



# Order Up: Innovation

Rutter's is voted best of the best in this year's Foodservice Innovators Awards

By Don Longo

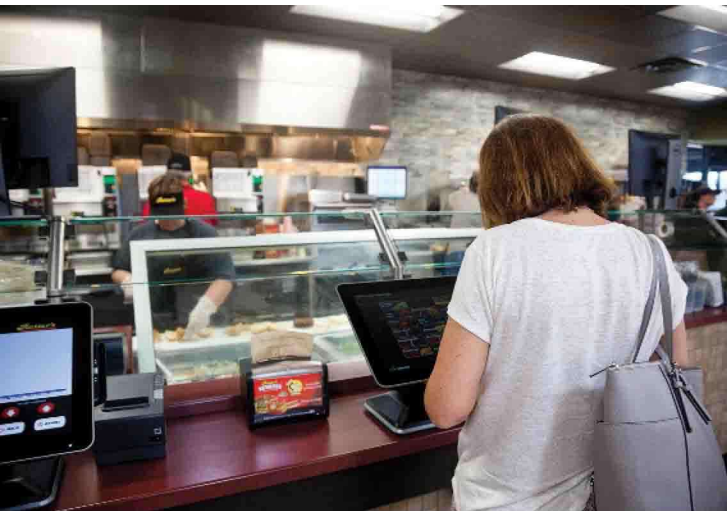
**SINCE THE CONVENIENCE STORE NEWS** Foodservice Innovators Awards program began seven years ago, Rutter's, the Mid-Atlantic regional chain of 71 foodservice-forward convenience stores, has found itself in the winners' circle four times.

In 2012, the inaugural year of the awards, York, Pa.-based Rutter's was named Foodservice Innovator of the Year. In 2013, it won Prepared Foods Innovator of the Year and in 2015, Rutter's nabbed the award for Best New Foodservice Offering.

This year, for the second time, Rutter's has been chosen as the Foodservice Innovator of the Year and tops the list of six best-in-class convenience foodservice retailers selected as honorees in the 2018 Foodservice Innovators Awards program.

Chosen by the *Convenience Store News* Foodservice Advisory Council — a panel of foodservice experts from the retailer, supplier, wholesaler, research and consulting fields — winners are recognized for raising the bar on quality, service and innovation in the fast-growing and critically important foodservice category in the convenience channel.

"Rutter's is constantly in the news with new menu offerings that are distinctive vs. the competition," said one of the experts on the Foodservice Advisory Council. "They are also very focused on their customers' needs."



**Rutter's new 10,500-square-foot Duncannon, Pa., store features the chain's largest kitchen.**

### The Makings of a Winner

On-trend, fresh, local and friendly define the Rutter's brand.

Among the many accomplishments the retailer is being recognized for this year are:

- Expanding its food menu to include two local favorites: Pork Belly and Pepperoni "Roni" Rolls. Pork Belly is available as an additional topping for such items as burgers, sandwiches and mac & cheese, in addition to serving as a standalone sandwich, sub or wrap. It was initially available exclusively at Rutter's for two months. "Roni" Rolls are soft, Italian dough stuffed with pepperoni and mozzarella cheese, and topped with cheese. Like Pork Belly, it is supplied by a local manufacturer — defined as being located within a 100-mile radius of Rutter's corporate office, or made in the state of Pennsylvania.
- Earlier this year, Rutter's further expanded its extensive food menu by offering customers more than 25 new seafood options. Items include fried shrimp tacos, tavern battered cod sandwiches, crab cake sliders, fried scallops, a fried clams basket meal, crab and roasted corn chowder, and single, double and triple tavern battered cod Route 30 sandwiches. This offering represents the most seafood options of any convenience store operator in central Pennsylvania, according to the company.
- Rutter's has been investing in local, fresh and healthier product procurement. In January, the retailer promoted Cheri Booth to the new position of fresh and local category manager, reporting to Ryan Krebs, director of foodservice.



