

Dairy Queen reigns

Texas franchise nation's largest

by Nancy Floeck
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Driving down obscure Texas highways, passing through even obscurer Texas towns, weary travelers often scan the horizon for that red and white sign that means caffeine and a restroom.

Dairy Queens are highway havens. Everyone in Texas has eaten or at least stopped there — and seeing one in an unfamiliar terrain provides a sense of security.

It's as if the stores multiply in Texas. Dairy Queen operates 859 stores in Texas, more than in any other state, and it seems every town from El Paso to McAllen has at least one. DQs have become a status symbol among smaller towns — you know your town has really arrived when it gets a Dairy Queen. (Nevada is still hoping.)

They're the meeting place and social hub of these communities. Recreational hangouts are few in places like Rockwall or Snook, and what better place to meet friends and catch up on the latest news?

Case fact: once, in some desolate, probably nameless town in West Texas, a notice was taped to the DQ's door, urging the town to attend a local woman's bridal shower. Not a very personalized invitation, but it sure cuts postage costs.

But having a DQ serve as the town's meeting place isn't a phenomena exclusive to those towns not on the map. Terry Smith, owner of three of the six DQs in the Bryan-College Station area, said his stores also have regular customers.

He said these regulars tend to be "middle-aged" customers who have gotten into the habit of dropping into the local Dairy Queen for a cup of coffee and conversation.

Chances are that these customers live around the corner and have learned to think of the store as a neighborhood meeting place. Charles Tanner, who owns the other three local stores, said a recent survey shows that 60 percent of Texas DQ customers live within a 1½ miles of the store.

He said the survey also showed that DQs tend to be family restaurants — 42 percent of their customers are married couples and 43 percent are children, with the rest spread out among other folks.

The fact that most Texas DQs are owned and operated by area natives perpetuates an aura of friendliness. About 1/3 of these DQs are second generation operations.

The veterans of the Texas business are the Smiths, who live in the Bryan-College Station area and have been in the DQ business for 30 years. They own 27 stores in south and central Texas in addition to the three here.

Tanner also falls in this category; he was born, raised and educated in this community.

Downhome at the DQ

But this down-home image also may be hurting Texas sales, although the 859 Texas stores gross about \$9 million monthly. About 100 stores have gone out of business since the late 1970s, and Donna Bigelow, office manager of the Texas Dairy Queen Operators' Council, said this is mainly because of competition from other fast food franchises.

"The numbers have decreased in the large metropolitan areas — Houston, Dallas," she said, and the council is trying to combat this by changing the stores' hometown, rural image.

"We're going to be updating the stores," Bigelow said. "Dairy Queen is the oldest franchise in existence and most of the stores reflect this."

She said that modernizing the stores may attract some of the crowds that frequent other fast food restaurants.

But while the appearance of DQs will be changing, the items offered won't. And keeping these items even more consistent throughout the state also will be a major priority in this effort.

Tanner said the stores will be closely watched to ensure such consistency, since in the past some stores have offered items others haven't — double and triple hamburgers are one example of products that may be offered in one region, but not in another.

The modernizing drive will begin in mid-April, he said, with high priorities on product quality.

It seems one thing is already constant across Texas — the Dairy Queen appeal.

Smith said his stores are equally popular in all parts of the state and credits this to the menu's variety.

Hamburgers probably sell the most, he said, although ice cream runs a close second.

The businesses within the state offer basically the same items, he added, but those in other states often lack the variety offered by their Texas cousins. Dairy Queens in the state serve country-style food, like chicken fried steaks, that



The familiar site of a Dairy Queen spells relief to many weary travelers who drive along desolate Texas highways.

many Northern stores don't have, Smith said.

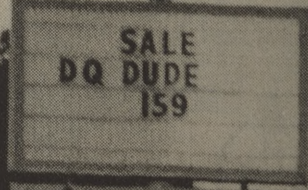
But besides that, the chain's fare is basically the same throughout the nation, and Tanner said this is another reason the franchise has stayed alive — a DQ is a DQ, whether it's in Texas or Wisconsin.

"We're working harder in the state to make it more so than ever before," Tanner said.

Friendliness, popular food and accessibility. That seems to be what keeps Dairy Queen hanging on and the money rolling in. And they owe it all to Alex McCoullough of Kankakee, Ill.

In the beginning

According to a 1979 issue of Texas Monthly, the idea of Dairy Queen was born in 1938 when McCoullough perfected the stores' now-famous ice cream.



What not to eat

Now that you know the history and social consequences of Texas Dairy Queens it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty: FOOD.

In order to provide a helpful guide to DQs' menu, Battalion and Focus writers took a staff expedition to one of six local Dairy Queens. Being connoisseurs of fast food, we feel we know quality junk food when we taste it.

Thanks, but no thanks: The Butterscotch-dipped Dilly Bar is not a dessert we recommend. Tastes like nothing, but leaves an unpleasant aftertaste that closely resembles the way old clothes smell. We suggest it be thrown out the out car window.

A delight alright. Two mounds of ice cream from the nifty dispenser covered in chocolate fudge and butterscotch toppings with whipped cream and chopped pecans topped with 2 marachino cherries make up the Double Delight. For a \$1.67 (tax included) it's not a bad dessert. It was creamy, smooth and sweet. The best part is you're able to lick the bowl when your finished, because who really cares in DQ?

Don't can it. This chili didn't taste canned. After much discussion, we decided they actually make it there. The cheese was real — a nice surprise — but the hot dog wasn't so grand. After more speculation, we concluded that they're probably turkey franks. So get the chili cheese dog without the dog.

Oh, peanuts. The Peanut Parfait. In spite of its fancy name, it's nothing more than a hot fudge sundae topped with peanuts. But a good sundae with fresh peanuts, not dry roasted ones.

Burger or bust. The Hunger Buster with cheese, commonly referred to as a cheeseburger, rates about 9.8 on the Focus scale. Above average, considering the usual quality of hamburger-stand cuisine. The french fries obviously were frozen ones, but they had been freshly fried and hadn't been sitting under a light for the past 3½ days.

Sentimental favorites. Dip cones and Dilly bars.

After ordering, we sat down and an employee actually brought the food to our table. It took a long time for her to bring it, but what can you expect for a \$2.93 meal?

Of course, the decor is nothing to write home about, but that's no loss. If you're hometown has a Dairy Queen, your folks have already seen it anyway.

He charged 10 cents and let customers eat all they could. He promptly sold out. But with invention of the continuous ice cream maker he was ready to go into business.

In 1948, he and a partner opened the first Dairy Queen in East Moline, Ill., but with little success. He had only 10 stores six years later.

It took a Texan to make the operation flourish. In 1946, O.W. Klose, a 63-year-old grocer and entrepreneur, bought the Texas franchise and Dairy Queen as we know it was born. Within a few years the first store, which was in Austin, spawned several others across the state and started the family-owned-and-operated precedent.

So now when you savor that creamy ice cream or see that familiar, friendly sign looming ahead, you know who to thank.