

Chicken Dijon Rotisserie Grill

The dramatic, high-ceiling entry into Chicken Dijon Rotisserie Grill is an immediate clue that this isn't your typical chicken restaurant. Nothing about this concept is average—the atmosphere, the food, or the history. It's hard to believe that the owners entered into the business out of desperation and have turned a small, unprofitable store into a \$6 million, seven-unit operation with plans to grow nationwide.

The story begins in August 1993 when 18-year-old Steven Nimeh was working as a delivery driver for Chicken Dijon in Redondo Beach, California. The restaurant had been open less than a year when the owners, faced with personal and financial difficulties, offered their business, which averaged just 40 customers a day, to Nimeh.

“My father had been out of work two years at that point, we were down to the last money we had. I told him if we all went in and worked—my mom; my sister, who was in high school; and my brother, Joseph, who was 20 at the time—we probably could make it work,” says Chicken Dijon vice president Steven Nimeh.

“I remember my father saying, ‘If I can't invest the last of my savings into my kids, who can I invest in?’” Nimeh says.

Their father, Afram Nimeh, had a background in hotel management and, together with eldest son Joseph, took the lead in turning the business around. “We all worked together, even my sister who was the cashier while working on her high school homework,” Nimeh says. Then, tragically, Afram Nimeh died of a heart attack in December 1994.

“Since then Joseph has been the backbone of the company. He and my mom laid a strong operational foundation from the beginning and allowed me to go to college and get a formal business education,” Nimeh says. Thirteen years later, the whole family still is involved in the business, including brother-in-law and culinary graduate Raja Firyani, who manages food quality and product development.

Chicken Dijon describes its food as fresh, healthy California cuisine with a Mediterranean flare. That translates to salads, soups, sandwiches, and the signature Mediterranean-seasoned rotisserie chicken platters.

Just a few traditional Mediterranean offerings are sprinkled among the menu's salads, appetizers, and side items including Mediterranean potato salad, Mediterranean fries, falafel, stuffed grape leaves, baba gnanoush, hummus, pita bread, and tahini sauce.

The Nimehs are of Mediterranean descent, and COO Niko Albanis, who joined the company in 2005 as a partner in the newly formed franchise company, is Greek. Even though the Mediterranean influence is authentic, it was not part of the menu until 2006, when the partners decided it could set them apart from other chicken companies.

“When we looked around at all the chicken concepts out there, no one was doing Mediterranean chicken. By adding just a few menu items we have been able to re-brand ourselves and give ourselves a sales boost,” Albanis says.



Speaking of branding, both Albanis and Nimeh admit the name Chicken Dijon doesn't really describe their brand, which is neither French nor emphasizes Dijon sauces. "But after 14 years of building the brand, that's how so many customers know it," Nimeh says. "That's the original name from the time my dad was involved. It's dear to our hearts and we've been successful with it."

The Nimehs opened their second and third stores nearby in 2003 and began making plans to franchise in 2004. Albanis, a longtime friend whose experience came from Daphne's Greek Café, joined the company to solidify operations and spearhead growth. He has helped open four stores in California since early 2006, two of which are franchises. Multi-franchise partnerships are in the works.

"Every time we open a new store, we have to take a moment and look at each other," Nimeh says. "We think of the trying times we went through. We still have many of our original customers come in—the ones who used to drink Turkish coffee with our father—and says, 'Your dad would be so proud of you.' That means a lot."

Chicken Dijon Rotisserie Grill

President: **Joseph Nimeh**

HQ: **Torrance, California.**

Year Started: **1993**

Annual Sales: **\$5.8 million**

Total Units: **7**

Franchise Units: **2**

WHY IT BEARS WATCHING: "We are taking the No. 1 protein sold in the world and merging it with one of the fastest-growing ethnic foods: Mediterranean," Albanis says.

Beyond the different flavor profile, Albanis says ease of operation and strong unit economics will support steady, expansive growth with Fransmart's help. The franchise development firm estimates Chicken Dijon can grow to 650 units in the U.S. and Canada over 10 years.

Each store serves 300 to 400 customers a day with an average check of \$12. The restaurants are built for \$250,000 to \$350,000, and corporate stores average \$1 million in sales per year.

"That's a good 3:1 sales to investment ratio," Albanis says. "And our food costs are between 27 and 29 percent, depending on poultry costs. Labor costs average 22 percent. That's strong in our industry."