

Not for boring people

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CULINARY CURRENTS

ON THE MENU

Ling & Louie's Asian Bar and Grill
Scottsdale, Ariz.

BY STEVE COOMES

Randy Schoch is an industry veteran who knows all the usual ways to draw customers to his restaurants. But when he launched Ling & Louie's Asian Bar and Grill in 2006, he took a completely different marketing tack. He sought to offend them.

Well, just a little. "Our tagline is, 'Not for boring people,' which says a lot about the fun we try to create," Schoch says. "It applies a little reverse psychology, too. People read it and say: 'Hey, I'm not boring! I can go there.'"

Schoch, 51, is the owner of Desert Island Restaurants, the umbrella company for six franchised restaurants, including five Ruth's Chris Steak House units and one Macaroni Grill, and his own creations: Thaifoon — Taste of Asia and two Ling & Louie's units. This most recent creation, Ling & Louie's, is decidedly different from its sister properties, and Schoch calls it a compilation of the best of what he's learned in his career.

Unlike his big-box restaurants able to seat hundreds, the quirky crossbreed of an Asian restaurant and an American tavern seats 120, a number he calls large enough to create its own energy when full, but small enough to feel cozy when not.

"Large restaurants like those usually are only full on Friday or Saturday," he says.

Ling & Louie's latest prototype maxes out at 3,000 square feet.

"We wanted a smaller restaurant that could fill up every day and was more user-friendly and approachable," he says. "We also wanted it affordable enough that people would come back regularly."

No item on the menu tops \$14.99.

Schoch got hooked on Asian food when he moved to Hawaii to surf professionally in the 1970s. There he ate Thai food and sushi "like Americans back home ate pizza." When



PHOTO: JIMMY ESTERLINE/SHOOTING

Ling & Louie's owner Randy Schoch says he got hooked on Asian food when he moved to Hawaii to surf professionally in the 1970s.



he caught the restaurant business bug, he climbed the ladder to become an owner of Nick's Fishmarket and later opened the first Roy's Pacific Rim Cuisine on the mainland.

Believing mainland Yanks were ready for Asian-fusion cuisine, he opened the mid-scale Thaifoon in Salt Lake City in 2001. But despite Thaifoon's success, Schoch's desire to create an even simpler, smaller concept wouldn't leave his mind, and he began piecing together ideas for Ling & Louie's.

"With this size box, you can get in and goof around with stuff, get really involved," Schoch says. "You introduce a dish you think is going to be a home run, but it's not, so you can change it quickly. ... This year for Cinco de Mayo, we had an Asian-style fajita dish with wasabi guacamole and Southeast Asian salsa. That's the kind of fun food we're creating."

Schoch says surveys show customers enjoy the restaurant's clever fusion profile and tongue-in-check item names: Hop Sing's meat loaf, named after the Cartwright's cook on the old western TV show "Bonanza," comes with wasabi mashed potatoes and Szechuan green beans; the best-selling Evil Jungle Princess Chicken gets a kick from red curry; the bar serves up a frozen Mai Thai described as an "Asia Rumarita;"

though the best-punned potable may be the Wong Island Iced Tea.

"We've created a brand that's a little irreverent to show we don't take ourselves very seriously, but our menu shows we take our food very seriously," says Kevin Donnellan, vice president of marketing and franchising.

Growth will be measured, he adds, saying two more units are on the board for 2009.

"We had a fantastic response to our prototype in Scottsdale," Donnellan says, "and now we're identifying growth opportunities. Randy wants to grow this, but with the right people." ■

Not for boRING PeoPlE		
StarterS	tons, Ling's vinaigrette: \$8.99	crumbles, lava sauce: \$9.99
Ahi Lettuce Wraps: Ahi Poke, lettuce cups, cilantro, garlic, ginger, water chestnuts, tropical salsa, sweet Asian sauce: \$7.99	Ahi Tuna Salad: Sesame-seed-crusted ahi tuna, greens, carrots, tomatoes, cilantro, ginger, crispy won tons, Ling's spicy vinaigrette: \$10.99	Sizzling Surf & Turf: Sliced filet mignon, shrimp, asparagus, straw mushrooms, sweet onions, Thai basil: \$14.50
Red Palace Pot Stickers: pan-fried, minced pork, slew Thai soy-based sauce: \$7.99	Emerald Spinach Salad: spinach, grilled chicken, blue cheese, strawberries, carrots, candied walnuts, raspberry-walnut vinaigrette: \$9.99	New Wave Pad Thai: Ling's Pad Thai, long rice noodles, shrimp, chicken, vegetables, chopped peanuts, blend of Louie's spices: \$11.99
Crispy Crab Won tons: crab, cream cheese, sweet citrus-chile sauce: \$4.99	EnTréeS	Chocolate Volcano: Soufflé-style cake, molten chocolate center, raspberry sauce, vanilla ice cream, fresh strawberries: \$4.99
Black Orchid Ahi Tuna: blackened ahi, Asian slaw, spicy soy mustard: \$8.99	Evil Jungle Princess: Zeety chicken breast, lemon grass, green beans, mint, Thai basil, peanut red curry: \$10.99	Banana Spring Roll: Cheesecake, bananas and caramel encased in flaky spring roll: \$4.99
Salads	Firecracker Chicken Sliders: Panko- and won ton-crusted chicken, red pepper, blue cheese	
Chopstick Chicken Salad: marinated breast, greens, sugar-snap peas, cilantro, peppers, crispy won		



Ling & Louie's menu includes salad with sesame-seed crusted Ahi tuna, left, and Hop Sing's meat loaf, right, with Asian gravy, wasabi mashed potatoes and Szechuan green beans.