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Taste Buds Management

2009 Best Places
to Work

Mina Morales thought she wanted to become a nurse — until she began working at Zea Rotisserie & Grill.

The St. Bernard Parish native started at the restaurant's St. Charles Avenue location as a summer job while attending the University of New Orleans. She stayed on staff and was promoted from server to crew leader to bartender.

Impressed by her professionalism and rapport with Zea's customers as a bartender, General Manager Alan Alvarez asked Morales if she had ever thought about becoming a restaurant manager.

"At that moment in time, I thought about where my direction in life was going, and I was like, 'I really enjoy this company, and I really enjoy the restaurant industry,'" Morales said. "So I started key managing, which is kind of like a manager in training, and I changed my major in school."

Taste Buds Management operates Zea and Semolina restaurants. The New Orleans-based company runs seven restaurants locally and 14 across the South.

Like Morales, Marla Chua also saw her path in life going in a different direction. While in culinary school, her goal was to work under a well-known chef at a five-star restaurant.

"This is the only corporate restaurant I would ever work for," said Chua, who was recently transferred to manage Zea's Birmingham, Ala., location. "The culture that we live by is amazing. Everybody who works for the company has a main goal in mind."



Photo by Frank Aymami

The staff of Taste Buds Management dig into some dishes from Zea Rotisserie & Grill outside of their Oak Street headquarters. From left: Vice President of Operations Paul Hutson, Chef/Owner Gary Darling (holding fork), Chef/Owner Hans Limburg, Director of Culinary Operations Kevin Guidroz, Chef/Owner Greg Reggio (holding spoon) Chief Financial Officer Mary Ford, Marketing Director Nancy Jeansonne (dusting) and CEO Chris Rodrigue.

Morales, who has worked for Zea for five years and is now the St. Charles location's event coordinator, said one of the aspects she enjoys most about Zea is how open her superiors are open to suggestions from employees at all levels.

Taste Buds' mission statement aims to "encourage innovation by having the freedom to make mistakes."

Morales recommended her restaurant begin delivering its food and offering off-site catering. Both suggestions have since been implemented.

"I'm smart enough to know that CEO of the company doesn't really mean a whole

lot," Taste Buds chief executive Chris Rodrigue said. "I don't get a whole lot of contact with our guests. The folks that get contact with our guests are our servers, the hostesses, the bartenders, the guys and gals in the back of the kitchen that are cooking the food. It's very important to us that we hear from those people."

Taste Buds also offers health care, vision, dental and 401(k) plans to its employees, rarities in the restaurant industry.

"The primary focus of the organization is the simple belief that you take care of the people who take care of the guests and everything else will take care of itself," Rodrigue said. "We focus on providing a quality work environment for our employees." •

— Ryan Chatelain

Nature of business: casual dining

Employees: 632

Average starting salary: \$20,010 for hourly employees (\$9.60 an hour, calculated on a 40-hour week), \$45,000 for management

Median salary: \$20,280 for hourly, \$52,724 for management

Average employment time: one year for hourly employees, 2.8 years for management

Benefits: health care with up to 100 percent coverage, dental, vision and prescription plans, 401(k) with up to 4 percent match, tuition assistance, continuing education program, relocation assistance, telecommuting, flexible hours, employee recognition program, subsidized meals

Wait time for benefits: 30 to 90 days

Paid days off: up to 18

Web site: www.zearestaurants.com, www.semolina.com