Booth oversees all aspects of local, fresh procurement including produce, seasonal fruits and vegetables, food-service, snacks, beverages, beer and wine. At the time of Booth's promotion, Krebs stated, "Consumers increasingly want more fresh, local and clean label products. We think that deserves a dedicated person to make sure we are providing our customers with the highest-quality local products possible."

Most recently, Rutter's expanded its fresh and local initiative with the addition of seasonal fruits and vegetables to its grab-and-go cold cases and fresh restaurant menu offerings. An assortment — which could include watermelon, blueberries, heirloom cherry tomatoes, sweet corn, and yellow and green squash, depending on the time of year — is available in the grab-and-go case in the center of its stores. The watermelon, blueberries and tomatoes come in ready-to-eat packaging for a quick and healthy snack.

In addition, the new fresh and local ingredients are used in Rutter's in-store restaurants, such as sliced and chopped sweet onions, sliced green peppers and mushrooms — all of which are grown in Rutter's home state of Pennsylvania.

Rutter's will change its fresh and local selection of ingredients as the growing seasons change. A "Local" icon on the retailer's electronic build-your-own ordering kiosks identifies available offerings. The c-store chain's



**President and CEO Scott Hartman (left) accepts Rutter's award from Convenience Store News Editorial Director Don Longo.**

**Rutter's newest initiative is increasing its sourcing of local goods.**



grab-and-go and restaurant menu produce is sourced from family farms throughout Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia.

"Foodservice is at the core of our company. It has been since we started as a dairy back in 1921," said Scott Hartman, Rutter's president and CEO. "Food has been a core part of our sales and it's ever-increasing. It drives so many other categories in our stores, from the beverages that go with foodservice to the snacks and the candy, and just the foot traffic it drives during key dayparts."

As it pertains to dayparts, Rutter's has been a leader at expanding convenience foodservice beyond breakfast and lunch. "We're continuing to figure out how to grow the evening daypart, which is the one that I think we're all after in the industry," Hartman told *Convenience Store News*. "We are probably out in front of that with all the different offerings we have, but we know there's still a long way to go."

Food tastes are changing at an ever-increasing pace, so staying on-trend with consumer wants and desires is very important to Rutter's.

"I think you have to have the spirit of a chef. You have to try something new and different. If it works, it stays; if it doesn't, we move on to the next trend," said Hartman.

Rutter's is particularly adept at meeting the needs of both its traditional audience, as well as the large number of newer, younger customers arriving at its stores. Rutter's menu includes traditional indulgent food, like its

loaded Route 66 Burger; a hearty but definitely not spicy chicken pot pie; as well as newer offerings made with spicy ingredients and sauces.

"Their taste profiles are exciting. We love them," Hartman said of today's emerging customers. "As a chef, Ryan [Krebs] loves them because they challenge the palate."

On its new initiative to buy from local vendors, Hartman said he's been studying the fresh and local trend for several years. "We saw a lot of it in Europe. I take my management group to Europe for study trips and it is something that's been on our radar for a while," he explained. "We just felt that now is the time to do it — that we can actually execute it now. Years ago, it would have been very difficult with the supply chain then."

"Fresh and local will be hitting more and more convenience stores and we'd like to be the leader in that trend because customers are telling us that's what they want," he added. "It doesn't have to be thousands of items. You just want to know the key ones and then use them in multiple ways."

For example, local blueberries that are sold in a plastic container from the fresh, grab-and-go cold case are also being used in frappes at the built-to-order beverage counter.

## **THE OTHER 2018 FOODSERVICE INNOVATORS AWARDS WINNERS ARE:**

### **Prepared Foods Innovator of the Year: MAVERIK INC.**

"With the combination of Adventure's First Stop and Bonfire Grill, Maverik has been very innovative with branding itself and using its foodservice program to become a serious food destination in the company's core markets," said one member of the CSNews Foodservice Advisory Council, who was impressed with the retailer's prepared foods offering.

