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William A. Becker
Georgia Southern College

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THEME RESTAURANTS, A UNIQUE DINING EXPERIENCE

BY

DR. WILLIAM A. BECKER, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND LEISURE SERVICES
GEORGIA SOUTHERN COLLEGE
STATESBORO, GEORGIA 30469-8073

ABSTRACT

Innovation is a key to sustaining improvement of quality services, thereby, maintaining customer growth and retention. Themed restaurants is a new way to develop an old product and service to improve the competitive edge. It is an example of innovation needed to improve quality and respond to the demand for increased sophistication by the consumer in the leisure industry.

THEME RESTAURANTS, A UNIQUE DINING EXPERIENCE

Theme restaurants are a growing segment of the commercial recreation and tourist business. The theme restaurant appears to fulfill the need of tourists who have not had their fill of either major or minor theme parks while on vacation. The definition of just what is a theme restaurant appears to be elusive. The restaurant business calls any restaurant with a theme architecture and interior design, such as "Baby Does Mine" or "Victoria Station", a theme restaurant. This article will focus on those restaurants that present a total themed leisure experience to participants. The term total refers to all aspects of the participants' experience: food, decor, entertainment and atmosphere. This article will not deal with restaurants that call themselves theme restaurants but have the usual fare of steaks and seafood.

The "theme" concept originated with Disneyland. The success of Disneyland and Disney World lies with the concept of providing a complete theme experience. At Disney's Magic Kingdom one will find the food service, rides, music and architecture all designed for the theme of a particular section of the park such as Adventureland or Tomorrowland. These themed areas all provide the feeling of "escape" that is so important to the experience of theme park participants. The current group of theme restaurants have hit upon the Disney concept of "theming." Disney has their own long running theme restaurants at Disney World such as the Polynesian Revue and the Hoop-Dee-Do Revue. Theme restaurants choose a particular theme such as the medieval period or south seas luau and carry it through the entire experience from appetizer to after dinner

entertainment. For the purpose of this article, theme restaurants will be defined as those establishments that have the following common characteristics: (1) a dominant easily identifiable theme; (2) a fixed menu that is compatible with the theme; (3) live family entertainment that is geared to the theme; (4) building architecture and interior design that is compatible with the theme; (5) a fixed starting time and a running time of about two hours; and (6) a policy of including everything for one price. Some people would include the nationwide chains of pizza and entertainment restaurants, such as Showbiz Pizza Place, in this theme restaurant grouping. However, these glorified pizza parlors cannot be grouped with such live extravaganzas as Medieval Times. The largest concentration of theme restaurants appears to be in the Orlando, Florida area. These establishments are designed to catch the typical Disney vacation family or travel group on their third or fourth night in town. The Disney experience is only good for so many days and then people start looking for the second tier attractions which include theme restaurants.

The theme restaurant business appears to be growing rapidly in the Orlando area. One of the original theme restaurants, Medieval Times, was built by a consortium of European investors who have recently opened their second medieval operation in Buena Park, California.(2) Medieval Times in Orlando has a seating capacity of 960 people per show and an estimated yearly attendance of 250,000.(1) A similar attraction in the area, King Henry's Feast, recently opened in place of Shakespeare's Dinner Theater. A new sister attraction, Mardi Gras, has a New Orleans carnival theme. Sea World offers a Polynesian luau and show. These along with the two Disney attractions make up six theme restaurants in the Orlando area.

The theme restaurant business seems to be primarily a tourist attraction at this time. Psychologists tell us that people give themselves permission to do things on vacation that they would not normally do at home. These things include overeating and spending money on all kinds of souvenirs. Personal experience and a review of the advertising literature confirm the fact that theme restaurants take advantage of this psychology by offering huge banquets and feasts along with the entertainment. However, the lure of this type of attraction is not just the food, but the complete entertainment package. A family of four would currently pay \$80.00 plus tax at Medieval Times (2), two adults at \$24.00 each and two children at \$16.00 each, for the two hour dinner and show. This is certainly an expensive experience for the vacationing family--it is almost as much as a one day admission to Disney World. However, people seem to enjoy this type of attraction as evidenced by the quarter-million visitors to Medieval Times last year.(1)

What makes theme restaurants so attractive to vacationing families? A review of the characteristics of theme restaurants reveals the reasons why these establishments are in a pattern of growth in the Orlando area. The first characteristic, a dominant and easily identifiable theme, is the hallmark of the theme restaurant. The management at Medieval Times has a highly developed story behind their theme which includes the guests being greeted on their arrival by the "owner" of the castle, Don Raimundo II, the 11th Viscount of Rocaberti. He is supposed to be a very rich and powerful count who is a regal descendent of the Emperor Charlemagne. The

guests are told that they are his honored guests for a "Grand Party" which includes a unique jousting competition and tournament games with the feasting crowd assigned a specific knight to cheer for during the evening.

King Henry's Feast has an "Old England" type theme with dueling knights, court jesters and a medieval style banquet with ribs and chicken. King Henry's feast is billed as a surprise birthday celebration for the King. The Mardi Gras theme restaurant offers Louisiana cuisine along with a jazz band and a one hour cabaret show. The Sea World Polynesian luau and show features an island buffet dinner and Polynesian show. The two Disney World theme restaurants offer something both similar and different to the vacationing family. The Hoop-Dee-Do Revue has a country-western theme complete with a show, country type food and barn-like decor. The Polynesian Review has island-oriental food and a Polynesian show with flaming torches and hula dancers.

