

With 12 sites and visions of creating the Starbucks of sushi...

One roll at a time, Restaurateur Abe Ng is building a sushi empire as he expands his Sushi Maki brand through South Florida.

With plans for future locations and more exclusive sushi provider contracts, the company is raising the bar for home-grown businesses with 12 locations in Miami-Dade.

Mr. Ng also heads the family's first restaurant business, Canton Chinese, which still has five locations. But he says the "growth vehicle" for the family-run restaurant business, which employs 250, is Sushi Maki.

Plans are to open locations in areas such as Doral, Midtown Miami and Aventura in the near future, he said, and eventually take the brand to other parts of South Florida.

"I think somebody is going to take sushi to the next level," Mr. Ng said. "To do what Starbucks did for coffee, Panera did for bakery, what IKEA did for furniture, somebody's going to do it for sushi, and we just think why not us?"

Mr. Ng discussed Sushi Maki's journey and future plans with Miami Today reporter Yudislaidy Fernandez at its restaurant in Coral Gables.

Q: How did Sushi Maki and Canton Chinese each take off?

A: It's really two brands that intertwine. They're both family businesses. Canton is a wonderful story. My mom and dad are immigrants. Dad came to the states first in 1959 and basically had a 10-year courtship with my mother via mail.

Mom finally came here. They got married in New York City, honeymooned at the Fontainebleau, and loved it here so much they moved down and opened a small Chinese restaurant take-out.

They were blessed with success and opened up several stores. At one point, we had up to eight restaurants all under the Canton brand name. Sushi Maki was really building upon that foundation of achievement that mom and dad were able to build.

It's one where they 10 years ago got into the sushi business, and it really came from real estate opportunities that we had with another restaurant concept called Wrapido.

But Sushi Maki basically within those footprints opened up a new concept and that's the one we're really excited about today.

We're 10 years old, we're 10 years young. We have 12 locations open. Canton is a legacy brand but Sushi Maki is really the growth vehicle.

The sushi business is only as big as we can imagine it to be. So that's really where there's the family, between my brother-in-law, my wife, my sister, the next generation, we work very closely with mom and dad in growing this business.

Q: How many Cantons do you still have?

A: Five.

Q: How many people does the restaurant employ?

A: About 250 employees and many families. We're responsible for many livelihoods in the area, and that's why we're so passionate and committed to running this organization.

Q: What does your role as President/



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Sushi Maki CEO Abe Ng hopes to one day expand beyond Miami-Dade and envisions also other dining concepts. But key is strengthening today's model first, he says.

The Achiever

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foundation."

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CEO entail?

A: The days are never the same. In any small business, you have many roles, probably master of none. I do marketing, finance, operations, development, PR.

I'm accountable to setting the long-term strategy of the business but also delivering results. Whether it's to our suppliers, our team members, my goal is to make sure we continue to provide an outstanding guest experience.

If we do that, all other things kind of fall into place, whether it's profitability, growth. My responsibility is to make sure the sushi experience is one of excellence.

Q: Why is that experience so critical?

A: In today's world, everybody's spending dollars are so valuable, so to us what excellence means is making sure our product is as good as it can possibly be in terms of freshness of

ingredients, consistency of preparation.

Also married with that is the service, whether it's on the telephone, with delivery and take-out. Going out to eat is such a sacred thing these days with the dip in the economy, so we really need to make sure that we get all the little things right.

Q: Tell me how you got involved in the business.

A: I always loved the restaurant business having grown up in it. But one of the things I'll give advice very early on is to make sure you get experience working outside the family business, so you're known for your first name and not necessarily your last name.

My first job out of Cornell was with Ernst & Young. It was an entry-level analyst position. They taught me a lot about the disciplines about having a real job, making sure you please your boss.

Don't get me wrong: when you come back into the family business people look at you suspiciously – are you there because of being a lucky person or because you should be?

That's one of the things that validated and gave me some confidence as well as a fantastic skill set. Ernst & Young has an incredible training program that really forces you to look at things not just what you feel but have the quantitative research analysis to back it up.

Q: How did you differentiate Sushi Maki as a brand from competitors?

A: We are the beneficiary of some fantastic dining trends. Sushi Maki aims to be healthy, affordable, but what we try to do to be distinctive is something we sit around every day and talk about.

