

Published September 28th, 2011

Chipotle Mexican Grill Opens in Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



Multi-generations eat at Chipotle on its opening day in Lafayette Photo Sophie Braccini

Is Chipotle a kids' joint? It certainly looked like it on opening day on September 21 in Lafayette. Reporters and photographers from several school newspapers came to the new restaurant that opened at 3518 Mt. Diablo Blvd. Suite F, between Peet's Coffee and Noah's Bagels. The fast moving line, after 3:00 p.m., was mostly made of kids from the nearby middle school, but there were also older patrons sitting at tables, enjoying their \$7 freshly made burrito.

"Chipotle is cool, hip and a bit quirky," said local Marketing Manager Ashley Head who had come to support the opening, "high school and college students love us." According to Head, what makes the brand popular is that the menu is very simple: only 14 to 17 ingredients to choose from, that patrons can see and combine the way they want. "And, of course, because it is very good," she added.

The company's communications emphasize its claim to quality and the local nature of the ingredients that are used in the restaurant: "When he started his first restaurant in Denver, Colorado, Steve Eils was not very pleased with the taste of the carnitas (roasted pork), so he looked for a tastier meat and found naturally raised animals taste better. Since then, we sell only meat that comes from naturally raised animals," states a press release.

Head also pointed out that the cilantro is organic and comes from Hollister, the romaine lettuce from Salinas, tomatoes are sourced from Taylor Farms also in Salinas (June through November), and all the dairy products are purchased at Petaluma Creamery. "There are no growth hormones or antibiotic residues in the meat/dairy products we use," stated Head. This commitment is part of what the publicly traded company calls "Food with Integrity."

Selling good quality ingredients in a fast food setting for a reasonable price means that the volume has to be very high. "We serve 150 people in an hour," explained the energetic manager, Patty Rojas, who oversees 15 employees in the Lafayette location, some of them local students. Speed and accuracy are top requirements for employees working in the assembly-line type setting.

Chipotle's menu consists of four main items - burritos, tacos, bowls and salads - with a choice of chicken, steak, or vegetarian (with guacamole). The price of the items is based on the type of meat chosen. Additional toppings include rice, beans (vegetarian or not), four types of salsa, sour cream, cheese, and lettuce. "The relatively small number of ingredients we offer allows us to focus on their quality," said Head, "and we also can keep it affordable to everyone."

The same day Chipotle opened in Lafayette, the company also inaugurated a restaurant in San Francisco. All the restaurants are owned by the company; at this time there are 45 of them in the San Francisco Bay Area, and more than 1000 in the US and Canada, with some new openings in Europe. Chipotle was ranked the third fastest growing restaurant chain in 2010.

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