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Restaurants bringing salad days to Atlanta

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Lisa R. Schoolcraft](#) Staff writer

Restaurateurs are hoping to see more green by adding and expanding salad concepts in metro Atlanta.

Saladworks, a Pennsylvania-based franchise chain, plans to enter the market with 10 locations, and Atlanta-based Dressed, which has a site in Midtown, plans to expand to Buckhead and Perimeter Center, then possibly Los Angeles.

Saladworks, which began in 1986 at a mall in New Jersey, has signed a deal with RaMM Alliance LLC of Pennsylvania to open restaurants in Peachtree Center, Buckhead, Marietta, Roswell, Alpharetta, Duluth, Buford, Lawrenceville, Athens and Peachtree City. The first two locations are expected to open by the fourth quarter, said Mike Medrow, RaMM co-owner, although he is unsure which two will be first to open.

Each restaurant will cost \$450,000 to \$500,000 to set up, Medrow said, "so we will be putting \$5 million into the market. We're committed to 10 [locations], but we have visions of even more."

Saladworks, which grossed \$88 million at 88 stores in eight states in 2007, is looking for space in malls, strip centers and possibly some stand-alone restaurants, he said.

Each restaurant, which will offer online ordering, delivery and catering, will have 15 to 20 employees and is expected to gross \$1 million annually, Medrow said.

RaMM Alliance's Medrow, along with Dean Russell and Michael McPhillips, are no strangers to the entrepreneurial world. The men started, developed and operated the publicly owned UbiquiTel Inc., a provider of Sprint PCS digital wireless personal communications services. They sold UbiquiTel, which had 50 retail stores, to Sprint Nextel in June 2006.

Dressed, which opened its first location at Plaza Midtown in November 2006, plans to open at Terminus in six to eight weeks, said chef and owner Justin Smolev. He plans to open a site in the Perimeter Mall area by September.

"As soon as I opened in Midtown I was looking for other locations," Smolev said.

Dressed offers fresh-to-order salads and soups.

Both Saladworks and Dressed face competition from other salad concepts such as Sweet Tomatoes, Tossed and Doc Green's Gourmet Salads and Grill.

Tossed, which offers salads, sandwiches and crepes, has locations in Decatur and Alpharetta, with an Atlanta location in the works.

Lettuce Souprise You, which had several locations in metro Atlanta before the salad concept really took hold, has since scaled back and now has just two restaurants, one off North Druid Hills Road and another in Midtown.

Sweet Tomatoes, based in San Diego, has four metro locations: Alpharetta, Kennesaw, Duluth and Perimeter Center, with no plans to expand beyond that within the next year, a company spokeswoman said.

Doc Green's has nine restaurants throughout Atlanta.

Simply salad

One reason for the abundance of salad places is the trend toward single-concept restaurants, said Marc Weinberg, operating partner at The Shopping Center Group LLC, who follows the local restaurant industry.

People are looking for different experiences and different foods, he said, which is why these fast-casual restaurants are cropping up.

"They take one segment of a menu and expand it," Weinberg said.

For example, a patron could get ribs, salads or Tex-Mex food at Chili's or T.G.I.Friday's, but Shane's Rib Shack, Tossed and Chipotle have all taken just one segment of that broader menu and expanded it into a restaurant, he said.

Smolev said he certainly didn't invent the salad concept for Dressed, but he thinks he's "taken [it] to its height" and offers dozens of variations.

"I think people are tired of getting fast food with no personal service," Smolev said. "They don't want something pre-made and unhealthy. Salads bring health into the fast-casual scene."

The trend is toward healthier fare at restaurants, Weinberg said. "Some of it is a backlash from the all-protein [Atkins] diet," he said.

Salad concepts also work well because they cater more to the female diner, who, in the restaurant industry, often picks where a couple will eat, Weinberg said.

Diners are seeking out the perception of freshness on menus, according to a May 2007 report on "fresh and local foods" by Packaged Facts.

"Fresh-baked," "made-on-premises," and "made-to-order" are the top three menu descriptors consumers equate with freshness, the report said.

Fresh ingredients are becoming "not just desired but expected by consumers," the report said.

Another reason for the rise in fast-casual restaurants like Saladworks and Dressed is the slumping economy, Weinberg said.

"In down economy, people tend to trade down for both lunch and dinner," he said. Instead of eating at a full-service restaurant, diners will head to a less-pricey fast-casual spot.

And Atlanta has a lot of entrepreneurs, and most of the franchise opportunities are for restaurants like Saladworks, Weinberg said.

RaMM Alliance considered starting Saladworks franchises in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Baltimore/Washington, D.C., but opted for Atlanta, Medrow said.

"We looked at the growth opportunities and found the quick/casual [restaurant] concept would be the best fit for the Atlanta market," he said.

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