

Waco-based Young Chefs Academy plans national expansion

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Julie Burleson, founder of a cooking school for kids called Young Chefs Academy, said she is often asked why there is no Young Chefs location in Waco, though the company has been based here since 2005 and continues to add franchised locations around the world.

Those inquiries can stop in January, when she and her staff will invite local youngsters to learn culinary skills in the headquarters' training center. They will serve as testers for new cooking methods and recipes while paying a "nominal fee" that could be as low as \$5 per class, Burleson said by phone Thursday.

"We've been concentrating on our corporate office duties and supporting our franchisees, and frankly we thought having a location here would be a distraction," said Burleson, 53. "But Waco has been growing, and cooking has gotten more popular with youngsters, so we believe there is more demand for a Young Chefs Academy in Waco."

Burleson said the company does take into consideration population and median income when creating a "territory" to serve, which is why more populous and affluent areas in Texas, such as Frisco and Plano in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, were chosen to become franchising zones.

Major expansion has become the goal of Young Chefs Academy, and company attorney Kevin Ayers said he thinks 500 locations is not out of the question. That would represent quite a growth curve, since the company currently has 35 franchised locations internationally, including 20 in the United States.

"That goal obviously is one we evaluate year by year, and we certainly don't want to saturate the market, but we do want to satisfy everyone who would like to open one of our franchises," said Ayers, who spent 15 years with one of the most successful franchising companies in America, Waco-based Curves International.

Providing support

He said the company's No. 1 goal is to provide support for existing franchisees,

“and to make sure they are happy and making money.” Having reached that goal, he said, now is the time to pursue explosive growth, and he thinks Young Chefs Academy is prepared for bigger and better things.

A Chicago-based marketing firm published a news release outlining the company’s new expansion strategy, noting that new locations are planned in Kansas City, Kansas, San Antonio and Atlanta.

“The next star chef may very well be your own child or grandchild,” the release said.

Burleson said Young Chefs Academy, located at 7728 Central Park Drive just off Woodway Drive, is hosting a series of Discovery Day events during the next few weeks for several groups from around the country interested in becoming franchisees. Plans call for the opening of 10 to 15 new locations by the end of 2015.

A franchising license from Young Chefs Academy costs \$39,900, and the company receives a royalty of 5 percent on revenues. Burleson said it typically costs \$100,000 or more to open a YCA location, counting the franchising fee and preparing a site suitable to accommodate dozens of youngsters whipping up chef-inspired menu items.

Franchisees may enjoy cooking in their home with their own children, but Young Chefs Academy does not allow home-based franchise operations.

Burleson called herself an entrepreneur at heart and said the notion to launch a cooking class for kids sprung from her young son’s desire to help in the kitchen.

“That caused my mind to begin spinning,” said Burleson, adding that her inspiration, Andrew, is now a senior at Lorena High School.

Her idea evolved to include a corporate office that features a training center for potential franchisees; kitchens for meal preparation and experimentation; and office space for nine staffers, including a certified chef who prepares the curriculum and a team that provides support for franchisees.

“We offer training here five days a week every six weeks, and people come from all over the country to attend,” Burleson said.

Franchisees learn to pass along cooking skills, kitchen safety, etiquette, table setting and menu planning.

“The welcoming environment provides a ‘real’ setting so that the students can take what they learn at YCA to their own homes,” Burleson said. “The kitchen is the pulse of the home, where we learn about life and each other. We strive to nourish those values and give kids an innovative environment to learn and thrive.”

Angela Sweeney manages a Young Chefs Academy in Fort Worth, where about 100 members attend a day of classes each week. Youngsters ages 3 to 18 are welcome, and they are divided into classes that cater to their skill levels. These are called KinderCooks, Junior Chefs and Senior Chefs.

Sweeney said the franchise also provides training to special-needs adults, but they are not officially part of Young Chefs Academy.

‘Never repeat recipes’

“Every month we have a new theme, and every week a different recipe,” Sweeney said. “Our goal is to never repeat recipes.”

Members of the academy in Fort Worth pay \$100 per month, while those who attend only special events, such as a birthday party, pay \$35 per occasion.

“Every franchise is a little different, with charges varying with rent and overhead,” Sweeney said. “Our classes are fun. There are kids who have been taking them for six years. We can’t get rid of them. But we also cater to the needs of students who want to be very professional. That’s why we continue to offer courses all the way up to teenagers. They experience what they might at culinary school, to see if that is something they would enjoy attending.”

Several Young Chefs Academy kids have made national television appearances on programs such as “The Dr. Oz Show” and Fox’s “MasterChef Junior” competition. The company even offers a three-year MasterChef cooking class in which students complete monthly challenges and earn awards marking their progress.

Roger Schmidt, a partner of Ayers who also spent time at Curves International, now serves as company president.

“With Roger and Kevin (Ayers) in place, and our new facilities, the possibilities are immense for us,” Burleson said, adding that the planned expansion means “the entire nation will now truly see how much fun it is for kids to discover their potential in and out of the kitchen.”