

'GHOST KITCHEN'

Red Robin, masquerading as separate restaurants, highlights fears over dine-in's future

BY JAMIE GOLDBERG

The Oregonian

Molly Jewkes came across a new restaurant prominently featured on Postmates while scrolling through the food delivery app last month.

She decided to order dinner from the restaurant, Chicken Sammy's, thinking she was supporting a local Portland business.

But her chicken sandwich arrived in a red container with utensils from Red Robin. A sticker with a picture of a chicken was affixed to the plastic bag the food came in.

"It made me feel like I was duped into buying something that wasn't what I thought it was," said Jewkes, 29. "Red Robin is a big national chain. I don't know why they would be advertising their food as different restaurants other than to confuse people."

What Jewkes was ordering from was Red Robin's version of a "ghost kitchen."

Ghost kitchens began popping up before the coronavirus pandemic with startups like REEF Technology and CloudKitchens offering a delivery-only model where the same kitchen staff cook food from multiple brands out of one small space or food cart trailer.

The concept has exploded during the pandemic because it offers a way for brands to offer food for delivery without the overhead costs of operating a full restaurant space. Market research firm Euromonitor believes ghost kitchens could be a \$1 trillion industry worldwide by 2030.

Portlanders were introduced to the ghost kitchen model last April when celebrity chef David Chang's fried chicken chain, Fuku, began showing up on food delivery apps in the Portland area. It turned out that Chang's company hadn't expanded to Portland, but had licensed the right to sell its chicken sandwiches to REEF Technology.

The move was met with a wave of criticism from local chefs who felt



Barb Gonzalez

Bombay Bend Indian street food has fresh ingredients and robust flavors and it's made in one of Central Oregon's ghost kitchens.

the national chain was profiting off the pandemic while local businesses were struggling to stay afloat. That prompted Fuku to pause the rollout, but it didn't stop ghost kitchens from taking hold in Portland.

There are numerous ghost kitchens advertising their delivery-only food in Portland on Postmates, DoorDash, Grubhub and other delivery apps. It's often very hard to distinguish between those brands and the local brick-and-mortar restaurants that use the same online delivery services. DoorDash labels virtual brands, but it takes some scrolling to find those labels. Other apps don't have any labeling that distinguishes ghost kitchens from local restaurants.

What Red Robin is doing, though, is a progression of the ghost kitchen model that makes it especially challenging for consumers to tell who is actually selling the food.

Red Robin is a publicly traded restaurant chain based in Colorado with 570 locations nationwide. It reported nearly \$870 million in revenue last year.

The company operates three ghost brands — Chicken Sammy's, The

Wing Dept. and Fresh Set — out of restaurants across the Portland area and throughout the country.

Those brands appear on multiple delivery apps and have their own logos, but outside of the branding there is nothing to distinguish them from Red Robin. They offer virtually the same menus and have the same addresses as any other Red Robin.

But at first glance, a customer would be unlikely to recognize that the brands are just offshoots of the national chain.

A Red Robin spokesperson asked for written questions but then didn't respond to those inquiries. Marc Burrow, a New York-based art director who said he designed The Wing Dept. logo, didn't respond to a request for comment but removed a webpage discussing his ghost kitchen concept for Red Robin a day after an email inquiry.

"There are questions about truth in advertising," said Kurt Huffman, the owner of ChefStable, one of Portland's most prominent restaurant groups. "Are you just selling us Red Robin, but with four different labels on it? To me, that is what they're do-

ing. There's nothing substantively different about the different brands they are selling. There's no personality to it, there's nothing that differentiates it in any real way."

ChefStable is among a handful of local businesses that have gotten into the ghost kitchen game over the last several months in an attempt to survive the pandemic and push back against what they see as sterile concepts and brands being offered by national ghost kitchen operators.

After catering business plummeted due to the pandemic, ChefStable Catering was left with little use for its 3,000-square-foot commercial kitchen. In December, the group transformed the kitchen into ChefStable Kitchen Collective, a virtual food hall where six different menus are prepared in the same space for delivery on the same ticket.

Unlike other ghost kitchen operators, the collective presents all six menus under the same banner on delivery apps such as Postmates, DoorDash and Grubhub, offering the concepts as different sections of a menu. All six menus were designed by local chefs who work together in the kitchen to cook the food for delivery.

Huffman sees the virtual kitchen as a place where those chefs can test run menus with the long-term goal of opening brick-and-mortar restaurants, if customers respond to the concepts.

However, he said he hopes the ghost kitchen model is not here to stay. For him, it's a temporary measure that enables ChefStable to get through the pandemic.

"Personally, I hope it all crashes into a fiery abyss," Huffman said. "I think it's a race to the bottom in terms of the quality of the product if you are really looking at this as the future. If this takes hold, it will be fascinating to see how independent restaurant owners can differentiate themselves in a space that's really built for conglomerates."

Diane Lam has spent the last few months working on a concept to try

to compete with the out-of-town corporations and national chains that have come to dominate the takeout scene with their ghost kitchens.

