



Boosting presence in N.J.
Ex-Goya executive plants seeds for growth in upscale franchise market. **Page 5**

Balancing family ties

Manager at J.P. Morgan gives clients investment and filial advice. **Page 5**

How he made his mark

SBA's N.J. Small Business Person of the Year found success by providing IT to defense contractors. **Page 5**

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Awaiting incentives

Small biotechs cheer for a \$1 billion tax credit program expected to spur innovation.

Page 17

Life Sciences Spotlight

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Christina Mazza

Andy Unanue, left, CEO of Trufoods LLC, and Gary Occhiogrosso, chief development officer, in the Wall Street Deli location in Jersey City. It's one of four brands Unanue will expand here.

Franchise players plot N.J. growth

Ex-Goya executive aims to make waves by bringing new brands to upscale Garden State locations

BY JOÃO-PIERRE S. RUTH

THE DOORS ARE open at the **Wall Street Deli**, in Jersey City — the local beachhead for an ambitious growth strategy by **Andy Unanue's Trufoods LLC**. Nestled within the Newport Tower on Washington Boulevard, the upscale deli is the first New Jersey location among four different franchise brands Unanue will unveil in the state.

Quick-serve brands **Pudgie's Famous Chicken**, **Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips** and

Ritter's Frozen Custard also will open locations across the state, Unanue said, with New York-based Trufoods recruiting franchisees to open shop in New Jersey.

While these brands are well known, they are newcomers to New Jersey — part of Trufoods CEO Unanue's plan to bolster each of the chains, which he acquired when he launched the parent company. Additionally, "I've toyed with the idea of starting a brand on our own," he said, including Caribbean, Spanish or Tex-Mex quick-serve restaurants.

Entrepreneurship runs in Unanue's blood. He owns New York-based debt and equity investor **AU & Associates LLC**, in New

York, and prior to launching Trufoods served as chief operating officer for family-owned **Goya Foods Inc.**, in Secaucus. He remains a shareholder in Goya, a company founded by his grandfather.

Trufoods and its collective brands have 105 locations across the country, generating \$40 million in annual revenue, said **Gary Occhiogrosso**, chief development officer for the three-year-old company.

Wall Street Deli opened its Jersey City location in February, and represents a new format for the franchise, Occhiogrosso said. "It's our first company-owned co-branded unit, with

➤➤ See **FRANCHISE** on page 7

FRANCHISE Potential for growth in Monmouth, Essex

»» Continued from page 5

Ritter's Frozen Custard within the deli," he said.

Occhiogrosso said Wall Street Deli franchises can fit within corporate centers, hospitals, travel plazas and airport concessions, and expects the chain to open up to 30 New Jersey units. The Ritter's chain, meanwhile, may open 80 to 100 locations in the state, including some co-branded with the delis, and Pudge's — co-branded with Arthur Treacher's — is expected to open 80 to more than 120 locations in New Jersey, he said.

Building a new reputation for these brands will take some effort. Unanue bought the assets of the brands in bankruptcy or other deals in 2007, and won't rule out further purchases. "I'm open to looking at acquisitions at any point in the lifecycle of a business," he said.

Occhiogrosso said Trufoods acquired brands whose prior owners had grown the chains as far as they could go, but had prospects for rebirth. "Our goal is to acquire companies that have not lived up to their full potential," he said.

He said Trufoods is looking throughout New Jersey for sites that suit its different brands. The company is working to bring Pudge's franchise units to Essex and Monmouth counties, as well as a company-owned unit in North Arlington. "I'm not so sure [Wall Street Deli] will be in a shopping center in the middle of Hunterdon County," Occhiogrosso said. "But certainly Ritter's would play well there. So would Pudge's and Arthur Treacher's."

Reviving franchise brands that have lost

their polish is a growing trend, according to **Steve Beagelman**, owner of **SMB Franchise Advisors**, in Doylestown, Pa. But "it is difficult for anybody to take a brand that has declined significantly and bring it back," he said.

Beagelman said there have been successful revivals for once-ailing brands like **Jack in the Box** and **International House of Pancakes**. "If they have the right growth strategy, and the right team in place, they will be successful," he said.

Beagelman said he is so far impressed by the strategy Trufoods has adopted. "I think

"If they have the right growth strategy, and the right team in place, they will be successful."

Steve Beagelman, owner, SMB Franchise Advisors

good things are on the horizon for the company," he said. "They have a good owner and are well funded. Andy's surrounding himself with a good management team to take the business to the next level."

Unanue said his familiarity with New Jersey and the food industry helped shape his strategy. "When I was at Goya, I used to say the one advantage Goya has over all these other companies trying to market to Hispanics is we don't market to Hispanics — we market as Hispanics," he said. ♦

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Patrons during lunchtime at The Wall Street Deli, located at 525 Washington Blvd., in Jersey City.