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Pressing on

Pressed Sandwiches/Choice Group LLC

Restaurateurs won't let challenges stand in way of expanding chain

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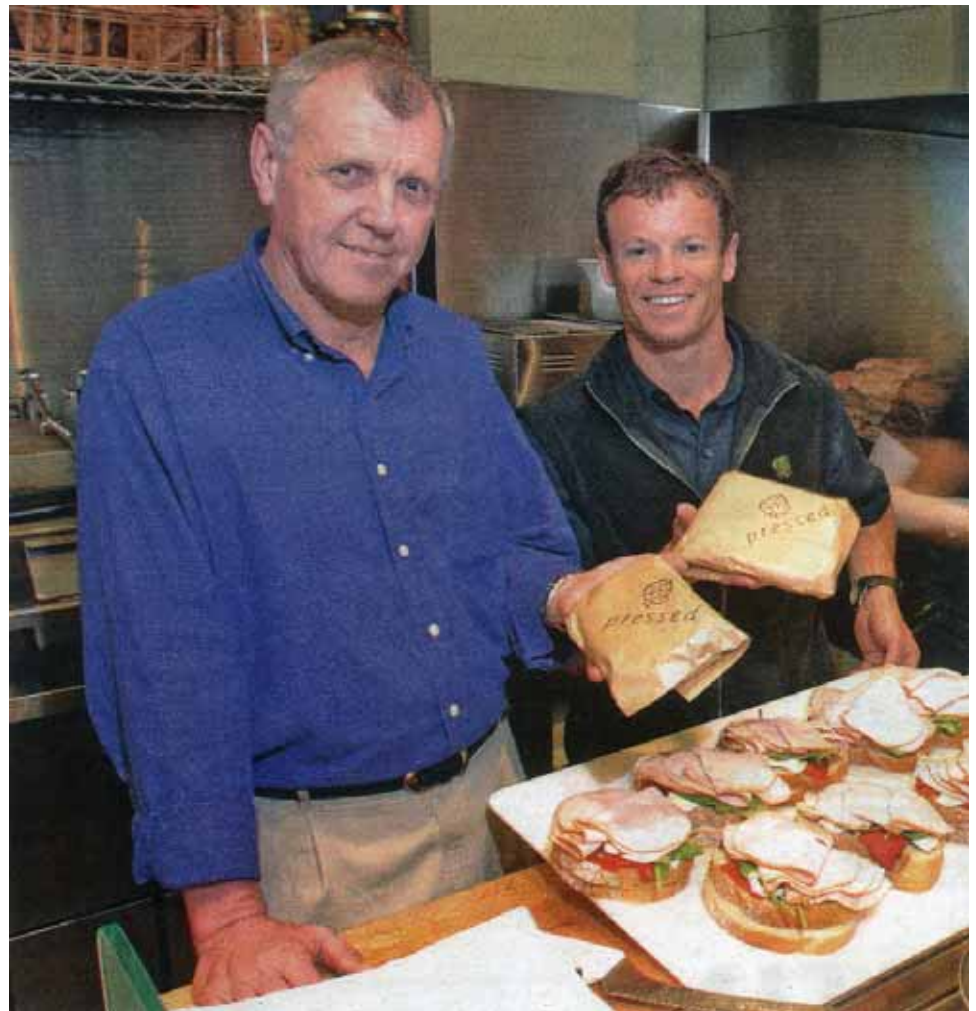
When he made his first foray into the restaurant business a year ago, Laurence Wintersteen felt he had prepared the perfect recipe for success: He had lined up the necessary capital, located the ideal Financial District location, and aligned himself with a knowledgeable partner.

On March 19, 2004, Wintersteen and partner Jack Schoaf watched as a steady stream of customers filed into their new quick-service eatery, Pressed Sandwiches, eager to sample the ultra-trendy pressed panini sandwiches. Within an hour and a half, the partners say, they had suddenly run out of food.

