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Flay touts success of Paramus eatery

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Celebrity chef Bobby Flay says being in Paramus has increased his appetite for suburban locations.

Flay, 44, opened his third Bobby's Burger Palace at Bergen Town Center two months ago, and it's quickly become the most successful in his new chain of casual burger joints. "If I can get the reception I got in Paramus everywhere, my life would be complete," he says.

Flay is best known for his appearances on Food Network shows such as "Throwdown" and "Grill It with Bobby Flay." He also operates five upscale restaurants in New York, Las Vegas and the Bahamas, and has authored nine cookbooks. He recently launched a line of Bobby Flay sauces and flavor rubs sold online and in his restaurants.

Flay lives in Manhattan, but his mother lives in Monmouth County and he spent his summers in Spring Lake and Sea Girt as a child. He spoke with The Record about why he loves Paramus, what made him pick Bergen Town Center, and why he's bullish on burgers.

Q. How's the Paramus restaurant doing?

It's doing great. The thing I love about it so far is that everybody has been so incredibly nice. The mayor of Paramus came out and cut the ribbon. You don't get that in New York. It's been very successful.

Q. Is it the busiest of the three Bobby's Burger Palaces?

Yes. Absolutely.

Q. How many burgers do you serve there on a busy day?

Sometimes it's 1,400 to 1,500.

Q. You've also launched a line of Bobby Flay sauces and flavorings that you are selling in the restaurant.

The sauces and products – I'm not doing it from a financial standpoint. People have always asked to take something home from the restaurants, whether it's Mesa Grill or

Bar Americain or the burger places. The idea is to let them take home some of the flavors they get in the restaurants.

Q. You're selling the sauces online. Are you going to be selling them anywhere else, say in supermarkets?

I don't have any plans to do that. The idea was to sell them online and in the stores, more for courtesy than anything else.

Q. You also have a line of cookware that's sold at Kohl's.

It's a combination of some cooking items – I do different cast iron pans and grills and griddles, and I have some grilling equipment. And also I do tabletop stuff. The tabletop sells more than anything else – plates and glassware and stuff like that.

Q. Have you been approached to put the Bobby Flay name on all kinds of things?

I get calls about doing all kinds of stuff like that. I sort of take one thing at a time and see how it makes sense to me. The Kohl's line is actually a partnership between Food Network and Kohl's. We thought it was a great way to market the Food Network and the Bobby Flay name to the retail segment of the world.

Q. Are there a lot of food products that would like to use the Bobby Flay name?

Yes. But I have to be very careful about that. Instead of being the spokesperson for some casual restaurant chain, like a Friday's or Applebee's, I'm a chef first, so for me it has to be my thing. That's why Bobby's Burger Palace feels so right to me, because it's my thing that I'm promoting.

Q. Why did you pick the Bergen Town Center? Why did they win out?

I don't know if they won out. We won out.

Q. It's a leasing coup for Bergen Town Center. The other Paramus malls would have loved to get you.

My business partner was talking to other malls and it came down to what they were willing to do for us in terms of helping us to build the restaurant. We got a really great sense from [Bergen Town Center] about being partners in a venture – that they would go the extra mile and help promote us. And we like being next to Whole Foods. I know that if Whole Foods is going to be someplace, quality is so important to them, and who they deal with is so important, they probably vetted it a hundred times more than we did. So it's a good place for us to be.

Q. Going forward, do you think the Bobby's Burger Palaces will always be in malls?

I don't know. We're going to open one in the Mohegan Sun [casino] in Connecticut on July 4th weekend. That's the first one we're doing that's not in a mall. I believe – and this is just me sort thinking out loud – that college campuses might be good places to try one.

Q. How are your upscale restaurants in New York and Atlantic City doing in this economy?

People are spending less money, for instance, on a bottle of wine. The guy that spent \$100 on a bottle of wine a year ago is now spending \$60. The check average is getting bitten a little bit. This is a good time to take a look at your costs and run your business in a leaner way. One thing I'll never do is to cheapen the quality or offer a deal that is going to lessen the concept of the restaurant. I'd rather make no money than to do that.

Q. Any food trends on the horizon? Anything beyond burgers?

Honestly, I have no idea. People ask me that question all the time. I opened a burger place and people give me credit that I don't deserve for opening a burger place in a bad economy. Honestly, I've wanted to do this my whole life. It happened to coincide with an economy that probably is kinder to the burger concept. Although I have to tell you, I think that burgers, fries and shakes works in every economy. In any economy burgers are a good idea.

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