

They've got a leg up with Chicken Dijon

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Article Launched: 04/05/2008 10:05:19 PM PDT

After the Nimeh family purchased the Chicken Dijon restaurant in Redondo Beach in 1993, father Afram Nimeh occasionally would pull his two sons to his side and lock his arms into theirs.

"He said, 'Stay together like this, march together like this and together you will stay strong,'" recalls Joe Nimeh, 35, the elder son.

Today, more than a decade after their father passed on, Joe Nimeh and his brother, Steve, 33, have their arms locked together, figuratively, as they expand their family's Mediterranean eatery business.



Business partners Niko Albanis, left, Joe Nimeh and brother Steve Nimeh make a gesture of unity at their second franchise Chicken Dijon location in Rolling Hills Plaza in Torrance
(Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

From that first restaurant, the two brothers now have seven locations. They own five, with two as franchises.

They have sold six more franchises that will likely open this year and next from Santa Monica to Long Beach.

Sitting in their Torrance headquarters, the Nimeh brothers and business partner Niko Albanis say they expect to sell more franchise rights that will see Chicken Dijon spread throughout Southern California.

The fast-casual restaurants specialize in rotisserie chicken, sandwiches, soups and salads - with a Mediterranean flair.

Albanis joined the brothers' business in 2005 to help develop the franchise concept.

The son of a Greek couple who immigrated to Canada, Albanis had experience with the style of food and restaurant expansion. He helped San Diego-based Daphne's Greek Cafe grow from six restaurants to 60 over the seven years he worked for it in various management roles.

The Nimeh brothers' parents immigrated to the United States from Bethlehem in the late 1960s. So the three partners say they have ethnic roots to the food they're selling.

"We all come from the Mediterranean Sea," said Albanis, 47.

Before joining the restaurant industry, Afram Nimeh spent much of his life working for hotels in various positions. In 1993, Steve Nimeh was working as a delivery driver at the Chicken Dijon in Redondo Beach, when the owners of that restaurant decided to sell.

Afram Nimeh agreed to buy the eatery for \$48,000. His two sons, wife and daughter all pitched in.

The father died about 2 years later from illness. Joe was 21 and Steve was 19.

After the family patriarch died, the family gathered at the hospital.

"My brother looks at me and says, 'Do we open the business tomorrow?'" recalled Steve Nimeh.

They usually left the tough questions to their father. But the two sons decided to stay open. They closed only one day - for their father's funeral.

The family grew the eatery's sales and eventually purchased a Chinese restaurant next door. But that business did not do as well. They tried to sell it, but failed.

"It went in and out of escrow two times," Steve Nimeh recalled.

The family eventually gave up on selling and decided to tear down the wall between the restaurants to expand Chicken Dijon. Combining the two took about 10 weeks in 2000.

The expansion brought in even more business. Sales were so strong that they decided to expand to more locations.

The brothers in 2003 opened a Chicken Dijon in El Segundo, followed by a location in Torrance. By 2004, they established the Chicken Dijon Franchise Corp.

In January 2006, the Nimeh brothers and Albanis opened a location in Irvine. It was their first Chicken Dijon franchise concept, with a "more bold" and eclectic look defined by wall colors of red, chocolate and pistachio instead of the subtler earth tones of the original restaurants, Albanis said.

By that spring, they started a restaurant in Long Beach and their first franchise opened in Rolling Hills Estates. Last year, two brothers who once worked for the Nimehs opened their second franchise at Rolling Hills Plaza in Torrance.

As they grow the business, the Nimeh brothers try to keep their father's memory alive in their work. The company's logo is two intersecting curved lines - like interlocking arms - inside a circle.

Albanis has the logo tattooed on his left wrist.

Two months ago, Steve Nimeh had a dream about his father that sums up their success, the brothers say.

"We were opening our eighth restaurant, and my father was in there with me," Steve Nimeh said. "And I asked him what he was doing there. And he says, 'What do you mean? I've always been here.' We truly feel that our father's been with us this whole time. He just drives us a little bit. Or a lot, actually."