

Pick up Stix sold to Leeann Chin owner

Carlson sells Asian fast-casual brand to focus on T.G.I. Friday's

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Lorne Goldberg, the owner of the Leeann Chin and Mandarin Express quick-service Asian brands, has acquired the 74-unit Pick Up Stix chain from Carlson Restaurants Inc., both companies said Monday.

Terms of the deal, which includes 70 corporate locations and 4 franchised units, were not disclosed. Goldberg, a Los Angeles-based former investment banker and owner of Stix Holdings LLC, said he plans to bring some "freshness and modernization" to the fast-casual Pick Up Stix brand, which he noted has been profitable but needs improvement.

"We are very excited to own Pick Up Stix," Goldberg said in a statement. "We believe the brand has enormous potential. It's an excellent strategic fit for our organization."

In a statement Monday, Carlson Restaurants said the sale would enable the Carrollton, Texas-based company to focus on its core brand, T.G.I. Friday's.

"We made a business decision to divest of the Pick Up Stix brand," Carlson officials said in a statement. "Several potential buyers were involved in the process, and after significant due diligence, we are pleased to announce that earlier [Monday] we finalized the sale of Pick Up Stix to Stix Holdings LLC."

In an interview with Nation's Restaurant News on Monday, Goldberg said he planned to be "very hands-on operationally," at Pick Up Stix, working to unify the brand, and improve its food and guest experience.

Goldberg also said there are no plans to continue franchising the brand.

The founder of investment banking firm West Coast Capital, Goldberg entered the hospitality industry in 2004 after purchasing the Mandarin Express chain, a mall-based food court concept operating primarily across the South. Currently that chain has 35 locations.

In 2007, he bought the Leeann Chin chain, based in Bloomington, Minn., a quick-service Asian concept whose late founder and namesake was a Chinese immigrant and cooking instructor and later a caterer and cookbook author. The chain totals about 43 locations.

For both Mandarin Express and Leann Chin, Goldberg made investments in improving décor and menu offerings, and he said he plans to do the same for Pick Up Stix. He also plans to move the newly acquired chain to Bloomington, with Leann Chin and Mandarin Express are based.

Goldberg said he sees an opportunity in the under-served Asian quick-service and fast-casual segments — one that others have also had an eye on. Chipotle earlier this year announced plans to develop an Asian fast-casual concept. In addition, stir-fry brands Stir Crazy and Flat Top Grill merged last year and have put forth aggressive growth plans.

Goldberg, however, warned that the category is "more difficult than people anticipate," he said.

"I don't know how Chipotle will do," Goldberg said. "Others have tried and been unsuccessful. It's not flipping burgers and selling chicken."

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