

# FROM A SPARK TO A BONFIRE

**How Maverik went from a solid grab-and-go concept to a best-in-class foodservice program**

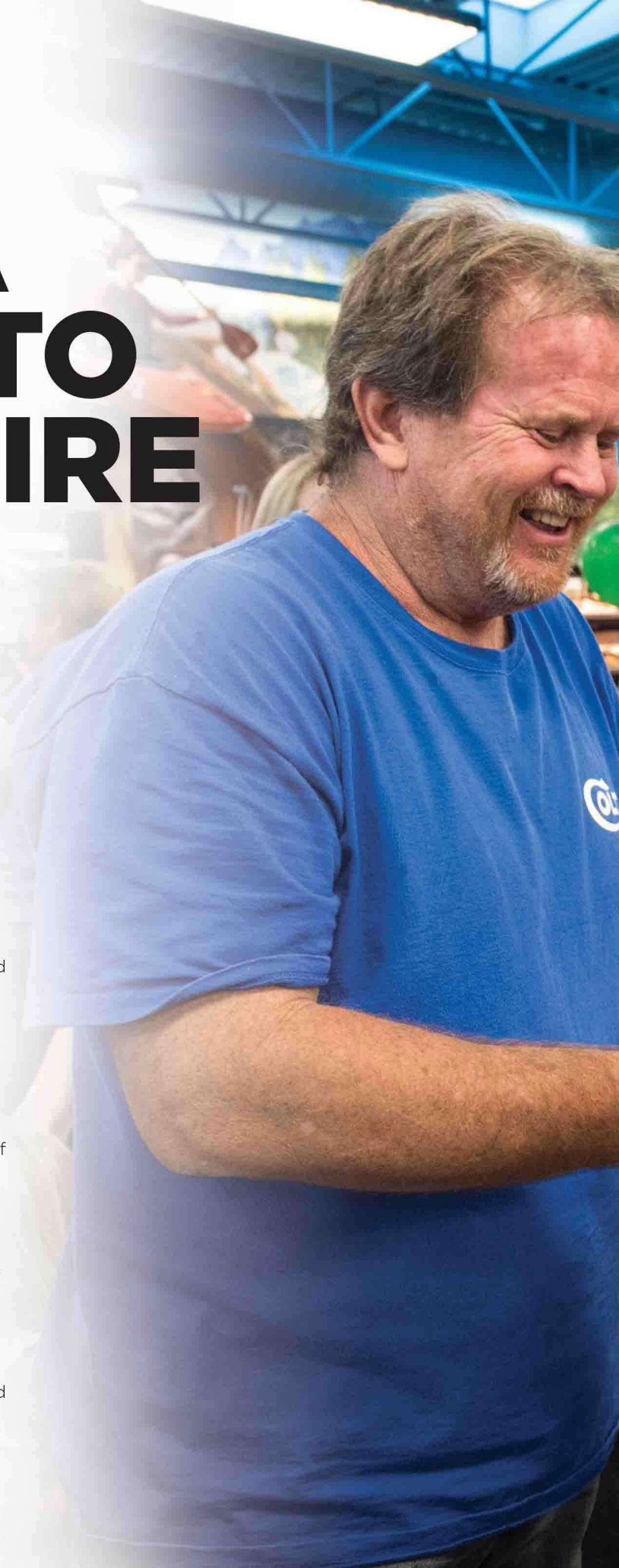
By Angela Hanson

**AS A CONVENIENCE STORE OPERATOR**, Maverik Inc. serves as an example of how to do convenience retailing right, by embracing a unique identity as “Adventure’s First Stop” and pursuing an ambitious growth strategy that led it to open milestone store No. 300 in July 2017 and land the retailer on the *Convenience Store News* Top 20 Growth Chains ranking earlier this year.

As a foodservice operator, however, Maverik is perhaps even more inspiring for its evolution from a standard c-store food offering (think roller grill, packaged sandwiches) to a program that is now a best-in-class example of how to take convenience foodservice to the next level.

Rich Green, director of foodservice for the Salt Lake City-based chain, recalls that when he joined the company 13 years ago, Maverik’s foodservice program centered on baking its own fresh bread in-store at every location. Aside from that, Maverik offered “the typical convenience store fare.” The largely grab-and-go offering was solid, but had little to set it apart from competitors’ foodservice programs, according to Green.

