, some of which will debut in western states, including Arizona, New Mexico and Nevada (Las Vegas). While it seems as if Brio and Bravo could expand even faster, Mohseni's reluctant to do so. "We stay very disciplined in terms of the number of restaurants we have," he says. "This business is about human resources, not real estate and not finance. We're looking for a

quality group of people rather than high multi-unit numbers. You cannot develop the human resource faster than you can develop sites."

The "human element" behind these two BDI concepts certainly sets them apart from many chains out there. Team members are strongly encouraged to move up through the

Both Brio and Bravo (pictured here) capitalize on their open kitchens as a way to keep guests excited during their dining experience while emphasizing the freshness and culinary sophistication of the food. The majority of the key cooking equipment sits lower than eyesight so that guests focus on the cooks at work and the decorative tiling. The wood-fired ovens that cook the flatbreads also serve as a point of visual interest.



Photos courtesy of BDI

of the Year



This Bravo Cucina Italiana in Albuquerque, N.M., like all locations, features an elaborate bar area with granite and dark woods, a good amount of seating space and frosted glass that separates this space from the dining room.

ranks to become managers, sous chefs and executive chefs, Mohseni says. A typical unit consists of an executive chef, two sous chefs, three assistant managers and 90 to 100 team members. The company created its Rising Star program about four years ago to train its employees in their positions as well as in assisting with store openings. Collectively, this gives employees the educational foundation necessary to function as a manager in a multi-unit environment or as a sous or even executive chef. At the same time, Mohseni says, BDI "constantly looks for great talent from the outside that can add more depth to our team."

Creating an Environment

While Mohseni rates its importance second to human resources, real estate still plays a central role in BDI's growth plans. This is particularly the case for Brio Tuscan Grille, a destination dining place that attaches to shopping malls and lifestyle centers in an effort to attract women of all ages. "Sixty-three percent of guests who visit Brio are female," Mohseni says. "Brio is definitely a place where women can get together for lunch with friends and relax in between shopping."

Brio Tuscan Grille presents a slightly dressier, more upscale décor than its sister restaurant, Bravo. Elements contributing to this presentation include light-colored walls spotted with paintings of Italian scenes, a granite-topped bar, and lots of light fixtures and white drapery throughout the dining space.



As a result, Brio's elaborate outdoor patios help create an environment that appeals to its target audience. "There's a tremendous amount of focus put on open space not only in the inside dining room at Brio, but also on the outdoor area to capitalize on seasonality," Mohseni says. Even at colder, Midwest locations, the Brio patio stays open longer thanks to tents and heaters.

Bravo restaurants, on the other hand, generally take shape as freestanding units in high-density, residential areas, many of them affluent and nearby major cities. This helps attract





Cooks at the Brio Tuscan Grille add toppings and prepare large wood slabs where the wood-fired pizza will get sliced and presented to the table. A long, brass hood maintains the aesthetics of the kitchen. In addition to performing its necessary functions, while modern, warm-colored light fixtures add brightness to the kitchen.

families and position the concept as a more casual, neighborhood place for enjoying a nice meal. "Where going to Brio might be a special occasion, Bravo is a local option where you take your family out to eat," Mohseni says.

The hallmark of both restaurants, Mohseni says, is the open, exhibition kitchen. "We feel that the open kitchen reinforces the freshness of our food and offers a certain showmanship. Dining is as much about eating as it is about attending a show."

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Emphasis on Value

While one certainly wouldn't characterize Brio and Bravo as "cheap" in any way, they do appear to offer a good value for their prices. Portions are generous, and it's up to the guest how much they want to spend. This is easy to do, though, especially at Brio where optional starter salads up-charge the entrées by at least \$3; the "specialty wines," grouped together and priced a good \$2 or \$3 more than house wines, take precedence on the wine list; and dessert options include mini variations of tiramisu, crème brûlée and other classics in tiny espresso cups for \$1.50 that add up quick.

"The average check per person hovers around \$18 for Bravo and can get up to \$23 at Brio,"

Mohseni says. "The reason Brio has higher check averages is because there's a greater emphasis on chops, being a Tuscan-style grill. Twelve percent of sales are generated from selling meat, and steaks are more expensive than pasta and flatbreads.

"In terms of pricing, we're really looking for the best ingredients, and making sure we're within what competition is charging and what customers expect to pay," Mohseni says. "Value plays a major role in



our company philosophy. We're more focused on getting our guests to visit more than three times in one month rather than on the prices alone."