We focus on a couple of things. One is, Sushi Maki has all natural ingredients, and this is a direct result of the learning that we had in our partnership with Whole Foods Market. We're the exclusive sushi provider in the Miami-Dade area. At first, we were learning about all-natural and organic and these were buzzwords. It's very trendy, but it really wasn't until we got our hands into it and said "there's something to be said about having more pristine ingredients."

We were so convinced by this we actually rolled out in the entire restaurant natural and organic ingredients. I think we have fantastic taste in food,

but you can really be comforted to know that the food doesn't only taste great, it's absolutely very clean food.

The second thing when it comes to Sushi Maki is that we try to be relevant, provide sushi in different venues, whether it's at the University of Miami or FIU (Florida International University). We serve Sushi Maki at the Miami International Airport. Sushi is one of those perfect portable meals.

Sushi Maki is trying to be not just available within the restaurant but also in other non-traditional places. We're at Miami Children's Hospital, Baptist Hospital, Cleveland Clinic, so we partner with brands that we believe we have alignment within their value.

We're the exclusive sushi provider for luxury hotels, the Four Seasons, as well as the Ritz-Carlton, all in South Florida. And some of the best caterers in town, whether it's Joy Wallace or Barton G, they too are providers of our sushi.

So between our ingredients as well as our place of distribution, that's what really makes Sushi Maki distinctive.

The third thing is just our relentless pursuit of innovation. We have some fantastic new menu items: sushi tacos, which are not just clever but a really solid way of delivering sushi ingredients in non-traditional [ways].

We also have Kobe sliders. Not typical that you'd find a burger at a sushi restaurant, but we think we have permission because we're not just the sushi restaurant. We're a place where sushi lovers can come, but we also don't want to not take care of those who aren't sushi fans or who are just beginners. It's about demystifying and democratizing sushi.

It doesn't have to be mysterious. It doesn't need to have names that are difficult to pronounce. We just want to combine great tasting fresh fish and great protein and vegetables in inviting settings, as well as in unexpected sushi rolls.

Q: Why did you decide to first expand through Miami-Dade?

A: One of the things is really making sure we have proof of concept and the economics work. Miami-Dade is such an incredible marketplace that we can put Sushi Maki in many submarkets and not cannibalize.

We do have ambitions to go outside Miami-Dade and further up the state. But we often wonder when is the right time. We have to make sure the foundation is strong, and that includes bringing on some fantastic new team members.

Once we get some of our team members into [it] who have done it before with other companies we'll feel more competent to expand. The final reason we haven't is just the reality of the world we live in today.

There's not a lot of expansion going on, so we had to be very careful to expand with strategic partnerships and in areas where there was high foot traffic.

You look around, the only places there are really cranes is universities and hospitals and airports, and we're fortunate enough to open up Sushi Makis over the last two years in these venues.

Q: Do you plan to add restaurants in Broward or Palm Beach?



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...Abe Ng runs homegrown, family-owned Sushi Maki

A: We've identified several submarkets in Miami-Dade, and also Broward and Palm Beach County are certainly areas we think would be great audiences – even outside of those counties.

Somebody is going to take sushi to the next level. To do what Starbucks did for coffee, Panera did for bakery, what IKEA did for furniture, somebody's going to do it for sushi, and we just think why not us?

But we want to be very deliberate about it. I learned very early on, slow and steady wins the race. We're not in a rush. It's a family business.

We can be disciplined about growing in concentric circles, and we're here for the long haul. So we don't necessarily need to blow this out. We want to keep our heads down and focused, but also dream big dreams.

Q: What are some of those submarkets you've identified?

A: It's no secret if you look at the pockets of great daytime and nighttime populations. Doral, an incredible area. We're excited to see what's going on in Midtown and Wynwood. Aventura is a very strong market.

Since I'm a local guy, lived here all my life, the different neighborhoods I have a good feel for. Going into Broward and beyond, I don't have the same kind of gut feeling about real estate, but that's one of the great things about our brand now.

We've been able to open up the neighborhoods where I think we really have a connection to the people who live and work there. I can go to anyone in the restaurants and it could be somebody I went to high school with, somebody my kids go to school with, somebody who used to work with me at Ernst & Young or worked with my wife at the law firm.

Now as we get outside of these concentric circles, then we really have to make sure we can get bigger but still stay small in the sense where this is a neighborhood restaurant.

We try to be a polished neighborhood restaurant where people come with friends and families and can use Sushi Maki

several times a week. We try to be very stubborn about making sure we don't try to become somebody we're not.

