

# Fire of Brazil churrascaria ignites international growth plan

By Jack Hayes

ATLANTA — With four units now open in three states, fledgling Atlanta-based churrascaria operator Fire of Brazil is turning to the international market to accelerate its already rapid growth pace, according to Brent Gilbertson, a partner in the family-owned chain.

Less than six months after inking a 12-nation Middle Eastern and North African master franchise deal with Bahrain-based Living Concepts Group, Gilbertson said the same group has since extended its Fire of Brazil master contract to include worldwide development rights except for

North and South America and the Caribbean.

Gilbertson said that Dallas-based Texas de Brazil, with 12 units in eight states, and churrascaria pioneer Fogo de Chao, with six U.S. locations, “may have us beat domestically so far. But we’re going to grow much faster on the international scene.”

The terms of the multimillion-dollar arrangement were not disclosed.

A single Bahrain unit now under construction is expected to open in early summer, and Gilbertson said another new deal

was signed to debut Fire of Brazil in Kiev, Ukraine. He said the master group also is negotiating with franchisees in Germany, Russia, Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

According to Gilbertson, Fire of Brazil’s international partners, Sheikh Khalid Bin Mohamed Bin Salman Al Khalifa and Abdul Wahed Al Kooheji, are members of the Baharainian royal family.

“The deal for Germany includes five restaurants, and it came out of nowhere,” Gilbertson said, adding that another master franchise deal is pending with a Canadian partner.

Meanwhile, the Bahrain group is opting for larger locations than the typical 7,000-square-foot U.S. Fire of Brazil prototype, Gilbertson said. The 11,000-square-foot Kiev location, for example, will seat 350 guests, he said.

The U.S. units include two suburban Atlanta sites in Dunwoody and Alpharetta, as well as a unit in the upscale Green Hills neighborhood of Nashville, Tenn., and the Mall at Wellington Green in Palm Beach County, Fla.

A former suburban Atlanta nightclub operator and developer of the San Francisco Wraps burrito brand, Gilbertson launched Fire of Brazil with his father R.J. and brother Terry Gilbertson. The family partners are talking with developers in Miami and two other south Florida markets as well as Charlotte, N.C. Gilbertson said deals also are being discussed with potential franchisees in California and Ohio.

Fire of Brazil’s original Middle Eastern and North African deal extended to the United Arab



Emirates, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Libya and Algeria as well as Bahrain.

“We’ve had inquiries from so many countries — Greece to Vietnam,” Gilbertson said, noting the U.S. stores are grossing \$2.5 million to \$3 million. The group is in talks to put its third Atlanta unit in the former Planet Hollywood site on Peachtree Street downtown. If the deal closes, construction would begin next January with an opening planned for March, said Gilbertson.

“We never intended Fire of Brazil to go outside of the Atlanta market,” Gilbertson said, adding the brand’s success is keyed to its “nonmenu” service approach in which gauchos roam the dining room and offer guests cuts of more than a dozen types of meat. Guests also have access to a high-end salad bar and may purchase the

salad bar option without meats.

The check average is running \$48 per person for the dinner-only brand, and Gilbertson said the downtown Atlanta unit also would serve lunch.

“By eliminating menu decisions, churrascarias take 30 to 45 minutes out of the dining process,” Gilbertson said. “Servers explain things and take drink orders, and guests get their own salads and wait for the gauchos who are constantly on the floor.”

Gilbertson said that exotic meats like wild boar and kangaroo are brought in to embellish the already broad selection for holiday dining, when the guest count normally breaks 600. Beverages, mostly wine, account for 15 percent of total revenue. The front- and back-of-the-house staff totals 40. ■

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Brent Gilbertson, partner in the Atlanta-based churrascaria Fire of Brazil, attributes the chain’s success to its “nonmenu” service approach, in which gauchos roam the dining room and offer guests cuts of more than a dozen kinds of meat. Eliminating menu decisions cuts 30 to 45 minutes from the dining process, Gilbertson said.