

SOURCING  
SEAFOOD

APPROACHABLE  
WINE

INSIDE OJOS  
LOCOS

LOYALTY &  
PAYMENT TRENDS

# RESTAURANT

## RISING STARS

40 UNDER 40

THESE UP-AND-  
COMING LEADERS  
ARE BLAZING  
THE FUTURE OF  
FOODSERVICE

### REGGIE DOTSON DREAMS BIGGER

THE BUDDING  
CHEF IS MAKING  
WAVES AT  
AWARD-WINNING  
ASH'KARA

+

HOW CHEF  
MICHAEL DIAZ DE  
LEON IS UPENDING  
EXPECTATIONS OF  
MEXICAN FOOD



## Ojos Locos is Changing the Game

Here's how a 35-unit Mexican cantina concept is leveraging scratch-made food, authenticity, and a neighborhood-first mentality to become a year-round destination for sports fans.

### WALKING THROUGH THE DOORS

of your local Ojos Locos Sports Cantina, you're greeted with bright smiles and perky waitstaff, referred to as *Chicas Coquetas*, ready to welcome you for a good time. "We're like Hooters, but with hotter chicas and better food," jokes Destinee Rollins, chief marketing officer for Ojos Locos Sports Cantina, which operates 35 locations spread across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and California.

It's hard to overlook the "balons" on every table. Originally coined by the brand, "balon" refers to a large, 100 fluid-ounce (approximately three liters) tall, round pitcher of ice-cold beer designed for sharing. To further reinforce the sports theme, the pitcher is shaped like a fútbol (soccer ball), making for a great photo opportunity.

Along the walls, you'll find sports-related and celebratory sayings written in Spanish. Whether it's a traditional Mexican drinking toast, "*arriba, abajo, al centro, y pa dentro*"—where people move their glasses up, down, center, and then drink—or an inspirational blurb like "*si, si se puede*" (yes, we can), you can feel the Latino culture in every detail of the restaurant.



HQ: Dallas  
UNITS: 35  
FOUNDERS:  
Rich Hicks and  
Todd Istre  
CUISINE TYPE:  
Tex-Mex  
FOUNDED:  
2010

THE MENU AT OJOS LOCOS OFFERS A VARIETY OF CULTURALLY RICH ITEMS, INCLUDING THE ELOTE LOCO, BIRRIA DE RES, WINGS, AND ROASTED POLLO (PICTURED ABOVE).

Energetic music fills the air, the brightness of screens fills the otherwise ambient-lit room, and the smell of birria and hand-pressed tortillas wafts by, leading to más cravings and signaling it's time to grab a beer, watch the game, and eat.

The brand was created in Dallas by friends Rich Hicks and Todd Istre in 2010 after becoming frustrated with finding a local spot to watch the World Cup. The duo identified a void for an authentic Tex-Mex Hispanic environment that celebrated Latino sports. By creating a comfortable, laid-back environment, the brand quickly built an organic following. Serving as the "Cheers for Cantinas," Ojos Locos is seen by many as a home away from home. "We are one of the very few concepts where a guest is coming in to see the Chica," says

Rollins. "He or she wants to come in and have that experience and feel as though it's an escape."

The Chicas are lovingly referred to as the heartbeat of Ojos Locos, and the brand prioritizes empowering its female staff—despite the preconceived notions some have around "breastaurant" concepts. During the hiring process, the brand seeks smart, ambitious candidates who are excited to become leaders and grow their careers with the brand. The training process for these women is a vital component in ensuring long-term success and is a top priority for the team.

At its launch, Ojos Locos used hand-pressed tortillas, and everything was made from scratch whenever possible. As the brand opened more locations, it found it difficult to remain consistent



OJOS LOCOS IS EYEING NEW MARKETS IN VIRGINIA, NEW JERSEY, FLORIDA, AND BEYOND, AND IS ACTIVELY BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK FOR FRANCHISING.

and, as a result, strayed from its roots. But the brand has worked tirelessly to get back to the soul of its menu. "As we continue to refine the food and beverage execution, we're not putting out any shortcuts. It's about getting back to the roots and the basics to create that authenticity," says Rollins.

To enhance its offerings and revamp operations, the brand has leveraged its team's expertise. Leadership has listened to what has worked and not worked at other concepts, and used recommendations and feedback to make impactful improvements. Some of these conversations led to discoveries, such as learning that many of its cocktails were too sweet on the palate. Through experimentation and taste testing, new recipes have been added to the menu. A few guest favorites include a spicy strawberry margarita, espresso martini, Milagro Mexica martini, Horchata Sin Dolor, and creatively flavored paleta shots.

When it comes to menu offerings, visitors can choose from a variety of culturally rich items. A few standouts include the Elote Loco, Birria de Res, wings, and traditional hand-pressed tortillas.

#### Grassroots Marketing & Growth

Connecting with the surrounding community of each location is a priority for the brand. They want guests to feel comfortable enough to visit after work with-

out having to dress up.

"We've recently rolled out a local store marketing 'boots on the street' program, which I think ties in so nicely with this cantina neighborhood field connection," says Rollins. For many of the brand's customers, visiting Ojos Locos has become part of their weekly routine. The brand has daily specials so there are always savings opportunities for value-minded guests and something exciting to look forward to, no matter the day you stop in.

"In a perfect world, I hope everybody that's a raving fan already is going to order that thing, and then next week they're going to say, 'Hey, I brought two brand new buddies that have never been here before, because this deal is so good I have to come and get it,'" says Alex Sadowsky, vice president of training, culinary, and beverage. The brand has seen a 10x lift in sales on some featured menu items as a result of these daily specials.

Because of this reliability and genuine excitement guests feel, much of the buzz around the brand has been organic. It wasn't until recently that it began exploring influencer campaigns. The bubbly personalities of the Chicas, the massive balons of chilled beer, the commotion of the dining room when a team scores, and the bright colors of the food all create engaging social media content. It feels natural for the guest to want to share their experience with friends and family.

To better connect with its guests, the brand has introduced a new loyalty program called Loco Rewards. The brand chose a bankable rewards system where guests earn five points per dollar spent, earning a \$5 reward once 500 points are accumulated. "We have always been about bringing communities together over shared love of food and sports, and Loco Rewards gives us a new way to recognize the guests who continue to choose Ojos Locos as their place to gather, enjoy a meal, and watch the game," says Rollins.

While currently a regional powerhouse, the brand is eyeing new markets in Virginia, New Jersey, Florida, and beyond. The leadership team is actively building the framework for franchising to ensure that, when it's ready to take that step, partners can easily replicate the authenticity of Ojos Locos's food and culture that the team has worked so hard to build. When considering potential franchisees, the brand stresses that it's not looking for "the mayor of one cantina," but rather for entrepreneurs committed to multi-unit growth.

In the meantime, the brand is focused on optimizing its existing locations. "We're putting a lot of focus toward preparing our guests for those exciting moments that we can showcase and build," says Rollins. "And we're going to be focused in the summer on extending premises. So, out into the parking lot, what are those watch parties that we can really capitalize on?" When asked when fans can expect the next round of locations to open, the brand hints that it will be at the end of this year. ■