"It disgusts me," Lam said. "They are trying to saturate the algorithms so that way when you're looking at these sites, you're seeing five of the same product from one location in the same pool as one restaurant with one page."

The ghost kitchen model itself doesn't necessarily bother Chris Cha.

Cha's Hawaiian restaurant Smokin' Fire Fish was touted as one of the best new restaurants in Portland when it opened in 2019, but the restaurant struggled once the pandemic hit.

Cha was in the process of closing the restaurant for good and selling off his equipment when Jaime Soltero Jr., the owner of Tamale Boy, offered to rent him space in his restaurant's North Russell Street kitchen.

By taking advantage of the shared kitchen model championed by ghost kitchen operators, Cha was able to limit overhead costs and get by with just one part-time staff member. The setup enabled him to survive while offering only takeout and delivery directly through his website. He credits Soltero with saving his business, and the two restaurant owners are now thinking of partnering on a new venture in Beaverton.

Cha said he doesn't fault any company or corporation for trying to do what it takes to stay afloat during the pandemic, even if that means embracing the ghost kitchen model. But he also said consumers have the right to know where their food is coming from.

"Those restaurants could be going out of business themselves, even if they are a corporate entity," Cha said. "It would rub me the wrong way, though, if they are trying to pass themselves off as a local restaurant. It's kind of sketchy if they are using this as an advertising tool to make it seem like they are something they're not."

Growers' coolers do double duty for tree seedlings

BY CRAIG REED

For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG — Not long after the coolers are emptied of summer and fall produce and products, the cool space on several farms becomes a transition home for seedling trees.

Those coolers are a stop between the nurseries of northern Oregon and southern Washington and the mountainsides of the Coast Range and the Cascade Mountains.

The digging and shipping of the seedlings, the majority of them Douglas fir, begins at the nurseries in December. In order to get the trees closer to their future homes, they end up at coolers at farms like Wesley Orchards and Norris Blueberry Farms near Roseburg and Fern Hill Holly Farm near Astoria, Ore.

The coolers are kept at 34 to 38 degrees.

"It's just more convenient to have the trees at a centralized location," said Ben Christiansen, a forester for Barnes & Associates, a company that manages 80,000 acres of southwestern Oregon timberland. "Then we don't have to drive up to the nurseries every day. Those nurseries don't have the storage space. Having these farms with their coolers is convenient for us."

Beginning in December and then a couple times a week, seedlings are delivered in bulk by semi-truck and trailer to

the coolers. During a normal planting season from December to April, the Norris coolers store 1.5 million young trees for five timber companies, Wesley Orchards stores 1.5 million trees for five companies and a few smaller timber owners, and Fern Holly stores 2.5 million trees for two companies.

In the past, Kruse Farms of Roseburg stored seedlings in its cooler for a timber owner until that company built its own cooler. Evan Kruse said the farm's cooler is available to storing seedlings.

"We want to provide a service, help these timber companies out and make it easier for them to get the trees every morning," said Paul Norris, owner of Norris Blueberry Farms.

Norris said he was approached several years ago about the use of the coolers.

"They came to me and said, 'Hey, you've got coolers. Can we use them?'" Norris said.

While providing a service, storing the seedlings is diversity for the farms, earning revenue and extending the use of its facilities beyond the summer and fall harvest seasons.

"This keeps our cold storage in operation, this utilizes our building space that we have during our off season," said Howard Sand, owner of Wesley Orchards.

Charley Moyer, the Dillard

District forester for Roseburg Forest Products, said that company plants 500,000 to 1 million seedlings a year. Most are Douglas fir, but incense cedar, grand fir and some other non-fir trees are also planted.

Moyer said the seedlings can be stored up to four weeks in the cooler without being damaged, but most of them are out and in the ground within three weeks.

"It's a convenience thing for the planting crews to have the seedlings closer to where they are going to be planted," Moyer said.

Between 5 and 6 each morning, five to six days a week, planting crews roll up to the coolers and load 8,000 to 10,000 seedlings into their trailers. They then head off to the mountains for a one- to two-hour trip to the planting site. With a crew of 10 to 15

planters and on terrain that is not too steep, the daily goal is to plant all the seedlings taken each morning.

Snow and below freezing temperatures are the two main factors that will stop the planting schedule.

The Wesley Orchards cooler has stored seedlings for the past 45 years. Sand said there have been years when up to 5 million trees went through that cooler. He said he expects the number to be up in upcoming years as the thousands of acres of forest land that was burned by the multiple fires of 2020 are reforested.

Sand said he's been told orders for seedlings for each of the next three years have already been placed by landowners who sustained losses in the 131,542-acre Archie Creek Fire that started last September east of Roseburg.



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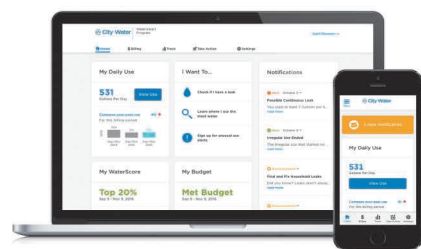
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