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Leeann Chin restaurant opens in River Hills



Photos by John Gross

Leeann Chin workers Jena Zachariason and Tyler Retzer serve up entrees for Jason and Irene Glaser and their children, Silas and Mitchell, at the new restaurant in Mankato's River Hills Mall.

Chin is in

By Tim Krohn
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — Leeann Chin, a well-known Minnesota-based company, has opened its first restaurant in Mankato at River Hills Mall.

Paul Wilke, manager of River Hills, said the restaurant has long been high on his most-wanted list. "The Leeann Chin brand really has some dedicated followers in Minnesota. We wanted to get one here. A lot of developers, outside of us, were trying to get them to their properties, too."

"We finally got to Mankato. We're really thrilled with the reception from the people there," said Mike Loney, chief operating officer of Leeann Chin Inc.

The manager of the new restaurant is well-known to many area residents. Jim Barker spent 10 years at Massad's, where he became famous for remembering customers' favorites as they approached the counter.

Barker most recently opened a restaurant in the former Larkspur Market in downtown New Ulm,



A variety of fruits as well as cereal and candy toppings are available for the yogurt desserts.

which he closed and sold recently. "This was a fantastic opportunity to come in as GM," said Barker, who's enjoying the fast pace of the business. "We've been very busy. It's nice to see."

At a long counter looking out into the mall, Jennifer Aaberg and a friend were finishing a meal. A

Nebraska native, Aaberg hadn't heard of the Minnesota chain before.

"I've been here a couple of times. I like it a lot. It's quick and good food."

The restaurant is decorated in

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Post offices get new wave of threats

Letters elsewhere in state echo those received in area in February

By Dan Nienaber
Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO — Postal investigators have asked local police departments to increase their patrols around area post offices after receiving another round of bomb threats.

About a dozen new bomb threat letters were received by Minnesota post offices Monday, according to a Mankato Police Department report. The letters were all sent to different locations.

Christopher Anderson, a

postal inspector in St. Paul, called Mankato police to report the new round of letters at about 3:45 p.m. Monday. A similar call was made to the North Mankato police a short time later, according to calls for service records.

None of the new letters were sent to post offices in the Mankato area, said Jeff Long, a public information officer with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service in Minneapolis. They were sent

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Drawing blood draws reaction

Hoover parents get letter about finger-pricking during science fair

By Robb Murray
Free Press Staff Writer

NORTH MANKATO —

What began Friday as a little extra experimentation during the Hoover Elementary science fair evolved Monday into a cautionary letter home to all parents warning of blood exposure and infectious control plans.

And one parent, at least, is not happy about it.

"It's boggling my mind

how they are handling it," says parent Darin Ingalls, whose 8-year-old son attends Hoover.

Ingalls' son was among the nearly dozen students to have their fingers pricked by a boy who brought a finger-sticking device to school. It happened during Hoover's science fair when the student began asking other students if they wanted to try it.

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The jobless turn to volunteerism

Obama's call to service also has role in rise of volunteer interest

The Associated Press

CHICAGO — After getting pink-slipped from his cement-plant job a week before Christmas, Nick Maloney indulged in some moping. For a week or two, the 27-year-old

"It's very rewarding," said attribute the rise to President Maloney, who lost both his step-brother and his sister to suicide. He is now considering making his volunteer job permanent. "There's a definite possibility of getting into this full-time. I just have to see what

Barack Obama's call to community service and a general sense of wanting to help others through tough economic times.

The Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal

CHIN: 40 stores, all in state

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brilliant colors and features a Red Cherry dessert station that sells yogurt with a variety of toppings.

Loney said the yogurt counter has been added to most stores in the past year. "The yogurt has been a huge hit for us."

Loney said most of their stores do about half of their business with carry-out, something they hope to promote here even though the restaurant is in a mall. And they expect to start a corporate delivery service in Mankato, something popular in the Twin Cities.

The location, next to the front entrance and in the food court, is ideal for the restaurant, Wilke said. The site was originally a Ruttlers restaurant, then became Knights Chamber clothing store, which last year relocated to a spot next to Scheels and became J Long's.

