

Fast-food veteran hopes to make mark with Qdoba franchise

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JEFF HINCKLEY/DISPATCH

Graydon Webb, displaying a chicken taco salad at Qdoba Mexican Grill on W. 5th Avenue, is a partner in a central Ohio franchise. Graydon Webb has been part of the Columbus fast-food restaurant scene for a long time, and he isn't done yet. The one-time vice president of franchise sales for Wendy's International and founder of G.D. Ritzzy's in 1980 has been involved with restaurant chains most of his adult life. These days, Webb is the minority partner in a central Ohio franchise of Qdoba Mexican Grill, which is competing nationally with Baja Fresh, Chipotle and other Mexican grills. "I think this is a great concept, and I'm really excited about it," Webb said as he sat in the franchise's first restaurant, which opened recently at 1689 W. 5th Ave. A second location will be at Arlington Pointe Plaza, the shopping center on the former site of DaVinci Ristorante at Henderson and Reed roads, with a third unit outside Wilmington, Ohio. The franchise agreement calls for 11 restaurants. Qdoba began in Denver in 1995 and was acquired in 2003 by Jack in the Box Inc., a San Diego company known for its largely west-of-the-Mississippi River namesake burger chain. More than 300 Qdoba units are open nationally, including a separate franchise location on Polaris Parkway. The local franchise's majority owner is Paula Harer, who knew Webb through their kids and Upper Arlington events. "Graydon brings a real inside-restaurant knowledge," she said. "He understands the industry better than anyone." While he honed his skills at Wendy's, he made his mark with Ritzzy's, a fast-food operation with a soda-shop theme. The chain hit 100 units before foundering, only to arise recently in a few markets. The final Columbus units were converted to Rally's stores in 1991, three years after the company was sold to an investor. "I think it was probably a little ahead of its time," Webb said. Ritzzy's was known for its grilled food and its premium ice cream. The fast-food business was extremely competitive in the mid-'80s, and the chain borrowed a lot of money to grow. In the end, "we just ran out of cash," he said. He served for a time as head of research and development for the Rax chain before it met its demise, and he was among the original investors in Jump Asian Cuisine. Webb has done consulting work for an array of restaurant companies, from Johnny Rockets to Yum! Brands' KFC and Taco Bell. Along the way, he's been an executive for a home builder, a San Antonio soft-serve ice-cream operation, a fried-food vending-machine maker, a dental-supplies chain and others. In addition to starting his own consulting firm years ago, he has been working since 1997 with the Chicago office of investment banking firm Chapman Partners Inc. During the past few years, he's also been a principal with Renaissance Partners, a corporate turnaround firm based in Pompano Beach, Fla., and is advising several new businesses.

Even though Webb has moved far beyond Ritzzy's during the past two decades, he's pleased the chain's name has survived. Six original franchised stores still exist in Indiana, Kentucky and West Virginia. Texas real-estate developer Haydn Cutler bought the rights to the name a few years ago and has opened two new restaurants in the Fort Worth area. The new Ritzzy's Fresh American Diner locations feature Angus burgers, salads, soups, hot dogs and, of course, rich ice cream.

On Restaurants is a weekly column about the restaurant industry. Send tips, information and news releases to bwolf@dispatch.com or call 614-461-5264.