Selected as the 2018 Prepared Foods Innovator of the Year, this is the fifth time that Salt Lake City-based Maverik, which operates more than 300 stores in 11 western states, has won a Foodservice Innovators Award. In 2012 and 2016, Maverik was honored for Best New Foodservice Offering.



**Crowds flock to Maverik store grand openings.**



**Introduced in 2009, Maverik's Bonfire brand ties all of its prepared food offerings under an adventurous theme.**

In 2013, the retailer won for Best Foodservice Limited-Time-Offer (LTO) or Promotion, before winning the Foodservice Innovator of the Year award in 2014.

So, why is Maverik the 2018 Prepared Foods Innovator of the Year?

"The Bonfire line is on-trend, flavorful and provides variety. It also aligns with their overall branding and marketing strategies, keeping the customer experience fluent throughout the chain," said another Foodservice Advisory Council member.

The Bonfire brand, originally introduced in 2009, ties Maverik's food items together under a single identity with an adventurous theme. By the fall of 2013, Maverik decided to take its foodservice to the next level by launching the new Bonfire Grill made-to-order program.

The Bonfire Grill concept, an open kitchen where customers can watch the preparation of items like pizza and tacos, began testing in late 2014 and is now included in all new-build Maverik stores. Maverik stores have also been redesigned, placing food front and center.

Other significant moves that have built up Maverik's foodservice program are:

- Experimenting with creative LTOs, some of which become mainstays on the menu, such as the MOAB (Mother of All Burritos);
- Examining its products and improving the quality of ingredients used;
- Hiring a new corporate chef, Kyle Lore, a fine-dining culinary expert who's brought a new perspective to the business; and
- Creating a taste profile that is spicier and more flavorful compared to its c-store, quick-service and fast-casual competitors.

This year, Maverik launched a new fresh sandwich line to replace its hoagies, which consisted of meat and cheese in a hoagie roll that the customer purchased and then dressed themselves.

The new fresh line of ready-to-eat sandwiches starts with new bread and also includes new meats and cheeses, and new sauces. Preparation steps have been developed that allow Maverik team members to dress the new sandwiches without them getting soggy.

Varieties include California Club, Turkey Gouda, Righteous Italian and Buffalo

Chicken Ranch. The new sandwiches were first tested in two stores, then expanded to a 10-store test to see actual sales results, and then moved to 30 stores to ensure ingredient distribution was right before being rolled out across all locations.

"Foodservice is an important part of Maverik's business model, and is becoming even more critical," said Brian Sullenger, the retailer's FRESCH category manager for grab-and-go. "We've been in the foodservice business a long time and our customers have come to trust that we have quality food for a competitive price."

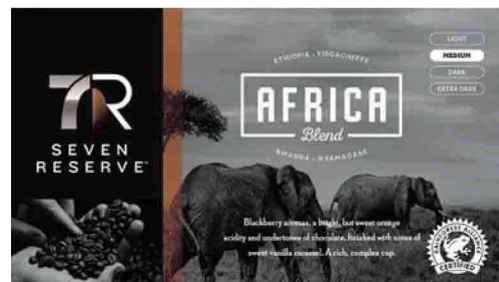
Sullenger also told *CSNews* that Maverik recently extended its Hispanic menu into nachos and salads, and plans are in the works for line extensions in the retailer's most successful prepared food segments.

### Hot Beverages Innovator of the Year: 7-ELEVEN INC.

7-Eleven, the Irving, Texas-based operator, franchisor and licensor of more than 67,000 stores in 17 countries, including 11,800 in North America, has been honored twice before in the Foodservice Innovators Awards program, but this is the first time the retailer is being recognized in the Hot Beverages category.

Previously honored as the Cold & Frozen Beverages Innovator of the Year in 2014 and for the Best Foodservice LTO or Promotion in 2016, 7-Eleven this year wins for multiple improvements it has made to its hot coffee program.