"We knew this was just the right space for them," Wilke said. The spot is too small for most sit-down restaurants, but just right for what is labeled a "fast casual" concept. "You don't need as much seating and a lot of people flow out to the food court," Wilke said.

The restaurant also installed a new entrance that will allow it to be open different hours than the mall. A small outdoor patio will be put in for summer seating.

This is the 40th Leeann Chin store, all in Minnesota.

Each year since 1985, Leeann Chin has been voted the Best Chinese Food and the Best Takeout Food by Minneapolis & St. Paul Magazine. The company has won numerous local



John Cross

The new Leeann Chin and Red Cherry yogurt opened at River Hills Mall recently.

and national awards for best restaurant design, and Leeann Chin herself was voted Minnesota Entrepreneur of the Year.

Leeann Wao-Hing was born in Canton, China, and immigrated to the United States with her husband, Tony Chin, in 1956 when she was 18. She began teaching cooking classes in Minneapolis. Her recipes became sought after, and she opened a cooking school in a Minnetonka mall. In 1980 she opened her first restaurant, serving authentic Sichuan (or Szechwan) and Cantonese cuisine.

After growing to more locations, Chin struck a deal with General Mills, which bought her name and some of the restaurants. General Mills attempted to expand to other states, but the plan fell flat.

Chin bought the company back in 1987, later took on additional investors and hired a new CEO who attempted to expand, under the new name of Asia Grille, into the Seattle market. That move failed and in the mid 1990s Chin, with a minority ownership stake and at odds with the CEO, took a leave from the company.

In the late '90s, Chin and a new CEO, with a board of directors backing them, began a third expansion attempt focused on Minnesota with her name on the restaurants and a new line of bottled sauces and dressings sold in grocery stores.

The number of restaurants grew, and in 2007 financier Lorne Goldberg, who operates the Los Angeles-based Mandarin Express chain, acquired the Leeann Chin company.

THREATS: Number of new letters not released

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to post offices in Minnesota.

Long said inspectors do not want to disclose the number of new letters sent because it could impede their investigation.

The first round of bomb threat letters were received by eight post offices in the Mankato area during the first week of February. In

addition to Mankato and North Mankato, those post offices were in Lake Crystal, Le Sueur, Le Center, Madelia, New Ulm and Sleepy Eye.

Police departments in all those cities received updates about the investigation Monday, Long said. Inspectors want to keep police updated in case new leads develop, he added.

"The investigation hasn't stopped since day one," Long said. "We're providing them with updates about what's going on with the investigation."

Dave Wintheiser, New Ulm's post master, said last month that the contents of the letter concerned him. The threats were not taken lightly and extra security measures were put in place,

he said.

"I was in shock and there was a little bit of fear and concern for the people here," Wintheiser said then about the letter he received. "I haven't ever received a letter like that before, and I hope I never get one again."

BLOOD: Parent thinks incident mishandled

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Eleven students took him up on it before school officials intervened. At that point, school officials worked to determine which students had volunteered.

"We think we were able to identify all the students on Friday," Principal Sharon Fitch said. "Unfortunately, it was late Friday afternoon."

Their parents, then, were notified Friday afternoon, but at that point it was too late to notify all students. So on Monday, students came home with a letter from

Fitch explaining what happened and encouraging parents who think their child was involved to contact the school nurse.

Ingalls said he was one of the parents who was contacted Friday.

"They said you should have him tested, and I said, 'Tested for what?' and they said, 'We're not obligated to tell you,'" Ingalls said. "That sent me into a freakin' tizzy ... What if the kid grabbed it out of the hazmat box at the doctor's office, or what if it came from a relative who actually has diabetes?"

(Diabetes is not a communicable disease.)

School nurse Sue Campbell said she spoke with Ingalls and has a different recollection of the conversation. She said she would have gladly gone over specifics with anyone who would have wanted more information about the possible risks stemming from the finger-pricking incident. No one asked.

Fitch says the letter went home Monday. No one called with concerns on Tuesday.

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