Belly Up to the Bar

For both restaurants, however, expanding the bar has been a central focus. Just a couple of months ago, BDI announced plans to expand its

BRIO Tuscan Grille

The upscale factor of Brio begins even before a guest walks in the door: the sheer size of real estate the store consumes, coupled with elaborate awnings and signage, and sometimes large white pillars. Inside, cream-colored walls and accents of gold, copper and brass weave throughout the space. "We're very much in line with our name, Brio, which means 'lively' in Italian," says Brio Concept President Brian O'Malley. "We're trying to create that Tuscan-rust look and an atmosphere that's loud and open," he says.

At about 52 tables seating roughly 230 guests per unit, the average Brio will see about 4,000 to 5,000 guests per week. Outside on the terrace, an important part of Brio, seats can range from 15 to as many as 45, O'Malley says.

"We want Brio to be upscale, but very, very friendly. At any one time, we can have a family at one table, the president of the local bank at the next, and 'ladies night' at another."

The drama continues with the exposed kitchen, where cooks can be seen preparing pizzas, grilling steaks and fixing salads, but all the major cooking sits below eye-level.

BDI's Chief Culinary Officer Philip Yandolino, who oversees the menu and culinary operations of both Brio and Bravo concepts, says, "We want to showcase the marble and tile along the back wall and the wood-fired oven, rather than a bunch of stainless steel. Rather than being more indus-

trial-looking, we wanted the kitchen to be more welcoming."

Some Brio locations have countertop seating along the kitchen line to add to the entertainment. From left to right, an upright broiler and Dutch oven for searing make up the grill station. Next to that sit a convection oven for breads and some entrées, and the sauté station that consists of a 12-burner range with two ovens underneath. A pasta station next to that also has a 12-burner range with refrigerated drawers underneath. A wood-fired oven makes up the pizza station, followed by the pantry where staff prepare salads and desserts.

"We strive to use the most authentic Italian ingredients we can," Yandolino says. That means lots of travel to the home country and seeking out the freshest, most seasonal products available.

"Instead of smaller shrimp, we'll use jumbo shrimp. Instead of olive oil, we'll use extra virgin olive oil. These are little details that maybe the guests don't notice individually, but when combined together they'll say, 'Wow, this is really good.'"

At Brio, the menu focuses on meat-heavy dishes like prime grilled steaks, gorgonzola-crusting lamb chops, and wood-grilled salmon. Pastas include the popular chicken Milanese pomodoro, a crusty, breaded chicken breast atop buttery noodles in a light tomato-red wine sauce, to the richer lasagna Bolognese. At lunch, paired-down entrée specials and pastas, entrée salads, and flatbreads rule.



- 2006 Annual Sales: \$110 million
- 2005 Annual Sales: \$83.2 million
- Current Number of Units: 25
- 2006 Number of Units: 20
- Locations: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas and Virginia. Areas where new units will open soon include Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico.
- Menu and Atmosphere: Tuscan-style grilled steaks, chops and other meat dishes, plus pastas, flatbreads and bruschettas. Brighter,

more upscale interior with a distinguishable bar and seating area with plush chairs and a fireplace.

- Average Per-Person Checks: \$23
- Target Customer: Women, all-ages, higher-income individuals
- Real Estate: Attached to shopping malls, lifestyle centers, spacious outdoor patio
- Busiest Days/Parts: Lunch, brunch, after-work, later dinners
- Equipment Dealer: The Wasserstrom Co., Columbus, Ohio

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bar program significantly in 2008. "We believe that both Brio and Bravo, being more upscale, affordable dining places, have had an opportunity to capture bar sales based on where we're located and what we would consider an after-work or late-night place for people to gather," Mohseni says.

Both concepts have always served wine and offered a full-bar, with an emphasis on specialty cocktails and martinis at Brio, but that will serve as just the cornerstone for what comes next. "We're adding tap beers to our bars, and will focus on our 'martini nights,'" Mohseni says. Instead of discounting drinks to attract guests, he says, both concepts will instead offer a specific bar-food menu with tailored-down dining menu items perfect for sharing such as flatbreads, bruschettas, calamari and other appetizers. Currently, bar sales at Brio rake in about 22 percent of total unit revenues, a significant amount.

"Our bar area has always been an integral part of our entire design," Mohseni says. The long, dark wood bars, surrounded by small tables and a comfortable seating area with plush, leather couches, sofas and a fireplace are typically the first thing customers see when they walk in the door. "The soft seating area clearly creates a comfortable environment for people to gather," Mohseni says.

Change Is Good

It's one thing to attract a more sophisticated crowd and another to be able to keep them coming back on a regular basis. "The average consumer might like something today, but five years later, their palettes may change, so our kitchen needs to be flexible enough to handle that," Mohseni says.