Q: How did you make your partnerships happen?

A: It's two things. One, we have a great culture as a company that's very customer centric, so when we were able to be blessed with one or two hotels, we were very fanatical about making sure we satisfied the executive chef of purchasing, have people answer the phones 24/7.

This really is an intensity to make sure we turn around customer needs quickly. You may get the introduction through friends, but you've got to deliver repeatable solutions.

Two, it's having grown up here and being very involved with the community. We meet lots of people. Sushi is one of the very hot food trends right now, so there are a lot of people interested in serving it. It does take some culinary talent, as well as dedication to the craft.

Persevering and honing in our corporate culture combined with leveraging relationships, we've been able to ride this wave. The last two years have been tough like any other restaurant company, but we feel fortunate to continue to grow through creative alliances in these challenging times.

Q: Where do you make the sushi?

A: Our sushi is restaurant-grade. If you look at it from a business school standpoint, there was a void in the market whereas a lot of the sushi being served in supermarkets as well as hotels was kind of processed.

We looked at this business as restaurateurs and not as food manufacturers, so that's what makes our product unique – the same quality of sushi you'll get in one of our restaurants you'll get at a hotel or supermarket or the American Airlines Arena.

We have a really interesting state-of-the-art facility in Medley, just north of Doral, where we craft sushi with traditional recipes, but we utilize the most innovative technologies to make sure our sushi is consistent but most impor-

tantly absolutely food safe.

We take it very seriously that raw fish is always a challenge to work with and we need to make sure our sanitation standards are at the very top. We are fanatical about going upstream, making sure we understand where our fish comes from, where our produce comes from, making sure we take every step of temperature controls.

Q: Are there other restaurant concepts you would like to introduce?

A: I love the food industry, all aspects – location, design, the culinary of it. I've got different concepts I would like to introduce, but one thing we want to be focused on is continuing to expand the Sushi Maki concept.

I'm a huge fan of all types of cuisine. Better burger concepts, very interesting. Innovative health concepts is something I'm very interested in, and this is really my continued involvement with Whole Foods. At the same time, there's continuing innovation into Asian cuisines. Korean food I like a lot.

As my tastes evolve our restaurant continues to evolve. As we continue to find ourselves more understanding of how food is grown, how food is processed, we have some concepts percolating.

But my business advisors and family always remind me to stay focused. We have something that's working today. That's really the downfall of a lot of entrepreneurs, that they keep starting things but never finish.

At some point, we're going to have a strong enough foundation where we can leverage some of our shared services and do other concepts.

I'm so excited about Miami and how the restaurant community has evolved in the last 10 years – unbelievable. One of the finest culinary destinations on the planet is South Florida right now, so there's lots of room. We're in no rush to do those new concepts, but I enjoy the blank sheet of paper and designing a menu and seeing what can happen.

Q: Other long-term plans?

A: The plan is how can we continue to

be relevant, because sushi is going to be very different in the next 10 to 20 years. We try to think about what will a sushi restaurant look like, and what types of foods will we have? What type of talent will we need to produce it? What type of kitchen?

I also think sushi is going to become more and more available in non-traditional ways like coffee shops, convenience stores. You see that in Asia, in western cities. Los Angeles or Hawaii, go to the equivalent of a 7-Eleven and they have sushi. In London, go to the equivalent of a Starbucks and you can grab a box.

Also, I'm very passionate about continuing to innovate Sushi Maki and making sure we have really bright, vibrant flavors and deliver those flavors whether it's delivery or carryout.

A third of our business at our restaurants is delivery and carryout, so that just reiterates that we are a value-oriented place. We're not an expense-account restaurant. We're a restaurant where people can spend their own hard-earned money.

Q: Tell me about your community involvement.

A: The [Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau], I'm on Bill Talbert's board there. I'm a Miami guy and anything we can do to make our city a more welcoming place I'm fully behind.

I'm on the Business Improvement District board [in] downtown Coral Gables. We have a lot of restaurants in Coral Gables. We really want to see this area continue to evolve, and what's happening here is phenomenal.

I'm the chair of Young Presidents Organization, where company heads look at how we can make our businesses better, our families better as well as our communities better.

I'm also involved at the Chinese Baptist Church of Miami.

Q: Tell us about your family.

A: I have a wife of 10 years. She is a lawyer by training but works now in the family business. Her principal job is we have three young children: 5, 3, 1. The free time we can make, I spend with my kids.



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