



The Food Network's Tyler Florence is one of the stars of N.Y.'s Chef's Theater show.

Lights, camera, cooking! New crop of celeb chefs act out to gain fame

By Erica Duency

New York — Bright lights, big kitchen?

Onstage at the Supper Club in Times Square, a trio of Broadway performers rehearses songs and dances alongside a grand piano and a kitchen set. The song, "A Meal to Remember," is the opening number of a new dinner theater show starring real celebrity chefs.

With a booming voice and sparkling smile, top toque Michael Lomonaco of New York's Noche is preparing ingredients for rum-marinated pork chops. His star turn on the Great White Way marks yet another high-profile landmark in the lucrative — but challenging — world of celebrity chefdom, which stretches from cookware endorsements, international restaurant chains and branded grocery lines to high-paying consulting gigs and network TV series.

(See **LIGHTS**, page 55)

Ruby Tuesday accounts for content, serves up nutritional info on menus

House votes 276-139 to ban obesity suits, like those that blamed lack of menu labeling

By Carolyn Walkup

As the Bush administration called for voluntary menu labeling and Congress moved to shield businesses from obesity lawsuits, Ruby Tuesday said it would become the first national restaurant chain to disclose nutritional content data directly on its menus for all food items.

While other chains continued to climb aboard the low-carbohydrate promotional bandwagon and Ruby Tuesday readied the April rollout of its new menus, the House of Representatives voted to ban liability claims that blame the food and foodservice industries for obesity and resulting health problems.

The passage of H.R. 339, the Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act, came one day after the release of a (See **RUBY**, page 6)



Ruby Tuesday said its pioneering decision to post detailed nutritional information on its menus about all food items would help customers make informed decisions about their varying diets.

Chains hung up in strip-search phone scam; police seek perp Managers tricked into undressing workers

By Milford Prewitt

Police nationwide are looking for a serial telephone prankster who, posing as a cop or chain official, convinces restaurant managers to strip-search employees in a bogus hunt for purportedly stolen money, drugs or guest valuables.

The perpetrator, who solicits detailed descriptions of the hapless victim's private parts and underwear, has struck several dozen times since 1999, fooling unit managers at McDonald's, Burger King, Hooters, Ruby Tuesday, Applebee's, Perkins, Taco Bell and other restaurants, investigators said.

From Florida to Alaska and from Maine to Colorado, the

caller, posing as a detective or a corporate executive, has struck almost exclusively in small towns. Unlike most con men, the vocal voyeur is not interested in easy money.

Instead, police theorize, the perpetrator either is egotripping on his extraordinary powers of persuasion, is seeking vengeance against an ex-employer or is achieving sexual stimulation from the verbal descriptions provided by the managers.

"I think reasons one and three are motivating this guy," said detective sergeant Victor Flaherty (See **CHAINS**, page 94)



Rising chicken wing costs have pressured operators nationwide.

Prices soar, feathers fly amid wing inflation flap

By Bret Thorn

Faced with record-high costs for raw chicken wings, restaurants that feature the popular poultry item are raising prices, curbing other costs and diversifying their menus to maintain margins.

Overall since 2002 wing prices nearly have doubled, according to the U.S. Depart-

ment of Agriculture, and countless operators who had featured bargain-priced wing dishes or cheap wings as happy-hour lures are recalibrating price points and promotional strategies.

"Wing prices are as high as they have ever been," Sally Smith, (See **PRICES**, page 97)

Chains hung up in strip-search phone scam; police seek perp

(Continued from page 1)
of the West Bridgewater Police Department in Massachusetts.

Flaherty, whose town is 25 miles south of Boston, is the lead investigator on a task force made up of police from three other Massachusetts cities that have pooled their resources to find the suspect after he bamboozled managers at four Wendy's outlets a month ago.

Wendy's International is bankrolling all expenses related to the task force's quest for an arrest.

In addition to the Wendy's in West Bridgewater, branches of the chain in Abington, Whitman and Wareham, Mass., all had their managers directed over the phone to force staffers, male and female, to disrobe in the ostensible pursuit of stolen money or guest valuables. Some but not all investigators appear to believe that a single perpetrator is behind the deceptions. But police officials don't seem to think that word of the crimes, spreading among restaurant workers, might have inspired some to indulge their own voyeuristic urges under the copycat guise of being ordered to conduct strip searches by some disembodied caller.

Why the managers — generally known for being well-trained and savvy individuals — are falling for the scam is unclear. But Dan Jablonski, a Wichita, Kan., private investigator whose & Associates specializes in suspected white-collar infractions and executive background checks, thinks he knows why the caller is so persuasive.

Jablonski, a 28-year field agent of the FBI, said the prankster knows just enough about restaurant operations to sound legitimate, sprinkling industry jargon in his conversation while pretending to be an area or regional manager of the chain.

Based on Jablonski's research and consultations with law enforcement around the country, he estimated that the caller has tricked restaurant managers and a few supermarket unit managers at least 50 times into strip-searching colleagues since 1999.

Many more telephonic strip-search scams go unreported each year or, even if reported, are filed away as "miscellaneous" and unresolved by police, Jablonski said. He and Flaherty concur that many victimized restaurant operators don't report such incidents

“We fell victim to a vicious scam, and words cannot express how bad we feel about all who were victimized by this. We've offered the deepest apologies to the employees, and we feel terrible for the store managers who are embarrassed that they were duped.”

