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Carlos O'Kelly's new look

A feast for the eyes, too Wichita-based chain brightens, updates appearance

BY BILL WILSON
The Wichita Eagle

A big dose of the Wichita-based Carlos O'Kelly's Mexican restaurant chain's new look is in place in Iowa.

David and Jon Rolph's newest store in Sioux City, Iowa, has the company's new "celebrate" look, a brightly colored update of the restaurant's Mexican decor, featuring artifacts from Mexico.

The results in Sioux City are so good that with a little fine tuning, the look will begin popping up in Carlos O'Kelly's across the system, including Wichita.

"Sales have been very good, above what we hoped they'd be," said Jon Rolph, the company's executive vice president.

"We have two or three different models, different prototypes, that we've done in the system, and we're going to look at how we can incorporate these elements into those and then put a package together we can carry into our scheduled remodels."

Two years after Carlos' parent company, Sasnak Management — Kansas spelled backward — launched its public drive to repackaging its restaurants, the result is a concept with a more distinct Southwestern flavor that "really excites me," Jon Rolph said.

It's the end of a process that included a bunch of tweaks and experimentation at restaurants across the system, including locally, with new paint and other changes.

It began in late 2006 with the first pilot redesign, in a restaurant and bar in Rochester, Minn.

The company also conducted an extensive customer survey to gauge their opinion on everything from design to employee uniforms and other favorite restau-



Part of the new look that will be installed at Carlos O'Kelly's restaurants throughout the chain is a greater use of artifacts from Mexico.

Photos courtesy of Carlos O'Kelly's



The revamped restaurants, beginning in Sioux City, Iowa, will feature a brightly colored update of the restaurant's Mexican decor.

Rolph said. With 13 years there, community demographics dictated some major changes.

"The community had grown away from us," Rolph said. "So we had to decide if we stay there or if we move.

move across town, into a corner strip mall space.

The company hired Nick Langerot of Zernco in

Augusta to help design the new store, and dispatched him south of the border for ideas.

tions of authentic Mexican artwork, furniture and other artifacts, along with the more celebratory colors the Rolphs have been after for years.

It's admittedly a brand recognition tightrope, Jon Rolph said.

"We've been so successful for so long that we won't want to destroy what people know," he said.

"We want to update our look without disrupting the relationship with our customers, some who are second and third generation."

But, good restaurant operators have to keep tweaking the business to stay fresh, said Don Saylor, president of the Kansas Restaurant and Hospitality Association.

"People like to try new things," he said. "New concepts, things like that.

"Updating your decor and your menu is part of good management, and the Rolphs are good operators."