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Salad spins off in favour of fries

JUSTIN SKINNER [More from this author](#)

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Though many fast-food hamburger chains have taken a beating in the press and on their bottom lines over the past few years, entrepreneur Jay Gould knows that a good product will sell itself.

Gould knows as much first-hand, as his New York Fries chain of restaurants has succeeded through fad diets and long-term adverts in health news by both adapting to meet the standards expected by consumers and by providing a superior product. That same approach has been key in launching his latest venture, the South Street Burger Co., near Dufferin Street and Steeles Avenue.

"Obviously, chains such as New York Fries and South Street Burgers are not going to be able to take advantage of the health trend," he said. "But if you offer a superior product, people will pay to indulge once in a while and they'll pay a little more for the industry leader."

The health food trend is nothing new to Gould. He actually began his entrepreneurial career in 1977 when he launched the Cultures chain with his brother Hal. That chain, inspired by the Goulds' mother, brought healthy options to fast food before healthy eating was in vogue.

"We could see that the big, heavy martini lunch was going by the wayside and people were running down the road in the morning, looking to get fit," Gould said. "Back then, maybe only five per cent of the market wanted what we were offering, but we were the only guys offering it."



The lessons learned through Cultures were extremely valuable when Gould decided to launch New York Fries 10 years later. As with his first chain, which the brothers grew to 58 stores before selling the company, New York Fries makes its money by relying on a loyal base of customers.

"Our idea is to do what you do and do it well," Gould said. "If you have to raise the price to do it better than anyone else, raise the price. We're not talking about the difference between buying a Chevy and a BMW; we're talking about a buck."

That philosophy has carried New York Fries through a still-growing health food craze and allowed the chain to not only outlast fad diets such as Atkins, but to thrive through them. In order to compete, Gould has been quick to adapt his products, with New York Fries becoming the first chain in Canada to cook their fries in trans-fat free sunflower oil. They have also downsized their serving sizes and cut prices accordingly.

"You'd have to be pretty dense not to see what's out there in the media," he said. "But we've made the changes we've made and the last 12 months have actually been a record year for us."

The South Street Burger Co. is not only a chain unto itself, but also a means of growing the New York Fries

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Jay Gould's latest venture is South St. Burger Co., which recently opened at Dufferin Street and Steeles Avenue. Gould, a Rosedale resident, is also the man behind the New York Fries chain, and before that launched the Cultures chain.



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brand, which has already gained popularity in shopping malls and movie-theatre food courts. The two ventures are a natural marriage of best-selling fast food items, the burgers providing the french fry brand to grow and the fries lending instant name recognition to the burger company.

"For New York Fries to go out on its own and start a restaurant outside of a food court, there's not enough of a calling card there," Gould said. "But by combining the fries with South Street Burgers, we can take advantage of the goodwill that's out there for the New York Fries name. We want people to say 'if they do burgers the way they do fries, I'll give it a try'."

Gould started tinkering with the idea of the burger chain over a year prior to its late-August launch. Menu and product sampling and branding took months, but the Rosedale resident is certain the time investment will pay off.

"We rented a kitchen and tried everything because we wanted everything to be as good as we could make it before we even started up," he said. "Our intention from Day 1 was to become a 50 to 100 store chain, not just a one-off."

Like New York Fries, the South Street Burger Co. relies on a small menu, but with the food made fresh. Unlike other fast-food chains, the burgers are grilled fresh using 100 per cent pure beef that is never frozen. They also offer fresh-cut onion rings, real ice cream milkshakes and, of course, the signature fries.

"We're not going to start offering a turkey burger or anything like that," Gould said. "If anything, we're going to shrink our menu. We just want to focus on what we do and do it better than the other guys. It's up to us to deliver, because if we're no better than the other 10,000 burger places out there, people won't bother coming to us and they won't pay a premium."

The advent of the South Street Burger Co. comes months after New York Fries began selling potato chips in their stores, with an eye to expanding into convenience stores and grocery stores. The chips, made with potatoes from British Columbia's Fraser Valley, come in a barbecue flavour, with the goal to add new flavours as the brand grows.

"We don't have a big enough distribution or enough space in our stores to have a lot of flavours, so we stuck with our most popular flavour," Gould said. "Really, potato chips are as logical a brand extension as we could have."

Gould noted that, even though his products are healthier than many fast-food alternatives, consumers still need to eat his products in moderation. While he feels the fast-food industry takes an unfair amount of blame for obesity among a decreasingly active population, he said that his products are indulgences rather than dietary staples.

"I've always said that I don't recommend New York Fries as part of a daily diet, but if you're going to eat, you might as well treat yourself to the good stuff," he said. "People are going to eat fruits and vegetables at home. When they go out, they want to get something that feels good and tastes good, and we're here to provide that."

While growing his company keeps him busy, Gould still finds time to spend with his wife Jan and his sons Mac and Will in their Rosedale home. He said city life suits his lifestyle perfectly.

"I live right near my office and I wouldn't fare nearly as well if I was stuck in traffic every day," he said. "I just find it amazing that the residential capacity in this city south of the 401 is so vibrant and mature and fabulous."

Gould's business acumen has earned him accolades as one of Ontario Business Report's top 100 entrepreneurs in 1995 and 1996, where he was also named runner-up for Franchisor of the Year. He was named 2002 Entrepreneur of the Year, receiving Foodservice and Hospitality's Pinnacle Award.

New York Fries founder Jay Gould expands fresh food concept with burger chain

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JAY GOULD

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