

app.

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Turning Point's turning point: Jersey Shore breakfast, lunch chain seeks franchise growth



David P. Willis
Asbury Park Press



It's the kind of pitch that may appeal to an experienced restaurateur who's tired of the grind of long days and nights that can come with owning your own place.

Forget dinner. Go breakfast, lunch and brunch instead. It's what Kirk Ruoff did after he founded Turning Point in Little Silver. Started in 1998, it has grown into a group of 21 restaurants in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware.

Now, backed by private equity firm NewSpring Capital, Ruoff, the company's chief executive officer, is franchising Turning Point Restaurants, fueling growth that will take his company into Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and Florida.

"People know the brand. People know us," said Ruoff, a Monmouth Beach resident. "They've been waiting for it and we're going to have conversations with people and if it's a good fit, we're going to move forward."



New Shore business for 2022: Hotel in Neptune? Target in Wall? Amazon and Wawa everywhere?

Turning Point has come far since Ruoff and his wife, Pam, purchased the Turning Point Coffee & Tea Salon, a failing 12-table spot on Prospect Avenue in Little Silver. For six months, he worked 80 hours a week, working a full day and night before coming home at 11 p.m.

But with his wife expecting their first child, they knew life had to change. So they, along with new chef Bonnie Iavaroni, now Turning Point's chief operating officer, decided to drop dinner service and just do breakfast and lunch. The restaurant closed at 3 p.m. "You know," Ruoff said, "to try to get our lives kind of back a little bit."

They added unique dishes, food that you can't get at a traditional diner or luncheonette, such as lobster eggs benedict or a "bacon lollipop," a piece of bacon wrapped around a Granny Smith apple slice. They served lattes and French-press coffees.

"We kind of focused on the higher-end breakfast and lunch," Ruoff said. "People liked it."

Restaurant news: Spring Lake Seafood wants to open your eyes (and mouth) to bounty of the ocean



Around 2001, he decided to open a restaurant in Holmdel Commons, a new shopping center on Route 35. "It really just took off," he said. "It was, you know, line out the door."

They knew they had something special. Over the next 20 years, they added locations, such as Brick, Manalapan and at Pier Village in Long Branch, as well restaurants outside of Monmouth County, in towns like Westfield and Hoboken.

"They were all really highly profitable, and, knock on wood, after 23 years, we've never closed a location," Ruoff said.



Last year, he opened Turning Point at Ocean County Mall in Toms River. A new restaurant also is being built at the corner of Route 35 and Deal Road in Ocean Township. That new two-story location will include the company's corporate offices, which will move from Eatontown, and a training center for franchisees.

In 2019, a private equity investment from NewSpring Capital, a firm that has backed Duck Donuts and Blo Blow Dry Bar, helped the Turning Point grow faster, providing a fresh perspective and ideas. During the pandemic's shutdown, Turning Point took a "hard look" at franchising,

"People had been asking for years," Ruoff said. "We probably would take three to four calls a week from people saying, 'Just ate at the store, I love it. I'm a restaurateur.'"



In the past, he always said no. Until now, the time just wasn't right. One reason why is he wanted to make sure he had a well-thought out plan and processes in place.

Now he has hired a vice president of franchise development. "Over the years, we've built an incredible team that could support a franchise business," Ruoff said. "You have to have a deep bullpen of people that can not only sustain what you've already built but also help people in their quest to open up their own Turning Points."



Ruoff said the company is now negotiating two franchise agreements, including one that has found a location in Pennsylvania, and is in discussion with six different groups. "We're just starting now," he said. He said he would like to have six to 12 agreements signed by the end of the year.

The company is looking for experienced restaurateurs only. The initial investment to become a franchisee ranges from \$695,000 to nearly \$1.2 million. Prospective franchisees also have to have at least \$500,000 in liquid assets and a net worth of at least \$1.5 million for each restaurant to be developed.

Meanwhile, Ruoff said Turning Point also will add its own corporate-owned restaurants in the Northeast, with three expected in 2022 and six in the pipeline for 2023.

Turning Point is a culmination of a dream that began when he was a cook a Chili's in Freehold Township. He was promoted and became the manager of Chili's in Holmdel before he had the opportunity to buy the Little Silver restaurant.

"It's like a dream come true," Ruoff said. "I'm fortunate to have incredible people around me and did my best to treat them right and they stuck around. We're at where we're at."