



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

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[Home](#) > The Table Service Upgrade

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Firehouse Subs, BurgerFi add table service to score real estate in Florida town.

The city of Winter Park, Florida, was in a quandary. Up-and-coming fast-casual concepts Firehouse Subs and BurgerFi wanted to move into the town's upscale dining and shopping district, Park Avenue, but business owners and city officials were worried that the posh image would become tarnished with the addition of limited-service operators.

As a compromise, the two brands did something unusual in the quick-service industry: They added table-service components.

"We will modify as much as our concept allows to comply with local zoning regulations," writes Josh Lorance, director of operations and development for North Palm Beach, Florida-based BurgerFi, in an e-mail to *QSR*. "Winter Park guests have the option of having their food delivered to the table or picking it up at the pick-up counter."

Park Avenue is a profitable venture for Central Florida, since many visitors to Orlando's theme parks also visit the street and the restaurants, shopping, and parks in the surrounding area.

Winter Park's zoning regulations for Park Avenue define acceptable restaurants as "any establishment which is devoted to the retailing and on-premises consumption of meals and food ... where foodservice is provided by waiters/waitresses and where the menu shall consist of fine-dining cuisine with a range of appetizers, entrees, and desserts. Fine-dining restaurants shall not include establishments where ordering or payment is done at a counter/cashier and shall not include sandwich shops, sub shops, or any type of fast-food business."

BurgerFi, which has around 50 total locations, opened its tweaked store on Park Avenue last year. Jacksonville, Florida-based Firehouse Subs is opening a unit next to BurgerFi in August. Like BurgerFi, Firehouse Subs' executives are willing to modify the chain's service model in order to operate a store on Park Avenue.

As a result, Firehouse Subs will provide table service to guests who want it, in addition to counter service, which is the model used in the remainder of its 600-plus stores.

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“We expect it to be a good volume restaurant,” says Mike Kelly, Central Florida area representative for Firehouse Subs. “We tested the numbers on table service, and the franchisee made the commitment to add the extra staff. We didn’t change our interior décor, and nothing else about the store changes [compared with Firehouse Subs’ other restaurants].”

When Firehouse guests first enter the restaurant, they will see signage that directs them to sit if they wish to have table service. “Dining-room attendants will take their order, ring up their order, and make the exchange [of payment],” Kelly says. “That is a departure from what we normally do, but we already deliver food to 100 percent of the tables.”

In an attempt to keep out other quick-service chains, Winter Park city officials are rewriting Park Avenue’s zoning regulations. But they have not determined the best way to include some fine-dining restaurants they would welcome while excluding other brands.

“We are not trying to prohibit every franchise. Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse is a good example of a franchise that would be very nice to have come to Park Avenue,” says Jeff Briggs, development director for Winter Park. “But it’s very difficult to craft words that can get you a Ruth’s Chris and not an Applebee’s.”

In fact, Winter Park officials are even having problems with BurgerFi’s service model and are claiming the brand has not kept up its end of the deal by offering table service—or at least making it known as an option for guests. “We are in negotiations with BurgerFi and may need to involve our code enforcement process to get compliance,” Briggs says.

While restaurant industry consultants understand why Firehouse Subs and BurgerFi modified their operational model in order to do business in an upscale area, they caution against making too many concessions when growing a business.

“If you continue to do that from city to city, then you are muddling your brand. When you go into a McDonald’s, for example, in Winter Park, Florida, or Denver, Colorado, you know what you are going in to,” says David Kincheloe, president of National Restaurant Consultants in Denver.

Dave Stone, managing partner and principal at New England Consulting Group, similarly says that the customer experience should always be the same. “There could be some spill out if customers go to other stores [and see something different],” he says.

While Firehouse Subs would likely not make the cut under the future Winter Park regulations, the location serves Firehouse Subs’ business model well, Kelly says. “We have worked to create ourselves out of the sub category. We are not the typical fast-food restaurant,” he says.

And as Firehouse Subs expands from the Southeast U.S. to the Northeast, Kelly says, it will likely have to comply with zoning restrictions in other metropolitan areas. “If you want to be in downtown New York City, for example, you can’t usually find a location to build,”

he says. "If you want to be in a city or an area that bad, you need to take whatever steps the city is asking."

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