

A Table for Few at Friday's

Our correspondent checks in on the granddaddy of “casual dining”—and it’s even worse than you think.

One of my best friends in college worked at T. G. I. Friday’s as a cook, though he would never dignify it with that term. “I was an assembly-line worker,” he recalls. He relied on a grill for meats, a couple of deep-fryers for appetizers, and a flotilla of microwaves for everything else. In the six years he worked there, the only skill he learned—the only skill he needed—was “not burning anything.”

Of course, when we’re talking about [BBQ Pork Ravioli Bites](#), preparation may be beside the point. Friday’s and its ilk trade in the kind of kitsch that gets (barely) parodied in movies like *Waiting . . .* and *Office Space*. These chains elicit, not [the loathing of a Blockbuster](#), but a head-shaking chuckle, with any serious concerns directed at other, Michael Pollan-sized issues.

Still, it’s been a rough couple of years for Friday’s. Locations across the country have closed. The Friday’s in New York’s financial district shut down for a only few days, but that was because its [staff was allegedly selling cocaine](#). Carlson Companies, which owns the Friday’s chain, [named a controversial new CEO](#). A customer found a [snake’s head](#) in his broccoli.

But the most telling sign of Friday’s struggles has been its lack of cohesive corporate strategy. In addition to the (alarmingly titled) Give Me More Stripes rewards program, the chain has cooked up the following promotions in 2009: 10 Meals for \$9.99; Buy One Lunch, Get One Free; Five Cent Appetizers; and The World’s Largest Inauguration Party. For the month of May, Friday’s unveiled its most desperate promotion yet—it would offer all 16 full-portion sandwiches and salads for \$5, its lowest price since opening in 1965. Friday’s isn’t looking for a strategy, it’s looking for a savior.

In the restaurant business, though, who isn’t? As *USA Today* [reported](#) last month, restaurant sales have declined for 10 straight months, and customer traffic for 19 straight months. Now, a [new study](#) making waves within the industry suggests that four out of 10 chains could fold next year due to massive debt and rising commodity and energy prices.

While many companies are facing these issues, it’s even worse for Friday’s and other “casual dining” chains. The classic definition of casual dining includes sit-down service, alcohol, almost mythical portion sizes, and a check between \$10 and \$25 per person—and you can see part of the problem right there. The most obvious reason for Friday’s struggles is that people need to cut costs, which can mean cooking at home or driving through McDonald’s.

But casual dining’s problems actually predate the recession. In 2002, the sector did [\\$100 billion](#) in business. By 2008, that number had dropped to [\\$75 billion](#), and Friday’s fits this pattern. Back

in 2003, slumping sales forced the chain into [a \\$200 million “revitalization” campaign](#), which it finished just as things began to fall apart.

When it opened in Manhattan, Friday’s was a singles bar—in fact, it was THE single bar, according to a 1973 *Newsweek* article, the Friday’s of Tom Cruise’s *Cocktails*, all oak paneling and Tiffany lamps. As similar restaurants opened (Chili’s in 1975, Applebee’s in 1980), a genre was born. Friday’s grew quickly, first in the South, then in the Midwest, hitting 100 restaurants by 1984. It siphoned customers from the fine dining sector and widened its appeal to the “bar and grill” of today.

Unfortunately, so did all the other chains, to the point that analysts now complain about how they “[lack sufficient differentiation](#).” Bennigan’s, which keeps trying to die, even if a few franchises [won’t quite let it](#), self-identifies as an Irish pub. Yet it serves the same steaks, shrimp, and Southwestern appetizers as Friday’s and everyone else. Indeed, if pressed to isolate something unique in Friday’s, the best you could do is: Most Shameless. Here is a restaurant named one of “[America’s Greatest Brands](#)” that engages in cross-marketing with an *American Idol*-like ferocity, pushing “Ultimate” items endorsed by the Food Network or entrées based on the Jack Daniel’s World Championship Invitational Barbecue. Is it any wonder that Friday’s was the first chain to partner with the Atkins Diet?

It seems fair to ask why this formula worked in the first place. Why would anyone head to a place where the menu and atmosphere seem more about coverage than quality? I visited a Friday’s last week, in a chain-choked strip of Orange, Connecticut. On a Friday night at 7:30, there was no wait. In fact, an entire wing of the restaurant sat empty. The food, to this eater, at least, did not measure up to Texas Roadhouse or Ruby Tuesday and its salad bar. (And it looks like *Consumer Reports* will back me on this in their [July restaurant issue](#).) I tried the Jack Daniels Burger, served with the dark, syrupy-sweet sauce that is the lingua franca of Friday’s menu, and the best I can say is that it was cheap. Thanks to Friday’s latest promotion, “Buy One Entrée, Get One Free,” my wife and I ate for \$13.15 plus tip.

We made it about six minutes before the first [Birthday Song](#), where Friday’s staff marches out to clap and chant for one lucky customer. In the hour we were there, this happened no less than five times, and I think it starts to get at the chain’s appeal. The buzz of conversation, in English and in Spanish, never let up, and there did seem to be a festive atmosphere. Perhaps Friday’s works in the same way as its birthday routine—forced, sure, and a little stilted, but still loud and fun.

There are also practical considerations. Chains like Friday’s draw on singles bar, sports pubs, and family dining, and if the model ends up dulling each part, there’s still a convenience in finding them together. Parents can drink without worrying about drunks (and on my visit, high chairs seemed to block every aisle). Large groups can bank on a wide selection that leaves no one happy, but no one angry, either. Also, lest we forget, Friday’s is [the chain of Kevin Federline](#)—its dress code remains flexible, and I saw nothing above jeans, along with a not insignificant number of sweatpants.

If these are the best defenses casual dining can offer, though, it’s in more trouble than we thought. First, they obviously limit its audience—and, worse, limit it to groups getting killed by

the recession. Casual dining has always counted [suburban Baby Boomers](#) and lower-income families as its base. (For example, more than a third of Applebee's customers earn household incomes of [less than \\$50,000](#) a year.) There's nothing wrong with this, of course, but retirement-scared Boomers and lower-income workers have been the first to cut back on spending.

Of course, those two groups also include a whole lot of Americans. But [as recently as 2007](#), Friday's and its culinary brethren were actually focused on *upgrading* their clientèle—remodeling restaurants, adding more expensive food, even phasing out coupons and promotions. And this brings us to the second, long-term problem with Friday's formula. Even if Friday's had better demographics, even if it didn't have to worry about [the death of malls](#) and the birth of “[fast-casual](#)” places like Panera and Chipotle, the chain has diversified itself into a corner. And it doesn't have a clue where to go next.

Casual dining execs [talk](#) about innovation, evolution, and, yes, a few failures; they parrot the rhetoric of “never letting a serious crisis go to waste.” But, honestly, what can they change? Thanks to their all-inclusive nature, they can't expand the menu or the experience. They certainly can't increase the kitsch. So Friday's only option is to offer last-ditch discounts, where they sell a \$12 sandwich for a Subway-like \$5 without altering their underlying formula. This might prolong the chain's death, but it won't prevent it—not in a land where, in the last twenty years, the number of restaurants has increased at [twice the rate](#) of the population.