At Bravo, the menu changes three times a year and at Brio, two times,



While Bravo's exterior resembles Brio's, inside, the décor consists of darker woods and white tablecloths. "Everything has a more rustic finish so it's a little less high-end, less dramatic than Brio," says Michael Mosher, Bravo concept president.

The same goes for the menu, characterized by less meat dishes and more pasta and sautéed items, but still including high-end ingredients such as imported, buffalo mozzarella and imported Borson goat cheese for the wild mushroom bruschetta. Seafood items span the menu as well, from lobster and shrimp ravioli to wood-grilled tilapia with crab.

Bravo changes its menu seasonally, but also to introduce special dishes from different regions in Italy. "Last year, we focused on Sicily and this year, we took a trip to northern Italy where there are stronger flavors like prosciutto, reggiano, orzo, risotto, and stronger green products," Mosher says.

Newer restaurants feature private dining rooms, and generally speaking the main dining room can seat up to 260 guests, Mosher says. In total, the concept has 25 to 30 back-of-the-house staff

members and 16 to 25 servers cover the floor on a given night. The terrace usually has around 50 seats depending on the location, he says. On busy nights, Bravo will do around 1,200 covers, and 600 on slower nights. During busy lunches, the restaurant will see 400 transactions and 200 during slower ones, according to Yandolino.

The kitchen at Bravo almost exactly mirrors that of Brio, although it doesn't have an oven station because of fewer meat dishes on the menu, Yandolino says.

Both Brio and Bravo kitchens, he says, generally span about 2,000-square-feet. Bravo's back of the house consists of prep tables; two convection double-deck ovens for roasting chickens and baking breads; a walk-in cooler; and a smaller walk-in freezer just used for cheesecakes, par-baked dough and some other desserts.

When purchasing equipment, Yandolino says, it's important for both Brio and Bravo to have extremely durable, high-end pieces to handle their volume, to hold temperatures at safe levels for a consistent product. "We also deal with a situation where all of our equipment leans against the back wall so we need compressors and other electrical parts that are positioned out in the front,"



The outdoor grill at Brio Tuscan Grille represents an important medium for attracting and retaining the concept's target female customers and other patrons looking to enjoy a relaxing lunch in between shopping, grab some after-work drinks and appetizers, or enjoy an evening meal. Thanks to portable heaters and tents, the patio stays open during more months of the year even in areas with colder weather.

although chefs from both restaurants constantly evaluate all items. "We're one of the dying breeds of restaurants that work with executive chefs rather than kitchen managers," Mohseni says. "This helps us put a greater emphasis on quality and execution, and it certainly allows us a greater opportunity to experiment with different ingredients and flavors."

Adapting the menu is just part of BDT's philosophy, Mohseni says. "As part of running any business you have to constantly grow, change, evaluate and modify," he says. "Our architectural design has evolved over time. So has our food program. And now our bar program. As any good organization, we make every effort to improve our operations so we don't wake up one day and say, 'We really missed the boat, we have to reinvent ourselves.'"

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- 2006 Annual Sales: \$130 million
- 2005 Annual Sales: \$115 million
- Current Number of Units: 37
- 2006 Number of Units: 34
- Locations: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin.
- Menu and Atmosphere: Casual, lively

atmosphere, but slightly more upscale with white tablecloths and a nice bar area with seating. Menu focuses on pastas, flatbreads and some meat entrees.

- Average Per-Person Checks: \$18
- Target Customers: Families
- Real Estate: Free-standing units in high-density residential areas outside cities
- Basicest Departments: Dinner, business lunches
- Equipment Dealer: The Wasserstrom Co., Columbus, Ohio

Yandolino says. "It's a little more expensive up front, but it's worth it in the long run."

As far as food safety, all managers must receive ServSafe certification and all staff members undergo rigid training. "We also complete line checks, check temperatures all the time, check the food that comes in, wash all our vegetables, use gloves and color-coded chopping boards, enforce handwashing, the whole nine yards," Yandolino says. To maintain consistency, many products, both at Brio and Bravo, get portioned prior to service, or during it on the line.

Bravo differs from Brio in that it has a curbside take-out program to compete with other casual chains, Mosher says. "This is a huge part of our growth," he says. "We have a very strong and loyal guest base, but if we can get another visit out of them because of the convenience of our curbside take-go program, that's extra business for us." At the moment, to-go sales account for 6 percent of total restaurant sales per unit, "which is very good for us considering when we started the program 18 to 24 months ago, we were in that 2.5-percent range," Mosher says.