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## Chain Reaction: Local restaurants chart their own paths for growth and expansion

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When an independent operator gets a restaurant successfully up and running, the prospect of opening another location can whet the appetite.

Yet how, where and when to grow isn't an easy decision.

"You need to make a decision when you're in that stage of your life whether to be a one-shop deal or if you want to be a regional chain," said Ron Sofranko, principal of Wexford-based Sofranko Advisory Group, who consults for various restaurants.

"For an independent, it's really critical to try to put a strategy in place in order to be effective with decision making," added Terri Sokoloff, principal of Specialty Group, a McCandless-based restaurant services firm. "Some people want to grow too soon, and they don't know the right way in which they should expand."

It's not hard to find examples of shuttered restaurants in the new year, which can inspire plenty of second-guessing.

Perhaps the most conspicuous closing in Pittsburgh to start 2020 was Molinaro Ristorante & Bar, an upscale Italian place in Market Square that closed in early



DREW MONIOT

Big Burrito Restaurant Group Chef Bill Fuller plans to open two new restaurants this year.

January after a little more than a year in operation.

Conversely, there also are examples of local restaurants that have successfully grown to operate a chain presence in western Pennsylvania.

That includes burger chain Burgatory, breakfast diners such as Pamela's Diner and Kelly O's Diner, coffee shop Crazy Mocha Coffee Co., and many more.

Some have even reached beyond Pittsburgh. Atria's Restaurant, which has six locations in the region, also has a restaurant in Morgantown, West Virginia. In addition to four local restaurants, Walnut Grill operates in St. Louis. And perhaps Pittsburgh's best-known culinary export, Primanti Brothers, has restaurants in several states.

Not that it's easy to expand, mind you.

Chef Richard DeShantz, who takes great pride in opening each new restaurant as a one-of-a-kind creation, acknowledged the workload challenge of pursuing four different restaurants around the same time, with Fish Nor Fowl in Garfield, Poulet Bleu in Lawrenceville and two other newcomers, Coop de Ville in the Strip District and Gi-jin downtown, still on the way.

"These last two years were hard on me," he said. "It almost got me out of being in the kitchen."

Sofranko describes the juggling act that comes with owning a restaurant and working to expand: "The mom-and-pop operator that has that one restaurant struggles with operating the second one because they're splitting time," he said. "Instead of 60 hour weeks, they're now working 80 hour weeks and going back and forth."

Sofranko added that a restaurant needs to increase its number of locations in order to be able to add the staffing needed to run a larger operation, with a general manager and other basic organizational support.

Sokoloff sees a business environment that's highly competitive right now and a market close to being saturated with too many restaurants.

“You’ve got to be top of your game with whatever you’re doing,” she said.  
“Mediocre just doesn’t cut it anymore.”

Read about three entrepreneurs in the restaurant industry who are finding recipes for success as they look to expand in the region by clicking on the links below.

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**Tim Schooley**

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