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● The Firkin Group of Pubs

'FIRKIN HUNGRY

Cozy, comfortable pubs in the English tradition, offering a homey place to relax and enjoy a beer and a burger, are the concept behind The Firkin Group of Pubs.

By Chris Petersen



Don't worry if your first reaction to the name "Firkin" is an off-color joke, the company is fully aware of the cheeky sound of its name. A firkin is actually an old term for a nine-gallon barrel of beer, and the word perhaps best sums up the company – a chain of English-style pubs with a relaxed, jovial atmosphere.

The first of them opened in Toronto in the late 1980s, and since then the chain has grown to include more than 30 in Canada and several in the United States.

The company looks to become a much bigger name

in America, with more than 100 Firkin pubs in development "south of the border."

"We would like to see ourselves as the biggest pub chain in North America," says Larry Isaacs, Firkin's marketing director. The company expects to make a big impact in the United States thanks to the pubs' homey ambiance, their all-inclusive nature and a roster of qualified franchisees.

The chain's first location was opened in 1987 in Toronto by two South African entrepreneurs, Stanley Adelson and Ian Fisher. The pair bought a pub called "The Fox and Firkin" from a different franchiser, and once the chain started opening new locations throughout Canada, the company seized the double entendre of the word "firkin" to create a national advertising campaign. For example, folding chairs with the words "My Firkin Chair" were a popular promotional item for the company, and billboards proudly display examples from the pubs' menus while asking, "Firkin hungry?"

Isaacs says that although a few people might complain about the irreverent marketing, most find it funny and memorable. He says the company likes to "take it close to the edge" with its marketing efforts, and those efforts have added up to 36 locations in Canada, with more on the way.

Home Away From Home

The most distinctive feature of Firkin pubs is their atmosphere. The overriding idea behind the Firkin pubs is that they should be places where everyone can feel comfortable.

"We use the analogy of 'Cheers,'" Isaacs says, referring to the popular sitcom bar where "everybody knows your name." "It's your living room away from home," he adds. "You have to stop there on your way home, or your day's not complete."

The pubs are styled after classic English pubs, but beyond that they don't fall into a certain category. Isaacs says most neighborhood pubs are designed to attract a certain clientele, whether it's sports fans or students.

Firkin pubs are meant to attract people of all types, from office workers stopping off for a drink to students burning the midnight oil to families looking for a bite to eat. "It's a very welcoming environment, very homey," Isaacs says.

Firkin pubs also provide a number of different ways to unwind in the traditional pub style, from darts to billiards to the recently added NTN video trivia game system.

The company doesn't expect the core concept of the pubs to change very much as more locations open in the United States, he says.

A big part of the English pub concept is traditional English pub fare, and Firkin pubs serve fish and chips, bangers and mash and steak and kidney pie, among others. Alongside the old English standbys, Firkin has a complete menu of appetizers, burgers, sandwiches, pasta dishes and desserts.

Isaacs says food counts for a higher percentage of the chain's business now, accounting for nearly half of its revenue. Food used to make up only a quarter of Firkin's business, so the company is placing greater emphasis on its menu, hiring a corporate chef and developing new menu items. The company is also expanding its salad and vegetarian choices to meet America's growing demand for healthier dining. To accompany Firkin's menu, the chain offers more than a dozen beers on tap, and another 15 brands in bottles.

British Invasion

Firkin currently has four locations in the United States: outside Chicago, Miami, Albany, N.Y., and Flint, Mich. The company plans to open 10 more pubs in the United States in 2006, and Isaacs says there are currently 148 more pubs in development by 23 franchisees.

The company sells franchisees development territories and then offers them the "Firkin Auto Pilot," a program that Isaacs says gives the franchisees the "A to Z" of opening a Firkin pub. The company also offers franchisees a marketing and hospitality seminar series called "Firkin University."

Isaacs says the most significant challenge is teaching franchisees the company's attitude. He says the goal each Firkin pub should have is to make every patron feel welcome, which sets it apart from other establishments.

"The point of difference is that when you walk into one of ours you feel like a somebody," Isaacs says. He says the company's marketing has also been key in helping the chain gain ground in Canada, and he expects the same to happen in America once more locations open across the country. The chain's "striking and impactful" advertising has given the chain a distinct identity and helped cement its place in the public's mind, Isaacs says. **FAD**