

Striking Success

Good food and luxury lanes equal perfect strike for experiential retail concept.

June Allan Corrigan



It was 2001 when Guy Revelle and Mark Gibson owned and operated two entertainment venues in a Tampa shopping center. Business was good but a large, empty retail space across the parking lot was a deterrent. So Revelle and Gibson decided to open a bowling alley. “At the time we thought it was either a really good idea or a really bad idea,” says Gibson. “Our thought process was to improve the food and beverage, approach it with more of a restaurant mentality, overlay bowling lanes on top and maybe end up in a good place.” That was the genesis for Splitsville.

Most people have at least a passing familiarity with bowling. They recall it as a fun enough experience but as Gibson puts it, “the bowling alley was usually a run-down or older place where the beer was warm and the food was cold.” Splitsville turned that business model on its head. Often described as a

luxury bowling alley, Revelle and Gibson opened the first Splitsville in 2003 in Tampa. Its fun retro-vibe, comfortable surroundings, multiple bars and enticing menu quickly caught on. Now there are six of them in three different states, with the most recent opening in August 2014 in Foxborough, MA, just outside Boston.

Not your grandparents’ bowling alley

In a typical bowling alley, as many as 12 or 24 or 36 lanes are lined up side by side. Splitsville is distinguished by its method of dividing lanes into groups of 4 or 6 and separating them with bars, dining and lounge space. It’s a unique floor plan that gives customers perspectives and lines of sight heretofore unseen. A customer might be standing almost right at the pins watching the ball strike while enjoying a glass of wine or a plate of nachos. “We think our varied layout results in some very good benefits to the atmosphere and the customer,” Gibson says.

Splitsville’s menu is a game-changer as well. The full-scale restaurants and bars in each location feature items like hand-tossed pizza, fresh-rolled sushi, delicious sliders and an assortment of drinks. Billiard tables, indoor lounge areas and outdoor patios round out the convivial scene and any misconceptions patrons have about what a bowling alley should look and feel like are soon erased.

Splitting the difference

Splitsville caters to everything from children’s birthday parties to high-end corporate and sporting events. It appeals to families and groups of friends simply looking for a night out. Interestingly enough, Gibson figures only about a





third of their customers actually bowl. The partners took this into consideration while devising their business plan and it definitely accounts for a good deal of their success. “It struck us that if you had something that was entertaining other customers, paid for by the [other] customers, it was kind of a unique thing. So we look at it like the bowling revenue is providing socialization and interaction for one chunk of our customers but it’s also providing entertainment for the ones that aren’t bowling,” says Gibson.

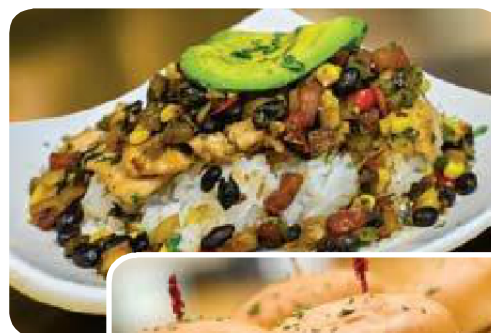
The formula obviously works. One of the three Splitsville locations in Florida is situated in the Downtown Disney area at Walt Disney World. The states of Virginia, Texas and Massachusetts each lay claim to one and while there are no new locations presently in development, Gibson says they are always quietly kicking tires. All locations are company-owned although they have recently begun exploring a franchise model.

Far from cookie-cutter

Interested? “It isn’t something anyone should think they could get in and get out of with a quick flip,” Gibson cautions. The minimum size for a Splitsville location is 20,000 square feet. The Disney location is 50,000 square feet. “There’s a big development cost, a big carry cost ... so from a franchise angle, we’re not quite cookie-cutter. You would have to have a significant amount of capital.” The Splitsville website does offer franchise information, but at this time it’s only fielding inquiries to determine the types of groups that are interested.

Meanwhile Splitsville will continue doing what it does best. “The natural process of bowling just creates [time] gaps and energy and conversation, so it’s very social,” says Gibson. Splitsville

takes their food and beverage program very seriously, but expects to see their customers exchanging high-fives and simply having fun.



For more information, please visit splitsvillelanes.com.

Freelance writer June Allan Corrigan addresses a wide range of topics including business, medicine, parenting and education. She’s a fitness enthusiast and also makes a mean apple pie. Visit her website at junecorrigan.com.