That Wintersteen, 34, and Schoaf, 57, whose Boston-based Choice Group LLC owns Pressed, have discovered is that in the food service industry, change is always on the menu.

Everything is in control until you open the doors, then everything is out of control, and it's entirely in your employees' hands and the operations you have in place," says Wintersteen.

Despite the unpredictable nature of the business, Wintersteen and Schoaf are so confident about their prospects that they're moving forward — one might say aggressively — with expansion efforts. Just one year after opening their original, 1,000-



Jack Schoaf and Laurence Wintersteen, partners of Pressed Sandwiches, at their new Oliver Street location in Boston.

square-foot location at 2 Oliver St., they've opened a new 2,000 square-foot site at 736 Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge. That move boosted their revenue to an anticipated \$1.5 million this year and their employee ranks to 30.

The inspiration for Pressed, says

FAST FACTS

The first Pressed location opened in Boston's Financial District in March 2004; the second location opened in Cambridge's Central Square in Cambridge in April 2005.

About 400 customers visit the Boston location each day; about 230 visit the Cambridge location. On average, Pressed serves up more than 300 sandwiches a day at the Boston location, and 150 a day in Cambridge.

Wintersteen, came from the booming business for pressed panini — a type of Italian sandwich in which the contents are literally pressed together and served hot off the grill that he had observed in New York.

The only problem is that Wintersteen, who had previously worked at the now-defunct startup Wheelhouse Corp. of Burlington, lacked any formalized training- in food-service operations. He sought counsel from local industry vets, like **John Pepper**, president of Boston-based **Stellar Restaurant Group**, owner of **The Wrap** and **B. Goode**. Pepper says he cautioned Wintersteen to “shoot high, but be realistic. It’s really a thankless business. You start over every day — It’s a long haul.”

After connecting with Schoaf whose previous experience had included a stint as beverage director for **Vinny Testa’s** — to serve as his partner, Wintersteen then tapped **Ed Doyle**, former executive chef at **Aura** in Boston’s Seaport Hotel, to develop Pressed’s menu.

The partners say they scoured Boston to find their first location, which had previously housed In Town Deli, for — which they locked in a seven-year lease at a rate of \$4,200 a month. Their initial capital investment of \$480,000, all of it Wintersteen’s funding, covered various consulting, legal and architectural fees.

Eager to capitalize on their success, Wintersteen and Schoaf took advantage of another leasing opportunity — this time in Cambridge’s Central Square — that was double the space of their first location and cost about \$1,000 less per month in rent.

“It’s so hard to find. the right space, you need to always be looking,” reasons Schoaf

What they didn’t count on, say the partners, is how physically and financially taxing the experience would be. In addition to an arduous licensing process, the Cambridge project was beset

with an assortment of structural issues — from asbestos to a leaky ceiling — that created delays and caused it to go about 20 percent off budget. At that, point, Wintersteen says, he was forced to seek a bank line of credit. “The anxiety level was high, because paramount to our concept in building out that space was not letting this one (Boston) slip in the least,” says Wintersteen.

Since it officially opened this past April, the Cambridge location has received about 230 customers a day, compared with nearly 400 a day in Boston.

Wintersteen says Pressed will make its profits on high volume for the two locations — not the price per item, which averages about \$6 for a sandwich and \$6.50 for a salad. Pressed has a monthly food budget of about \$30,000, and serves up a total of over 10,000 sandwiches a month.

With their pressed panini, says **Peter Christie**, president of the **Mass. Restaurant Association**, Wintersteen and Schoaf have found a great way to stand out in a crowded marketplace for lunchtime dollars: “They’re delicious. They’re different. Many casual restaurants are now buying panini grills. I think it’s a great lunch item.”

Despite the challenges, the partners, who are currently scouting their third location, say they’ll press on.

“It’s a collection of small hurdles,” says Schoaf. “Unfortunately, you can’t always jump them one a time.”

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