

Take a Bao puts the spotlight on Chinese-style steamed buns

BY LISA JENNINGS

LOS ANGELES — Bao, a new offering in the upscale food court of the Westfield Century City mall here, is being introduced by food-service newcomer Brest Stein and industry veterans Bob Spivak and Chuck Frank, while the duo develop several other restaurant ventures.

The Chinese-style steamed buns, known as bao, which commonly are served on dim sum menus as a breakfast or brunch item, are the featured dishes at the partners' new Take a Bao fast-casual outlet. It opened last month as the latest of several budding busi-

nesses that have attracted attention in the nation's largest cities.

Traditional bao typically are steamed orbs of yeasty dough with savory centers, such as shredded barbecue pork or chicken, and are portable, tennis-ball-sized snack or meal items.

Take a Bao's buns, however, are different in that the steamed dough is flattened, almost like a thick pita, and folded over the filling, sandwich-style. Eight filling options are offered, from pomgranate steak or Thai peanut chicken to crispy panko-crusted Atlantic cod or sweet-chile-glazed tofu.

Despite stiff competition in the busy food court and in the increasingly crowded fast-casual segment, Take a Bao is off to a fast start, averaging about 500 guests per day in its first three weeks, Stein says. The bar is on track to exceed his budgeted \$1.5 million in first-year sales, prompting the first-time restaurateur to look for a second location in the Los Angeles area and envision rapid growth.

Stein's confidence also is bolstered by his concept's ability to attract Spivak and Frank as investor-partners.

Spivak is founder and former chief executive of Los Angeles-based Grill Concepts Inc., which owns the upscale Grill on the Alley and more moderately priced Daily Grill chains.

Frank is a former executive of Spectrum Foods, which in its heyday operated such California concepts as MacArthur Park, Prigo and Tutta Maw. He later went on to steer development of Johnny Rockets and serve as president and chief operating officer of the El Forno Italian dining and bakery chain. He recently bought the last remaining MacArthur Park from Spectrum, now in bankruptcy, and plans to revive the Palo Alto, Calif. restaurant to its former glory.

Now teamed in a consulting partnership called Spivak and Frank, the two are assisting in the acquisition of the four-unit Hana Grill/Me. Hana concept, a "fresh Japanese" fast-casual chain in Los Angeles. They intend to change

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the name to Kich Grill and grow that brand.

Spivak and Frank also helped Dunkin' Brands Inc. design the new Baskin-Robbins Café 31 prototype, an all-dessert variant that opened last month in Peabody, Mass.

They also are working on plans for an "experience store" to bring Dunkin' Donuts back to the West Coast, though they declined to give details.

Take a Bao fit with the consultants' plan to work with entrepreneurs to bring unique concepts to market, Spivak says.

"People are looking for high-quality food in a fast environment, and Take a Bao really fits that description," he said.

Stein is not the first to attempt a bao-focused chain.

Letruxx Entertain You Enterprises Inc. in Chicago launched Wow Bao in 2003, offering a variety of steamed buns, noodles and other dishes. LEVE now operates three Wow Bao units there, averaging about 750 guests per day.

Plans call for the opening of another three to six more Wow Baus in 2009, said Art Mendozza, the brand's supervising partner.

With a \$7 to \$8 average check, Wow Bao offers traditional buns whose fillings are encased fully in dough. A key selling point is the brand's frequently changing variety of dough flavors and fillings, such as a green-tea-infused dough with eight-vegetable filling, or breakfast buns filled with eggs, bacon, sausage or cheese.

In New York, two of chef David Chang's three Momofuku restau-

rants offer his popular version of bao, which he simply calls steamed buns. Like those at Take a Bao, the buns at Momofuku also are flattened and folded over sandwich-style and have become one of the restaurants' most popular items. At Chang's Noodle Bar and Steam locations, they are \$9 for two.

Stein said he and founding chef Christian Lomas designed Take a

Bao's buns not only to show off the fillings but also to accentuate the brand's message of freshness.

"People say it's sort of like a pita or a taco," he said.

In addition to the fillings, the bao are stuffed with marinated cucumbers, Japanese radish, julienned pickled carrots, scallions or pea shoots. Two buns with a Napa cabbage salad are \$8.95. The dough is manufactured for Take a Bao and purchased so guests can watch the final steaming in the restaurant, which is about 500 square feet. Both wheat and white versions are available, and carbohydrate-averse guests can wrap their fillings in lettuce if they prefer.

The menu also offers the option of having a bao filling served over white or brown rice with vegetables instead of being steamed in a bun. Take a Bao also offers several noodle dishes and salads.

Bao even appear for dessert as a "mimosa" variation: sweetened steamed dough wrapped around chocolate, marshmallow and granular fillers.

Exotic sodas, beer, wine and sake are also available. Because the Westfield food court buses its tables, Take a Bao uses real china

and flatware. The average ticket is about \$10. About 60 percent of sales are at lunch and 40 percent at dinner.

From an operations standpoint, Take a Bao is not simple. Fillings and sauces are made in house, and all items are assembled to order. As Spivak said, "there are a lot of moving parts."

Stein, Stein calls the menu "forward-thinking food," noting that his bao aim to be a new experience, not compete with Los Angeles' many ethnic restaurants serving authentic steamed buns.

A former advertising executive, Stein developed Take a Bao while a business student at the University of California, Berkeley. After graduation, he worked briefly for a hot dog concept in New York called F&B to learn the business before he began working on his bao concept.

Spivak and Frank got involved after Stein called them to help him find a Los Angeles location.

Franchising, however, is not being planned, Spivak said.

"Franchising is not a word I like," he said. "We're looking to expand the brand ourselves." ■

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