

A NOODLE

IN A HAY STACK

Armed with a wok, a noodle and a smart idea, Luke McGrath is now selling his recipe for success by opening up Wok Me Noodle Bars to the franchise market.

Wok Me first appeared on the Brisbane market in 2003, taking residents by storm with its healthy fast food alternative and extended opening hours.

The concept is one that had proven successful in southern States, and when Luke, originally from Melbourne, saw that the trend was yet to reach Queensland, he made an instant decision to change the industry.

"I was living in Kangaroo Point and working huge hours in the property industry and the thing that amazed me about Brisbane was that you couldn't get anything to eat late at night," he said. "I was sick and tired of fatty fast foods and realised that I probably wasn't the only one looking for a healthy alternative – so I set about changing the

options available to Brisbane residents. "The Queensland food retailing industry at the time was worth \$3.2 billion and there were no take-away food chains shifting towards the consumer's demand for healthier food options. "Realising this void in the market, we decided to create our own healthy alternative and really shift the marketplace in making a move to healthy options.

"I knew the right strategy and proper planning would allow Wok Me Noodle Bars to take hold of a large percentage of market share. "The Queensland industry has since steadily increased to be worth over \$3.75 billion as of February this year so there is definitely no concerns with business slowing down," he said. Armed with 15 years experience within the hospitality industry, Luke developed the Wok Me Noodle Bar concept and within a whirlwind 12 weeks he had convinced suppliers, shop fitters and landlords to be able to bring his business concept to fruition. "I knew it was a good idea and I wanted to make it happen. In that

12 weeks I flew back and forward to Melbourne and Adelaide, got some chefs to help with recipes and menu design, and dealt with the business of opening a takeaway food outlet," he said.

"When we first opened, and our store was open until 10pm, everyone thought I was nuts – even the car park was empty at 8pm and people ate 6.30-7.30pm. In that first year, 80% of our business walked in the door before 8pm, but now that people

know we're open we make 30% of our turnover after 8pm.

"We're unique in the market – we're healthy, fresh, fast, and flirtatious. We don't use any oil in cooking and we have a nutritionist looking at our meals, all our fresh produce comes in daily and is cooked in front

of the customer. We can have a meal ready in four minutes, and we provide a fun and happy environment for staff and customers alike."

Within 12 months of opening, the second Wok Me Noodle Bar opened at Direct Factory Outlet (DFO), and in 2006 the North Lakes store opened, with all three stores experiencing immense growth.

"DFO, Fortitude Valley and North Lakes all serve very different demographics and all three trade beyond expectations," he said.

Luke attributes the success of the Wok Me Noodle Bar chain to his focus on the continual evolution of the business in providing the healthiest fast food alternative. In 2007, five new stores are opening in Robina, Gympie, Buderim, Jindalee and Springwood. Luke said his background in the property industry from leasing-to-development has given him a good head start in

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Wok Me owner Luke McGrath saw a void in the market and decided to create a healthy alternative.

sourcing sites for Wok Me Noodle Bars.

"I started at the base of the retail property industry in leasing shops, where I really got to understand the nitty gritty and basics of retail," Luke said.

"I then went on to work on the commercial side of retail giving me the right tools to apply fundamental insight and knowledge from the industry to source the best sites for Wok Me Noodle Bars," he said.

With sales on the rise and growing interest in the concept, Luke was faced with deciding on the best option for managing the future growth of the business.

"A couple of months ago I started wondering what I was doing and whether I should sell the stores off. But I had all the systems in place, our customers were loving us, and it seemed crazy to sell off two years of hard work," he said.

"I realised that a franchise model would be perfect – franchisees have the passion and can work in-store and dedicate more time to each individual store."

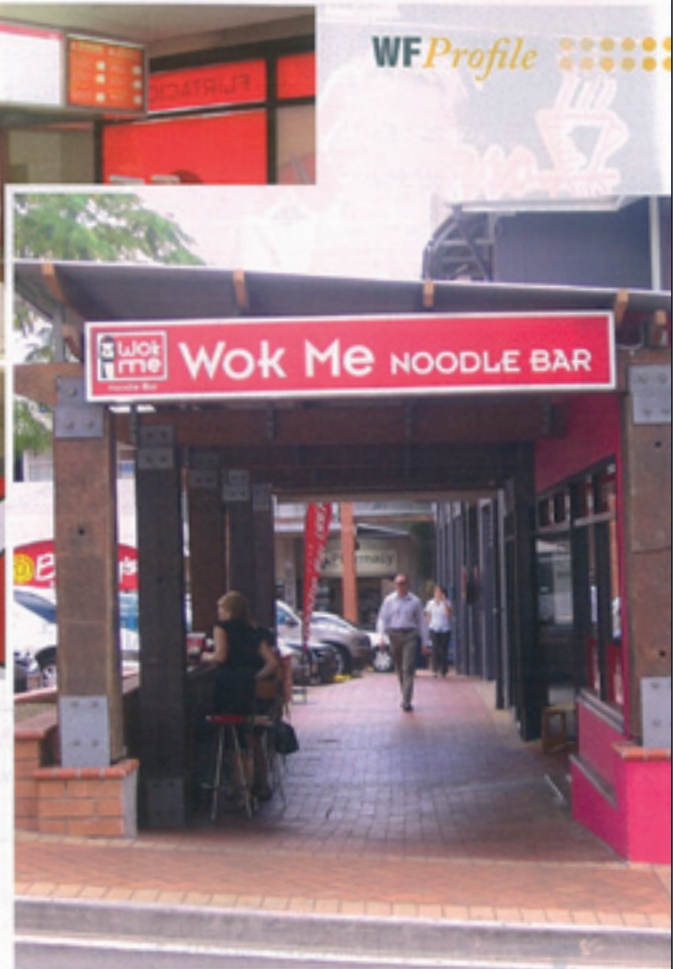
The three existing Wok Me Noodle Bars are now being offered for franchise, along with new stores.

To assist in achieving a smooth transition into the franchise model, and to protect the Wok Me brand name, Luke has established a comprehensive operational guide outlining systems and processes. The 180 page document covers how the noodles are cooked – and why they're cooked in that way – how to take an order, and all other aspects of running a Wok Me.

"Having spent 15 years working in retail property I saw so many fly-by-night businesses that didn't have that sort of thing in place, so I know how important it is," Luke said.

That's not to say the systems are inflexible.

"A franchise is a business partnership, our franchisees will grow with us, and systems and processes will evolve. We will be looking to involve franchisees in coming up with ideas for menu planning, specials and keeping it fresh." **WF**



Be Passionate and Have Fun

Luke's number one piece of advice for potential franchisees and franchisers is the same:

"Most important is to be passionate, enjoy what you're doing and just do it! No hesitation, no second chances – I live by that motto.

"I've had a lot of friends starting out in business and retail but if they're just in it for the money and not passionate about the product it doesn't work. I eat Wok Me every single day and I love it."



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Media Coverage



Noodle Bar

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