— BOB BERTINI
SPOKESMAN, WENDY'S INTERNATIONAL

out of embarrassment.

“Think about it: You are an assistant manager, and one day you get a call from your area manager or regional vice president, who identifies himself and asks you to do this,” Jablonski said. “Do you think most assistant managers know the name of the area or regional manager?”

A McDonald's in Roosevelt, Utah, a Taco Bell in Juneau, Alaska, and a Hooters in Fayetteville, Ark., typify the kinds of places the prankster hits.

Jablonski expressed concern that the con artists are getting better the longer they stay in the game.

Jablonski, who as an FBI agent was credited with getting Oklahoma City federal-building bombing suspect Terry Nichols to admit that he was more involved in the

crimes arrive to take them into custody or search their cars.

Meanwhile, with the arresting officers said to be en route, the manager is directed to strip the suspects and describe their undergarments and body parts. The scam most often is exposed for what it is when the manager, puzzled that police haven't arrived, finally calls the local police department and discovers the deception.

The damage left in the scam's wake can be costly both emotionally and legally. Angry and embarrassed employees often quit; some file lawsuits charging sexual harassment. And employee morale plummets as bonds of trust between employers and employees are ruined.

The crime also is becoming a race issue. Two of the four victims at a Wendy's units in Massachusetts were Brazilian immigrants, who told local media they were targeted because they are foreigners. In Oregon Mexican consular officials protested the targeting of Mexican restaurant workers who were strip-searched there.

McDonald's has been hit by two lawsuits stemming from the crime in recent years.

In one case three years ago in Zanesville, Ohio, a 35-year-old unit manager who had strip-searched two female employees — 18 and 19 years old — on what he testified were telephoned instructions from a police detective, was acquitted recently of misdemeanor charges of unlawful restraint and sexual imposition.

More recently, a McDonald's franchisee also emerged unscathed when a nine-count civil-rights lawsuit in federal court in Utah that alleged false imprisonment, defamation and invasion of privacy was dismissed.

In that case an 18-year-old female employee allegedly was



this. We've offered the deepest apologies to the employees, and we feel terrible for the store managers who are embarrassed that they were duped.

“Our managers thought they were responding to direct orders from the police, and we are taking the matter seriously enough to do whatever we can to help the police find the person or persons responsible.”

Bertini said managers required to jog in place in the nude in front of male and female managers under telephoned orders from a man identifying himself as a regional manager for the chain.

Richard Franey, police chief of the Abington Police Department in Massachusetts, who is one of the four Wendy's task force officials, insisted that there is no conceivable scenario in which legitimate police officers would ask restaurant managers over the phone to detain suspects, let alone strip-search them.

Investigators say the Massachusetts cases were the first in which female managers strip-searched male suspects.

Those cases also will be the first in which a charge of rape will be leveled against a suspect if he ever is brought to justice.

“I just can't get into the details, but we have consulted with the district attorney, and we are pursuing this as a case of rape,” said Flaherty, the West Bridgewater detective sergeant. “One of these incidents went a bit too far.”

Flaherty said that he had discussed the case with colleagues in other cities around the nation and was “shocked” to learn how widespread the strip-search phone scam has become.

“Oregon, Illinois, Maine, Florida,” he said, citing other states where he has been in contact with peers investigating similar cases. “Here we thought for a moment we were just dealing with a local prank, and this thing appears to be nationwide.”

Bob Bertini, a spokesman for Wendy's, said the company is prepared to pay any price to help local law enforcement in southern Massachusetts find the perpetrator. He said the company feels miserable about what happened to its employees and even sadder that its managers were tricked, but Wendy's does not intend to stay duped.

“We fell victim to a vicious scam,” Bertini said, “and words cannot express how bad we feel about all who were victimized by

Bertini said managers at Wendy's have the right to search employees suspected of theft while they are working, but the managers can demand only that suspects remove their coats, hats and shoes.

Despite the long history and widespread pattern of the crime, Flaherty said he is optimistic that a culprit will be caught.

“If we hit a dead end, we'll probably give it to the FBI,” he said. “But for the moment I think we have a lot going for us. I'm pretty optimistic.”

What fuels his optimism is that investigators know that the trickster has been making his calls on a calling card from Panama City, Fla.

Private eye Jablonski said he, too, has found a Panama City, Fla., connection in some of his cases.

He reported, for example, that in early June last year, someone using a calling card reached a Taco Bell unit manager in Juneau, Alaska, from a phone booth in Panama City, Fla.

In that case the con man pretended to be a regional manager who said he was sitting with the police and the parents of a teenage female cashier who was suspected of having drugs on her person.

The manager was ordered to give the phone to the girl, who was introduced to a police officer, who told her to follow the instructions of the unit manager who conducted the strip search.

Jablonski said the manager was on the phone with the scammer 45 minutes before he realized he was being duped.

“But the point is, whoever did this used the phone card for five hours, calling restaurants all over the country,” Jablonski said.

“Too me, this is almost like a serial crime.”

Laurie Schalow, a spokeswoman for Taco Bell, said since the incident all managers have been ordered to take the phone number of callers identifying themselves as police seeking information about employees, and to call them back to confirm the caller's identity.

Wendy's, McDonald's and Taco Bell are among the chains that have been targeted in a sexual-harassment scam that has been ongoing since 1999.

