

nature's table

A Pioneer in Fresh, Health-Conscious Dining Celebrates 40 Years

By Rich Wagner

I grew up in a family that had a true passion for healthy eating. My father owned a health food and juice company, so health-conscious living is a concept I have practiced since day one. I had always dreamt of sharing that passion with the world, and with the help of my family and my high school best friend, Bryan Buffalo, we have been able to share that passion for the past 40 years.

We opened the first Nature's Table inside the Melbourne Square Mall right in Melbourne. It was a new name that brought a new concept to food courts: lighter fare at a faster pace — a concept that was relatively unknown in the early '80s.

Mall food courts were just the beginning for us. After many successful mall openings, we decided to take a risk with the direction of our company. We ventured out into unique spaces that included office buildings, strip malls and military bases. Today that open method of thought has become our signature selling point for franchisees. Our flexible footprint concept works in any physical space, whether it is an office, airport, hospital or a college campus. We have become a trusted brand for institutions looking to bring healthier food options to their students, patrons and guests across the southeast.

We are currently focused on opening multiple new franchise locations within hospitals, airports and colleges across the United States. In fact, we will be opening locations in the Irsay Family YMCA in Indianapolis next month and the Cook Museum in Decatur, Alabama next year.

With nearly 70 locations open and thriving today, we never imagined the incredible success Nature's Table has experienced. It is hard to believe we are celebrating our 40th anniversary this year. We could not have achieved this without the help of our families, our fantastic franchisees and, of course, our wonderful guests.

My partner and I know this company inside and out because we have worked every role behind the counter. Whether it is in the kitchen, at the checkout, in the office or on the floor at tradeshow, we have made sure we have a solid understanding of what every member of Team Table does on a daily basis. A good entrepreneur should understand the tasks and responsibilities of each and every one of his or her employees.

Even after decades of growth, we are proud to say this company is still a family-run business. Senior Vice President Bryan Buffalo and I work closely with our wives and families to make sure the company continues to thrive. Our



wives play key roles, not only in our lives, but also in the company. Bryan's wife, Chris, is part of the corporate team and a current franchisee, and my wife, Sandra, is a former franchisee who now works in our office headquarters. Our vice president of Operations, Lisa Odom, was also a franchisee and has been part of the company for 25 years.

As restaurants pop up on virtually every corner of America, people have become more conscious of what they are eating. Nature's Table strives to lead the pack with nutritious options for a quick meal. Consumers want true transparency and to know what is really in their food along with the nutritional values. The conversation has turned to hormone free, un-processed, fresh, locally-sourced produce. We evolve and stay relevant by updating our menu every three years.

We pride ourselves on providing a menu that puts our customers first. We want to make sure there is something for everyone on our menu, so each location features endless combinations of



healthful, nutritious super foods, gluten-friendly and vegetarian options. In a world where everyone is very conscious of what they are eating, we are glad to be an option that lets guests feel good about what they had for breakfast or lunch.

Not only does the company attract new customers daily, but we are attracting new franchisees every year. Plans are underway to expand operations in the Midwest throughout 2018. The company is also focused on opening new franchise locations within the Jacksonville market.

Celebrating a major milestone this year, we continue to look forward to the future and working together to carry on a restaurant that stays true to itself, even 40 years later.

People often ask what advice I would offer aspiring Foodpreneurs. I have learned a few things over the years, but my three favorite lessons are: stay humble, provide outstanding customer service and cherish all relationships you make along the way. It has been a fantastic 40 years with Nature's Table, and we are thrilled for the next 40!

Rich Wagner is the president and co-founder of Nature's Table, a fast-casual dining concept that gives health-conscious eaters a variety of options including smoothies, wraps, sandwiches, soups and protein bowls. ♦

