

CinéBistro

Dine-in movie theater merges upscale cuisine with film-watching experience

BY ERIN DOSTAL

CinéBistro is a concept that combines dinner and a show. It's really just that simple, said Fred Meyers, the company's executive director.

"We've created this very luxurious, very pampering way of enjoying an activity people have been doing for years," Meyers said. "We have a unique niche in the old tradition of dinner and a movie."

The concept, which is owned by Birmingham, Ala.-based Cobb Theatres, offers an upscale-casual dining experience in which food is served before a movie begins and then is consumed once it is underway. The target audiences are couples on a date night and girls'-night-out groups — think pink martinis and the "Sex and the City" movies, he said.

The chain has seven locations across the country, including units in Hampton, Va.; Atlanta; Miami; and Vail, Colo., and hopes to expand in the coming years. It currently is scouting prime locations in large, emerging markets with the right upscale demographics to support the chain.

"People are just infatuated with this [CinéBistro concept]," Meyers said. "They tell us they stopped going to dinner and a movie because it just [took] too much time." Now, he added, they can do it all in one place.

Children aren't allowed, either, Meyers said, which makes it a more relaxed moviegoing experience for adults.

"The movie experience has become a kids' hangout," he said. "You have people who are texting and giggling; you have stale nacho chips. ... Instead, we've really merged white-tablecloth dining with moviegoing."

The seats at CinéBistro are purchased along with the movie ticket at a kiosk or "conierge," so there's no rushing into the theater to grab a seat before the show, Meyers said. The seats are plush and up to 36 inches wide, he added, which makes for a

comfortable date night.

Serving restaurant-quality food while pacing for a movie-theater experience was one obstacle CinéBistro had to overcome, Meyers said. The chain addressed the issue by requiring dining guests to arrive at the theater at least 30 minutes before the movie begins so servers can take their orders and customers can receive their food and drinks before showtime. Once the movie starts, there are no interruptions.

In fact, guests don't pay until they leave, he said, allowing for a completely seamless movie-watching experience.

CinéBistro features an upscale-casual menu with some movie-centric items, including an \$11 popcorn chicken, calamari or rock shrimp — a take on the classic movie treat. Regular popcorn with unlimited refills is available for \$8.

All menu items are prepared in each building's on-premise kitchen. Appetizers — called "previews" on the menu — include a Mezze Platter with hummus, eggplant, tomato dip and grilled pita for \$12; Fig and Brie Flatbread with sweet grain mustard and caramelized onions for \$11; and BBQ Beef Rib Sliders for \$9.50 at

CINÉBISTRO

LEADERSHIP: Jeremy Welman, chief operating officer of Cobb Theatres and CinéBistro; Fred Meyers, executive director at CinéBistro
HEADQUARTERS: Cobb Theatres is headquartered in Birmingham, Ala.; CinéBistro's offices are in Atlanta
MARKET SEGMENT: upscale-casual movie theaters
NO. OF UNITS: 7
YEAR FOUNDED: 2008
TARGET MARKETS: major U.S. cities
METHOD OF GROWTH/FUNDING: company-owned stores funded by Cobb Theatres



According to CinéBistro, a main target audience for its dine-in movie experience is couples on dates. Among the upscale-casual menu items it offers are crab cakes, far left, and a watermelon Mojito, left.

the company's Atlanta location.

"Our approach to our menu is really approachable food that is done with flavorful ingredients," Meyers said. "Everything is made from scratch, right down to our salad dressings and the whipped cream on the desserts."

Main dishes — called "features" — include Rock Shrimp Mac and Cheese for \$17, a New York Strip steak for \$24 and Fettuccine Al Forno, which starts at \$15 without add-ons like chicken or grilled sirloin. The menu also offers salads, sandwiches and assorted desserts, including a chocolate cake and a peanut butter pie.

Full-bottle wine sales are very popular, Meyers said, because guests know they won't get service during the film.

"People come to us for a night out," he said. "It's not just about dining. It's not just about the movie. It's about both."

Guests can go to CinéBistro's lounge just for dinner and drinks, or they can come see a movie without ordering food. Most people choose to do both, though, Meyers said.

Industry experts voiced differing opinions about the dine-in theater concept, though.

"Restaurant-movie theater combos are viable businesses," said Mary Chapman, director of

product innovation at restaurant industry research firm Technomic Inc. "They can turn a regular movie night into a more complete experience."

Chapman added that consumers usually are willing to pay a little more for the combo experience of having good food and drinks served to them in their theater seats.

However, Richard Tullo, director of research at financial services firm Albert Fried & Company, said he doubted the real estate investment would be worth CinéBistro's possible returns on investment.

"That's been tried, and I think you're taking two low-margin, hard-to-operate industries, merging them together and hoping for the best," he said.

Adding a restaurant to a movie

theater adds complexity to the building, too, he continued.

"You're limiting the audience," he said. "It makes no sense as a business model."

Nevertheless, CinéBistro is not alone in offering the combined experience of dinner and a show. Other dine-in theater concepts are being rolled out around the country by AMC Entertainment Inc., Gold Class Cinemas and Alamo Drafthouse Cinema.

And because CinéBistro competes with major movie-theater chains like AMC and National Amusements, "the food and experience can't just be a novelty," Chapman of Technomic said.

"Since the costs of both the movie and the food tend to be higher, there are many consumers who consider it only for special occasions," she added.

But that's just the point, Meyers said. Moviegoing is a special occasion. And, he said, CinéBistro has the sales to prove it — although he declined to share sales figures.

Most of all, Meyers said, CinéBistro creates a unique but convenient dining experience, which people embrace. As a result, he said, the concept is focused on its future growth. ■

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