

Owensboro still Chowdown Town

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

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The folks in Chowdown Town still like to eat out, a new national restaurant survey says.

The 2009 Nielsen Claritas Restaurant Growth Index last week listed the Owensboro metro area as the 11th best place in the nation to start a restaurant -- just ahead of Orlando, Fla.

Myrtle Beach, S.C., has held the top spot for the past six years.

Owensboro's ranking is down from seventh a year ago, the survey said.

But it still means that people in the local metro -- Daviess, Hancock and McLean counties -- eat out more than those in 352 other places studied.

The Restaurant Growth Index for 2002 showed Owensboro -- then the 92nd best place for a new restaurant -- with 155 restaurants with total sales of \$100.8 million and average sales of \$650,865 per restaurant.

By last year, that had grown to 204 restaurants with \$269.8 million in total sales and average sales of \$1.32 million per location.

Leo Portaluppi and Marcelo Augdo opened City Subs & Salads in the old Pizzaroma location in Halifax Square in February.

"Business is really good," Portaluppi said Monday. "We look like geniuses now, but when we started everybody said we were crazy. Our sales are better so far than we thought they would be."

It's so good, he said, that "we're actually looking at opening a second location downtown."

"We've had three national restaurant chains looking at Owensboro locations in the last month," said Philip Purdom, senior vice president for development and mall leasing for Hocker & Associates, which handles leasing for Wesleyan Park Plaza, Woodlands Plaza and Highland Pointe.

"And we're talking to franchisees from a couple of regional/national chains," he said.

All three locations he represents are being considered for new restaurants, Purdom said.

"Any of them would be good for Owensboro," he said. "We're hoping something happens soon."

More than 20 years ago, the Courier-Journal in Louisville labeled Owensboro "Chowdown Town" after a high ranking in a similar national survey.

The moniker stuck.

Owensboro has lost several restaurants in recent months.

Ruby Tuesday, Steak 'n Shake and the Dairy Queen in front of Towne Square Mall all closed last fall. Montana Mike's closed in January.

But City Subs & Salads has opened, Chick-fil-A bought the Steak 'n Shake location and Zaxby's bought the former Dairy Queen in front of the mall.

And at least one and possibly three Dunkin' Donuts locations are scheduled to open in the next four years.

The Restaurant Growth Index studied 363 metro areas.

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