This led to the development of the BonFire brand. Launched in 2009 alongside a revamp of Maverik’s Bodacious Bean coffee program, BonFire tied Maverik’s food items together under a single identity with an adventurous theme and





# BONFIRE GRILL







The BonFire Grill concept, which began testing in late 2014, is now included in all new-build Maverik stores.

color-coded labels based on the type of product, such as a red flame for high-traffic hot items and a green flame for fruit and salads.

By the fall of 2013, the company was ready to move Maverik and BonFire to the next level.

Enter Maverik's new BonFire Grill made-to-order program.

"Sales were kind of flat. We were in growth mode, trying to figure out what foodservice meant to us and what the next five years looked like," Green recounted.

The team gathered and came up with some guiding principles to help the retailer along the journey. These included: a serious focus on "fresh"; a goal of becoming destination-worthy; and a unique presence in Maverik's operating footprint and in the convenience channel.

"We wanted to give customers a reason to come to Maverik to eat something they can't get anywhere else," Green said.

These efforts have helped Maverik's foodservice offering "explode" in the years since. But it isn't looking to let up on the momentum. As it continues to develop the BonFire

Grill made-to-order program and add it to all new stores, Maverik plans to keep the adventure going.

### Forming a Foodservice Identity

Maverik has made several significant moves as it's built up its foodservice program.

First, it began experimenting with creative, "out of the box" limited-time offers (LTOs), some of which became mainstays on the menu, like the M.O.A.B. (Mother of All Burritos).

Next, the retailer reexamined what went into its products and improved the quality to become a more ingredient-based operation.

Maverik also hired a new corporate chef who brought a different perspective to the business. Chef Kyle Lore spent much of his career working in fine-dining restaurants in places like luxury hotels. He later spent some time in retail as a corporate chef for West Salt Lake City-based Harmons grocery stores. Joining Maverik marked his first step into the convenience channel.

Lore's knowledge and ability to help the Maverik team see things differently combined well with the company's knowledge of customers in the convenience world.

"We had a pretty happy marriage there," Green said.

Together, they asked a simple question with a complex answer: How could Maverik bring more flavor to its menu? The company decided to create a taste profile that was spicier and more flavorful — something that differed from its competitors, which include quick-service and fast-casual outlets, as well as other convenience stores.

While it risked alienating consumers who don't enjoy that kind of food, eschewing a distinct identity in favor of chasing universal appeal would have had its own risks.

"When you try to be everything to everybody, you end up nothing to nobody," Green said.

Maverik reached the 300-store mark in July and is shooting to have 400 stores within the next four to five years.







**BonFire Grill features an open kitchen where customers can watch the preparation of made-to-order items like pizza and tacos. Grab-and-go options are also available.**

The process involved trial and error as Maverik worked out what would make good menu items, what its customers wanted to eat, and what was feasible in a c-store setting.

A common error for the foodservice team, which Green describes as being made up entirely of “foodies,” was to veer too far into upscale items, which could be too expensive to offer or too esoteric to be appealing, such as a spicy Italian pizza with Calabrian chilies.

Other missteps came from simply misjudging customer response. One example of this is what Lore calls “The Great Gravy Revolt,” when Maverik rolled out a new recipe for its biscuits and gravy. The new version wasn’t bad, but it was a change customers didn’t want. So, the chain rolled it back, and biscuits and gravy remain a core item today.

The financial crunch of testing new items at lower margins was another challenge, but the eventual results made it worth overcoming.

“It’s all been really good for us. Even though it takes time and investment to build a platform based on quality and distinction, I think our customers recognized the difference and rewarded us by visiting more frequently and buying more food,” Green said.

As Maverik has reinvented its food, the BonFire brand has evolved with it, going from a quality grab-and-go program to a made-to-order initiative in the form of the BonFire Grill, an open kitchen where customers can spectate the preparation of items like pizza and tacos.

The BonFire Grill concept began testing in late 2014 and is now included in all new-build Maverik stores. In 2015, Maverik underwent a store redesign that places food front and center, making its food-service offerings visually prominent inside the stores and increasing sales by huge numbers in some of the updated stores.

“That effort, particularly in new stores, definitely swung the pendulum more toward foodservice,” Green said.

### **The Journey Continues**

At the end of the day, Maverik keeps convenience as the No. 1 factor, refusing to compromise either speed of service or the quality of its menu.

“Simplicity is important to us, so we can deliver convenience,” Green said.

Striving to balance both attributes affects everything — from designing Maverik’s store kitchens to ensure the least amount of wasted time during food preparation, to using equipment that meets the retailer’s unique needs. Advances in restaurant technology help, such as the TurboChef ovens Maverik uses that can cook a pizza in 30 seconds.

