

[www.thebusinessnewsonline.com](http://www.thebusinessnewsonline.com)

# Growth Strategies



Ron Burkus, left, Mark Grishaber, Tom Grishaber, Dean Grishaber, and Scot Grishaber squeeze into a booth at the newest Tom's restaurant-on Westhill Boulevard in Appleton, which features booths made from Tilt-A-Whirl seats. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

## Family is key part of recipe at Tom's Drive In

# Family is key part of recipe at Tom's Drive In

## From Tilt-a-Whirl booths to the Tominator, goal is to create fun atmosphere for dining

By Kristin Stankewicz

kstankewicz@thebusinessnewsonline.com

Tom Grishaber can estimate your age based on how many of his burgers you could buy for \$1 as a kid.

"We have some people who remember seven burgers for a dollar," said the founder of the Tom's Drive In fast-food chain. "I say, 'oh, you're that old, huh?'"

What started in 1960 as a lone burger shop on Appleton's south side is now a seven-location Fox Cities chain. The most recent addition, 501 N. Westhill Blvd., Grand Chute, opened in December with a carnival decor theme. Other locations' themes include local sports, music, and retro.

The unique themes provide variety for customers who visit different locations frequently,



We should have put in all Tilt-a-Whirl seats. We expected it (to be popular) for the kids, but the adults want to sit in them also.

— Tom Grishaber, founder of Tom's Drive In fast-food chain



said Scot Grishaber, Tom's son and the company's director of market development.

"We want them to feel like they're having a

different experience each time," said Scot.

The Westhill Blvd. location, which cost the family more than \$2 million, includes four restored Tilt-a-Whirl seats in the dining room and two old Scrambler cars mounted on the walls.

"It's a fun atmosphere," said Scot. "Everyone has memories of the carnival and what it was like, so we thought this theme would be popular."

The carnival theme idea was Tom's, said Scot. "He had the idea of putting a carousel inside the restaurant, but that wasn't feasible because of the seating you'd lose."

Instead, Scot bought the Tilt-a-Whirl cars from a farmer in northern Wisconsin for \$250 each, then spent an additional \$6,000 each to fix them up and turn them into booths. Customers sometimes wait in line to sit in them, he said.

"We should have put in all Tilt-a-Whirl

seats," said Tom. "We expected it for the kids, but the adults want to sit in them also."

The new location includes the company's corporate offices upstairs, giving the management team a centralized home base.

Tom credits Scot and his other two sons — Dean, director of inventory management; and Mark, director of purchasing — with engineering the growth of the company over the last several years.

"I started four stores, and my sons have advanced the program. They're the sole owners now," said Tom, who is "90 percent retired."

All three started their fast-food careers in junior high, "standing on a Coke box, putting out hamburgers," said Tom.

See Tom's, PAGE 22

www.thebusinessnewsline.com

# Tom's/Expansion plans target the Green Bay area

## From Page 21

Before that, "They'd crawl around under the drive-thru counter looking for coins," he said.

Both generations agree that paying attention to their customers' needs has been a key ingredient to their success.

"It starts from the top down," said Scot. "Owners and managers need to exemplify what we want our employees to portray to the customers. We would like to go above what our customers' expectations are."

Unlike most fast-food outlets, the Tom's Drive In staff includes long-term employees, including some past the 20-year mark.

Scot attributes the long tenures to the family-like atmosphere. "We care about our employees," he said. "We offer wages and benefits competitive with other industries, so the foodservice industry is now viewed more as a legitimate career path."

Over the years, the Tom's Drive In menu has grown as customer tastes changed. "It started out very simple, with hamburgers and fries," Tom said. "We added things slowly, like the cheeseburger and fishwich. Now chicken is popular."

One of the most popular menu items, fried cheese curds, arrived in the late 1970s at the urging of Tom's Kraft sales representative. "He came in and said, 'You oughta start selling this fried cheese.' I said, 'how can you put cheese in the fryer?'" Tom said with a laugh.

When it's time to order a meal for himself, Tom picks the Tominator — and not just because it's named after him. "I like it because it's got lettuce, tomato, and onion on it," he said.

Nutritional information for all menu items, as well as a company history, is available online at [www.tomsdriveins.com](http://www.tomsdriveins.com). "Nutritional information is something people are concerned

about, so we responded to that," said Scot. "Plus, people are using (the Internet) for research in all aspects of their purchasing."

The Web site also has a request form for donations. Tom's Drive In sponsors multiple youth sports teams, and has a reputation as an avid community supporter.

"We get over 1,000 requests a year for donations," said Scot.

The Grishabers don't like to tout all the time and money they devote to local causes. Scot said they do it because "the community has been so good to us. We want to give back to the community where we grew up."

Looking ahead, the Grishabers plan to expand the Tom's Drive In concept. They're currently looking for franchisees.

"We're targeting the Green Bay market first," Scot said. He has plans to turn the current west side Tom's Drive In into a prototype

restaurant. "We'd like to have three or four in that market."

Franchisee information on the company's website places the required initial investment at \$437,650 to \$574,580, including a franchise fee of \$35,000.

"We believe that the people in Green Bay are our type of customers," Scot said. "We think a franchise will be very successful in that market."

Although Tom cites his sons as the force behind the company's growth, Scot said he and his brothers credit their dad.

"It's Tom's Drive In, and it always will be Tom's Drive In," Scot said. "People say we're lucky to have survived this long in a competitive industry. It has nothing to do with luck. Tom has spent the vast majority of his life at the restaurant. It's hard work and determination that's gotten us this far," said Scot.