



ODDLES OF NOODLES

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Austin-based Pan Asian chain ready to break into Lower Rio Grande Valley



BY STEVE CLARK
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Randy Murphy thinks Mama Fu's will go over well in the Rio Grande Valley because people here are already used to spicy food.

That's one reason. Another is that there's not nearly as much competition here for the restaurant chain's version of Pan Asian cuisine compared to other parts of the country. Murphy owns Mama Fu's Asian House, an Austin-based, 13-store chain that's gearing up for a massive expansion that includes including extreme South Texas.

"We know that the spicy taste profile will go over well," he says. "We want to get down to the Valley as soon as possible. Hopefully we're going to be announcing our first deal down in the Valley in the next few months."

Mama Fu's Pan-Asian menu features Vietnamese, Korean, Thai, Chinese and Japanese dishes. Pan Asian food is one of the fastest growing segments of the restaurant industry, Murphy notes. He thinks it's due in part to "the changing tastes of America" and the fact that Asian food can be prepared in a healthier fashion and not lose its appeal.

"I think with traditional American food, when try to eat healthy it's just not very exciting," Murphy says. "When you make Asian food healthier it still tastes great."

The business model is "flex casual," a concept trademarked by the company he heads as CEO and which owns Mama Fu's: Murphy Adams Restaurant Group. Flex casual means that Mama Fu's is "fast casual" during the day for lunch, but transforms into a full-service restaurant in the evening for dinner.

"At night we're looking for more of an experience when we dine," he says.



Top: Mama Fu's Pan-Asian menu features Vietnamese, Korean, Thai, Chinese and Japanese dishes. **Above:** Franchise partnerships with the restaurant chain are anticipated in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. **Left:** The interior decor of Mama Fu's is 'fast casual.'

COURTESY PHOTOS

Mama Fu's was founded in 2003 by Atlanta-based Raving Brands Inc., which was eventually sued by its franchisees and investors, who charged the company with fraud and breach of contract. Murphy Adams Group was the chain's largest franchisee and acquired Mama Fu's in 2008. Murphy Adams downsized the company, redesigned the stores and won back the confidence of investors and franchisees.

Now, the company plans 160 new locations over five

years and is looking for franchisees willing to take on three units minimum. Murphy anticipates having two to three franchise partners in the the Lower Valley, perhaps with additional partners in Laredo or Corpus Christi. He anticipates maybe 12 to 15 stores total for the Rio Grande Valley.

Murphy say potential locations in Brownsville and Harlingen won't be discussed until franchise partners have been announced — which could

happen in a few months. McAllen probably will get a Mama Fu's before Brownsville and Harlingen, though he expects additional deals to happen quickly after the first announcement.

"The other areas of the Valley will go very quickly once (McAllen) is announced," Murphy says. "We're looking obviously for additional people down there. Once we announce the first big deal we'll obviously get a significant amount of inquiries."