Upcoming developments for Maverik may include a made-to-order beverage program, which the company is in the initial stages of exploring. Green acknowledges that such a program is a “tough one” for the company, describing how he’s observed sudden beverage orders like a made-to-order milkshake disrupt the rhythm of the kitchen.

Working with third-party delivery services, such as Uber Eats or DoorDash, is also something the company is exploring. However, the logistics are more complicated than they seem, particularly when taking into account the multiple delivery services customers use and the labor necessary to fulfill delivery orders during all dayparts, Green explained.

Whatever new additions the company might make in the future, Maverik wants to be sure it has mastered its existing program and delivers it right to customers every day.

“We’ve had so much rapid growth, focused so much on innovation and program development,” Green said. “We’re stepping back and looking at how we can hone and simplify our existing operation, get it humming like a well-oiled machine.”



Although he describes himself as “not much of a futurist,” Green predicts that five years from now, the foodservice competitive landscape will have continued to broaden as convenience stores catch up to the QSR and fast-casual segments. Younger generations who are willing to buy food from anywhere that is good will make a difference in growth potential and the blurring lines between foodservice segments, he noted.

One thing that won't blur is Maverik's sense of identity. Having transformed itself into something separate and distinct from the usual convenience store and c-store food program, Green believes the most important lesson c-store operators can learn is not to be afraid to define themselves. Even though it's easier said than done, the results are well worth it.

“You have to decide who you are and what you're going to do,” he said. “And go after it.” **CSN**

## THE CHEF'S PERSPECTIVE

With a background in fine dining, Chef Kyle Lore brings a different mindset to Maverik



Nothing Chef Kyle Lore's traditional apprenticeship or his following years working in fine dining could have led him to believe that he would enter the convenience store industry and help spearhead a culinary transformation. But the opportunity came along at the right time, he told *Convenience Store News*. Maverik needed a new corporate chef and Lore was seeking work hours that were a better fit to spend time with his children.

During his interview, Maverik's Director of Foodservice Rich Green questioned Lore on whether the lower level of creativity would be a dealbreaker for him. Yet Lore has found that he can still be creative by tackling the challenges of reimagining a foodservice program with limited resources in terms of physical space, equipment and entry-level employees.

“How to design things that can be produced in that environment yet have a really good fresh offering — that's

where the creativity comes in,” Lore said. “You have to really tear apart processes to develop something that can be successfully executed in our environment, consistently, and have a high level of quality.”

Part of his duties involved going through all of the ingredients Maverik used in order to identify those that were not up to the standard they wanted to set, as well as those that could be used to compete with best-in-class convenience stores and higher end quick-service restaurants. From there, the foodservice team explored pricing and samples.

“We quickly realized that in our market, the customer's resistance to waiting was very short,” he said, explaining that customers had been trained to expect the speed of grab-and-go items. Their standards for speed don't go away even when choosing a made-to-order product.

This prompted Maverik to focus on quality items that could be prepared quickly and consistently, such as street tacos. It was also able to identify third-party purveyors that were willing to take a leap of faith on the research and development process. This allowed Maverik to negotiate good margins based on volume and growth.

“It's a constant exploration,” Lore said of the process of coming up with new offerings. Using limited-time offers (LTOs) and category innovation to attract customers enables Maverik to grow its foodservice program without undercutting itself with too many discounts or overly low pricing. This means Lore is always working on some stage of a possible new product.

Some of the improvements Lore has overseen are less dramatic, but still resulted in positive change. The company used to buy frozen dough pucks for its cookie program. To avoid the additives and shelf extenders that Lore says prevents frozen cookies from being truly premium, they developed a cookie base that is simple but similar to what someone might bake at home.

While there are ways to do more with less, from Lore's perspective, retailers that want to improve their foodservice program must invest in it.

“They need to commit to the labor attached. So many convenience stores try to have the food executed by the same person doing the cash wrap,” he said. “That is so limiting — you'll never get anywhere with it.”

It isn't that food preparation is too complicated for floor staff to learn, but rather that it is too difficult to multitask, according to Lore. By committing to having employees who are only there to work in foodservice and training them properly, c-stores will see better results and less turnover.

He also advises c-store operators to look to higher-end QSRs as their foodservice peers and compete with them on price and quality, as opposed to value-focused fast-food chains.

“Why try to compete with McDonald's on McDonald's food? That's a losing game,” he said. “The only thing to do is differentiate yourself. Offer your products and sell them at a price you can make money on.”