The second characteristic of theme restaurants is the fixed menu that is compatible with the theme. All of the attractions mentioned in this article have this characteristic. They all offer a line-up of food that goes along with their theme. At Medieval Times and King Henry's Feast one will find food that replicates the feasts and banquets of Old England. Or at least the guests have the opportunity to pretend that they are feasting in an old castle with kings and knights. A large part of the attraction is the opportunity to eat ribs and chicken with one's hands like King Henry VIII. The ads call this "eating in true pre-silverware fashion." The Polynesian theme restaurants offer island-oriental type food that is similar to what you might find in a Chinese restaurant. The Hoop-Dee-Do Revue has food geared to it's country-western theme: fried chicken, ribs, corn-on-the-cob and their famous strawberry shortcake. Mardi Gras has a four course Louisiana dinner to go with their cabaret show.

Live entertainment, along with the food, is the main attraction of a theme restaurant. This is the element that separates them from a regular restaurant and what makes them so attractive to family groups. The theme is carried out in grand style at Medieval Times. Guests are greeted by the Count and Countess of the castle who welcome them to share in a "regal banquet" and enjoy the "daring and skill of their knights." The next step is the Royal Wine Cellar where a wine cocktail is served. After the reception, trumpeters herald the guests into the Great Ceremonial Arena where they are seated in one of six color coded seating sections which corresponds to a knight's colors. The guests cheer for their knight in the tournament games which include jousting, javelin throwing, sword fights and other games. The show features twenty horses and a cast of seventy-five.(2)

King Henry's Feast, a surprise birthday celebration for the King, features Old English songs and dancing, specialty acts such as magicians and court jesters, and dueling knights. The focus at King Henry's is more on entertainment and less on the knight's competition that is found at Medieval Times.

The two south seas islands Polynesian shows, The Polynesian Luau at Sea World and the Polynesian Revue at Disney World, feature the usual

entertainment one would expect at this type of show. It would certainly not be a Polynesian show without hula girls, fire dancers, and island music. The Hoop-Dee-Doo Revue at Disney World has country-western entertainment which features singing and comedy skits. Mardi Gras has a one hour cabaret show, a New Orleans jazz band, and a carnival of the world show.

The fourth characteristic of theme restaurants is building architecture and interior design that is compatible with the theme. Medieval Times is housed in an authentic looking 11th century European-style castle complete with a moat and drawbridge. The guests file through various rooms such as the highly decorated "Hall of Arms" with its display of medieval arms and shields into the "Royal Wine Cellar" for a drink of wine before the banquet. The banquet takes place in the "Great Ceremonial Arena." The Arena has tiered tables on both sides with a large sand floored arena in the middle for the combat and games.

King Henry's Feast has a large Old English manor house on International Drive. The interior is designed to look the part with exposed wood beams and appropriate Old English decor.

The Polynesian theme restaurants try to simulate a south seas island setting with palm trees and tiki torches. The roofs have palm fronds and there is an open air tropical feeling. Disney enhances this feeling with a long walkway to the dining area. The walkway is lined with tropical plants and palm trees which puts one in the right mood for the evening.

The Hoop-Dee-Doo Revue at Disney is housed in an old fashioned barn-type structure that has a definite "country" decor. The location of the Hoop-Dee-Doo Revue near the Fort Wilderness RV Resort adds to the rustic flavor.

Other features of theme restaurants are that they are "all inclusive for one price" and have a fixed starting time. Everything is included for the price of admission: the food, entertainment, and sometimes even the alcoholic beverages. This is especially attractive for families and large travel groups because with the fixed menu there are no choices to be made or extra charges to worry about. The fixed starting and ending time allow a family or large group to plan their evening in advance. They know that everything will be provided for the one cost and on a set schedule.

The future of theme restaurants in this country may be very limited. The market at the moment seems to be limited to large tourist markets. As mentioned earlier, the prime location for theme restaurants currently is in the Orlando, Florida area. Medieval Times has built a second American restaurant in Buena Vista, California near Disneyland.(2) The characteristics of theme restaurants that make them attractive to tourists such as the show, group rate prices, and fixed menu, would make them unattractive to locals. The theme restaurant experience is not something you would take a date to on a typical Saturday night. Nor is it an experience to be repeated on a regular basis. A theme restaurant needs a large volume of one time only customers to stay in business. Theme park authority, Dr. Jack B. Samuels, noted that the New York City

metropolitan area would be a good potential site for a theme restaurant because of the large population plus the large number of tourists and convention visitors. This seems like a rational viewpoint because of the clustering of attractions in the New York metropolitan area. One problem may be the seasonal nature of the New York tourist business. One point to keep in mind is that theme restaurants are second or third day, or night, attractions. People view the theme restaurant experience as only part of their overall vacation experience. No one travels to Orlando just to go to Medieval Times. The prime attraction of course is Disney. For the immediate future, theme restaurants will be secondary attractions in large tourist markets. This market may be limited because at the moment the only two large year-round tourist markets are Orlando and Southern California. Theme restaurants are a unique part of the commercial recreation business picture in our country. It will be interesting to see that if in the near future this type of attraction will spread to other parts of the United States.

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