7-Eleven has been adding single-origin, sustainably sourced brews. Late last year, the retailer headed south to the Cajamarca region of Peru for a Rainforest Alliance Certified coffee made



**7-Eleven went to Africa for the first limited-time coffee under its new, premium Seven Reserve brand.**

with 100-percent Arabica beans. The Rainforest Alliance is an international nonprofit organization that seeks to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods.

The Peruvian coffee has citrus notes complemented by vanilla, cinnamon and berry undertones. The hand-picked beans are grown in the high Andes Mountains of Peru. They are then authentically roasted to a medium level for a smooth, rich taste.

"Today's coffee-drinkers are more sophisticated and, in addition to wanting a great-tasting cup of coffee, many also are looking for something extra," Raj Kapoor, 7-Eleven's senior vice president of fresh food and proprietary beverages, said at the time of the Peruvian brew's launch. "Millennials, in particular, want coffee crops that are sustainably grown, sourced directly from small farms, and made from single-origin beans rather than blends."

Prior to introducing the Peruvian brew, 7-Eleven featured LTOs of single-sourced coffee from Matagalpa, Nicaragua and Chiapas, Mexico. In addition, the retailer's popular 100-percent Colombian coffee is now made with Rainforest Alliance Certified single-origin beans.

What's more, this past April, 7-Eleven went to Africa to source the first limited-time coffee available under its new Seven Reserve brand of fresh-brewed premium coffees. The Seven Reserve Africa Blend is a 50-50 combination of 100-percent Rainforest Alliance Certified Arabica beans cultivated on small farms in Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Foodservice Advisory Council members were impressed with how 7-Eleven is introducing all these new coffees from exotic locales known for producing fine coffee. They also gave credit to 7-Eleven for working with Conservation International to set measurable corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals to reduce its environmental footprint. As part of its CSR objectives, 7-Eleven says it will continue to seek out responsibly sourced coffees, and other products and packaging with less environmental impact.

### Cold & Frozen Beverages Innovator of the Year: CIRCLE K

Circle K, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Canada-based Alimentation Couche-Tard Inc., debuted in the Foodservice Innovators Awards winners' circle in 2016 for its revamped hot coffee and hot beverage program. This year, the retailer, which is part of Couche-Tard's network of 10,000-plus

This summer, Circle K's "Your Cup. Your Rules." initiative boosted brand awareness and customer engagement around its Polar Pop offering.

**YOUR CUP.  
YOUR RULES.**



convenience stores throughout North America, is being recognized as the Cold & Frozen Beverages Innovator of the Year.

Judges on the council raved about the successful promotions that spurred more sales of cold and frozen drinks by the chain this past summer. In July, Circle K's "Your Cup. Your Rules." initiative enhanced brand awareness and customer engagement by inviting shoppers to quench their thirst with its signature Polar Pop cup. In the United States, Circle K sells 17 Polar Pops every second, according to the company — a factoid that shocked several of our judges.

The "Your Cup. Your Rules." initiative showcased how Polar Pop helps customers create the drink of their dreams and encouraged consumers to interact with the brand. During the promo, popular social media influencers, expansive digital and billboard advertising, and on-site events drove Circle K customers to fill up their cup and share their enthusiasm with the hashtag #DONTBETHIRSTY! Additionally, Circle K employees were featured in an internal video contest to show their pride in Polar Pop and how they share it with customers.

The retailer followed up the Polar Pop promotion by dispensing more cool treats on Free Froster Day, held July 10. Froster is its frozen beverage brand. Circle K stores offered free Froster drinks as it introduced a new Mango Fire Froster variety to its dispensed beverage lineup. U.S. stores were expected to give away an estimated 10,000 free medium Froster drinks that day. This promo was enhanced by the use of an app-based coupon.

