

## FOODSERVICE

Prepared Food + Hot, Cold, Frozen Dispensed Beverages

LEADER OF  
THE YEAR

# Bringing a Chef's Perspective

Foodservice Leader of the Year Ryan Krebs has used his experience as an executive chef to transform Rutter's foodservice operations into restaurant quality

By Tammy Mastroberte



If it has to do with food, Ryan Krebs, director of foodservice at Rutter's Farm Stores, is involved in the decision on it. Krebs joined the York, Pa.-based convenience store chain four years ago after working as an executive and corporate chef. He started at Rutter's as a roving restaurant manager, moving from store to store as needed. After one year, he took over foodservice for a new store built in Harrisburg, Pa., and it soon became the busiest store in the company.



Rutter's food menu is robust, offering options for breakfast through dessert.

"The store caught the attention of the corporate team, and I had more contact with my predecessor, Jerry Weiner," Krebs told *Convenience Store News*, explaining that Weiner had a plan to retire. Two years ago, Weiner did retire and, while there were a lot of people who wanted to take over for him, Krebs was called in and asked if he would like to interview for the position — and he got the job.

While he has a team of people who report to him, including the category managers for dispensed and hot beverages, produce and bakery, Krebs is the ultimate decision maker when it comes to food items. He works

directly with manufacturers and distributors, and makes all equipment decisions.

He recently made the decision to roll out chef coats to foodservice employees in all Rutter's stores. "We are in the restaurant business, so all restaurant managers and assistant restaurant managers wear them," he said.

Since taking on the director of foodservice role, Krebs has also made menu and operational changes for greater efficiency. His initial goal was to take what Weiner had already created and bring a fresh set of eyes to it, in order to make it even better. He's replaced some items with higher restaurant-quality ones, created some brand-new items, and revamped equipment.

"I replaced a legend in c-store foodservice, so I didn't want to come in and just put my stamp on things," he explained.

For example, Weiner started a dinner concept for Rutter's stores with a couple of options before retiring, so Krebs took the program and expanded it into an entire category, with 15 different "basket meals." Customers can choose a protein, starch and sides to build their own basket. Rutter's uses the same approach for breakfast meals.

"I am 100 percent convinced there is so much money sitting on the table for convenience stores with dinner. Customers come in for breakfast and lunch, but then they go to a QSR [quick-service restaurant], fast casual or casual restaurant for dinner. Dinner is where you get the highest dollar ring and margin, but that is when you typically get the least foot traffic," Krebs said, noting that Rutter's dinner concept has resonated with customers and grown the dinner daypart for the chain.

### EXPANSION & UPGRADES

In addition to the dinner expansion, Krebs revamped Rutter's pizza program to make it a more relevant

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category. The retailer changed from serving small, personal-size pizzas to large, family-size, brick-oven pizzas with a self-activating yeast — a high-quality ingredient not usually seen in convenience store pizza, according to Krebs. The chain also redesigned its pizza boxes.

Additionally, since roller grill was a flat category when Krebs took over, as the chain had been leaning into other food items on its robust menu, he worked with Kunzler and Co. to change the trajectory. Kunzler and Co. has been a partner of Rutter's for more than 40 years. Together, they created a bacon-wrapped hot dog, stuffed with cheddar cheese and black pepper. Rutter's had exclusive rights to it for three months, and it invigorated the category. The item is now available nationally through Kunzler and Co.

"I am trying to build categories so we are a destination for people," Krebs said, explaining how companies often put an egg roll on the menu and say they are in the Asian food business, but that is not his goal. "I recently rolled out a whole product line of high-quality seafood items, like crab chowder and fried scallops. I rolled out new items within a couple of weeks of each other and have had huge success in that category. It made us a seafood destination."

Rutter's offers robust variety on its menu, and it's all served 24 hours a day. Customers can get breakfast for dinner or dinner for breakfast. The chain also

bakes its own breads daily, along with muffins and cookies, and works with a lot of pre-cooked items that are heated to provide consistency, according to Krebs.

A lot has changed in terms of operational efficiency as well since he took over.

Because the stores do such a high volume of foodservice,

he brought in a new fryer filtering program, which simplified the process and improved the taste of the food.

"We had a tedious and manual way of working with fryers, and I worked with a company that offers a pump to suck the oil out, and then another bottom pump to bring it back in," he said. "This isn't seen on the customer side, but almost 90 percent of our stores are at a 100-percent filtration rate, so the quality of food is a lot better, and it's unheard of in the industry."

Krebs is always looking for better-quality options, like upgraded taco meat. But aside from upgrades, he will typically introduce a new menu item every two



Krebs sees limitless potential for Rutter's food program.

months. With the seafood items, he rolled out four within a couple of weeks. He usually likes to introduce about six "big and impactful items" per year.

The chain also takes customer feedback into the equation.

"We had one customer ask why we didn't have banana peppers on the menu since we served subs. That would have been our fourth pepper option, but I was able to add it and it became the third-best-selling topping overnight," he said. "We take customer feedback and have even had store-level employees create recipes for our menus."

#### THE INDUSTRY & THE FUTURE

Since starting in the c-store business four years ago, Krebs has seen firsthand the growing importance of the foodservice category. It's on everyone's radar and there isn't a show, conference or meeting he attends in the industry where people are not talking about foodservice and how to make it better.

"Particularly in the past two years, it's become an everyday dialogue. I get calls all the time asking, 'How can I be you when I grow up,' from other chains," he said. "Everyone has different challenges and hurdles."

He has seen more chefs come onboard at c-store companies, along with chains creating positions for food and beverage managers. Companies are realizing they need a director of foodservice, not just a director of marketing, he said, noting that he works closely with Rutter's marketing department when it comes to all things food.

Krebs describes himself as a "risk-taker" and believes the sky is the limit for what Rutter's can do in the foodservice category.

"I think we are pushing the envelope to places that convenience has not even wrapped its mind around. We have induction woks, cannoli, tiramisu. And if we can do it, then others can, too. It's about growing the industry because there are so many competitors now outside of convenience." **CSN**

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