



## ENTERPRISE

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### **A Zen for healthy fast food**

**Austin restaurant chain focuses on growth, expansion**

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Adam Weisberg doesn't speak Japanese.

But as the founder and managing partner of Austin-based Zen Japanese Food Fast, he is fluent in what it takes to build a growing restaurant chain. Zen is a counter-service oriented restaurant that serves sushi, salads and many varieties of Japanese dishes in a relaxed, casual atmosphere.

When Weisberg opened his first Zen location at 2900 West Anderson Lane in Nov. 1999, it was the culmination of almost two years of hard work and sacrifice to make his vision a reality.

"I didn't know a soul in Austin when I came here in January of 1997. But I evolved my business plan every day and worked to recruit partners while waiting tables at Sullivan's Steakhouse in the evenings," Weisberg says.

Before coming to Austin, Weisberg learned the restaurant business while working at and managing Chart House restaurants. Chart House runs high-end steak and seafood restaurants in coastal locations throughout the U.S., as well as in the Caribbean and Europe.

Weisberg was inspired to open Zen after realizing that Austin had no fast food restaurants serving Japanese dishes like he enjoyed while growing up in Phoenix.

He also thought Austin was the perfect place for his concept.

"Everyone knows Austin has unique culture. I thought this was the perfect place to get to brand something new and original, and make a big impact. It's pretty rare to find a wide open market for a concept like ours," Weisberg says.

Through grit and tenacity Weisberg eventually signed up three partners who saw the potential of Zen.

The partners include Jeff Weinberger, creator of Jeffrey's, Shoreline Grill and Cipollina Italian Bistro; Abe Zimmerman, a successful Austin businessman with a background in restaurants and high tech companies; and Tim McClure, co-founder of Austin-based GSD&M.

Like any startup, Weisberg faced many obstacles early on.

"One of the main challenges we faced in the beginning was finding a good, affordable spot. The real estate market was so hot then. But it was also tough to find great people who could be excited about a start-up restaurant as opposed to a high tech business," says Weisberg.

Today, Zen has three locations in Austin that employ more than 70 people with a mix of part-time and full-time workers.

In addition to the restaurant on Anderson Lane, Zen opened at 1303 S. Congress Ave. in October 2002 and a third location this summer at 3423 Guadalupe St.

Future plans for Zen include opening five to six more locations in the next 18 months, including two outside of Austin.

"I've done a number of different businesses. The restaurant business is one of the toughest businesses and Adam has the right kind of personality to do it," Zimmerman says.

Despite the ups and downs of the local economy, the Zen restaurants have flourished. In fact, Weisberg feels his restaurants' growth has been helped as people started watching their dollars, while still trying to eat healthier meals.

"Because we are value-priced, you can walk in and walk out and spend \$6 or less. And since everything is fresh, there are good health connotations to our food," says Weisberg.

Since its inception Zen has been committed to serving a healthy alternative, Weisberg says. The restaurant actively participates in the Heart Smart program.

While positive word-of-mouth reviews are always good for a restaurant, Weisberg has promoted Zen by using a mix of guerilla marketing and advertising. To promote his first location on Anderson Lane, Weisberg focused on a 3-mile radius around his restaurant.

"We targeted office parks and residences. We went door-to-door with menus and coupons.," Weisberg says.

As new locations have opened, Weisberg has expanded his efforts to include advertising on Capital Metro buses, and placing radio ads on KGSR.

The Zen concept has caught on. The new Guadalupe location averages about 400 customers a day and the other locations have similar traffic.

"Places like Zen are more of a step up from quick service, rather than a step down from formal dining. Many people want to move up from quick service and have more variety, but still save money. Zen fills a market niche. It's casual quick service and no drive-up window," says Richie Jackson, executive vice president and CEO of the Texas Restaurant Association.

Weisberg has found that one of the keys to his success is working with local businesses.

He buys his produce from local suppliers, and uses Austin's East Poultry to stock his kitchens.

"We like partnering with Austin brands like Ruta Maya Coffee. And we're friends with Steve and Amy of Amy's Ice Cream across the street from us on Guadalupe," Weisberg says.

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