Earlier this year, Circle K awarded five shoppers a \$25 gift card each through a Facebook promotion to support the launch of another new Froster flavor, Sweetos Cinnamon Sugar, inspired by PepsiCo/Frito-Lay's Cheetos brand's Sweetos cinnamon sugar puffs.

### Best New Foodservice Offering of the Year: BP/ampm

Based in La Palma, Calif., and operator of approximately 1,000 franchised c-store locations, mostly in five western states, BP/ampm is revitalizing its foodservice offer to make it fresh and relevant, as part of a larger project known as "Project Mojo." Included in Project Mojo is a new coffee program and a new fresh food program, both of which caught the attention of our judges and earned the retailer the award for Best New Foodservice Offering of the Year.

This is the first time in the Foodservice Innovators Awards winners' circle for BP/ampm, which appears to be challenging the c-store industry maxim that all of the best



**BP/ampm is revitalizing its foodservice offer to make it fresh and relevant.**

U.S. convenience foodservice retailers are located in the Mid-Atlantic states.

"We are dialing up the offer, making it current and fresh, and aligned with the trends we see around our consumer base," Chief Operating Officer Donna Sanker explained to *CSNews* during a visit to the brand's Southern California headquarters late last year.

Sanker explained that the retailer spent 2017 getting back to basics with a "Simple. Fresh. Delicious." mindset. New to the *ampm* chain's prepared food offering are all-natural, USDA-certified beef burgers; the re-release of an all-natural version of its No. 1 food product, the BBQ Rib Sandwich; and the launch of a new grab-and-go sandwich line.

As with most c-store retailers who periodically refresh their dispensed beverage program, *ampm* also knew it was time to revitalize that offering. Entering into a new playing field for the brand by capitalizing on the latest customer craze, the retailer introduced cold brew coffee and frozen coffee. The debut of both products help consumers recognize that they can get a good-quality and differentiated beverage solution at *ampm*.

Fresh food has the ability to attract new customers and *CSNews*' judges feel *ampm* is on the right track to improving consumer perceptions about "gas station food" on the West Coast.

### **Foodservice Innovator to Watch: DASH IN**

Dash In, a division of The Wills Group, is the 2018 Foodservice Innovator to Watch. This award category debuted last year with the

recognition of Pilot Flying J for the improvements the travel center operator made to its fresh prepared-food offer.

This year, judges put the spotlight on Dash In, which operates 50 c-stores across Virginia, Maryland and Delaware. The retailer's new 5,600-square-foot store in Chesterfield County, Va., is an example of why industry-watchers are taking note of this up-and-coming regional chain.

"They're building new stores with a strong food focus," noted one Foodservice Advisory Council member. "As a competitor in the food-heavy Mid-Atlantic, Dash In is beginning to carve out a vision of their own regarding coffee and high-quality foodservice."

"During the past three years, we worked closely with our design and construction teams to transform the Dash In store environment," said Darleen Nascimento, director of brand marketing at Dash In. "We have been working to reimagine and elevate the Dash In brand experience, and the neighborhood store concept really embodies those efforts."

Dash In's made-to-order Chef's Craveable Menu features artisan sandwiches, wraps and salads made fresh in-house every day, as well as all-day breakfast with freshly cracked eggs. The breakfast menu includes a flour tortilla filled with scrambled eggs, potatoes and American cheese.

"Our newest Dash In is a demonstration of our commitment to creating a store design that offers an elevated brand experience for our customers," stated Dash In President Julian B. Wills.

Headquartered in La Plata, Md., The Wills Group is the parent company of SMO Energy. In addition to Dash In Food Stores, The Wills Group is a leading provider of propane, heating oil and HVAC equipment in southern Maryland. Its other business interests include Splash In ECO Car Wash, SMO Motor Fuels and Potomac Energy Holdings. **CSN**



**The Chef's Craveable Menu at new Dash In stores is prepared in an open kitchen to highlight the chain's commitment to fresh, high-quality ingredients.**