

RETAILING & RESTAURANTS

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Food, bowling create a winning combination

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When brothers Glenn and Gregg Uyeda considered buying an aging bowling alley in Aiea, they quickly recognized that they would have to develop a new business model to turn a profit.



Christina Failma, PBN

Glenn Uyeda shows off some of the plates that are attracting customers to The Alley restaurant in Aiea. A fast-growing food service is supporting one of Oahu's last bowling establishments.

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"Bowling is a flat business with high overhead," said Glenn Uyeda. "We knew that the only way we could make it work would be to have something else, a side business to generate income."

With Glenn's culinary background and Gregg's childhood dream of owning a bowling alley, the brothers bought **Aiea Bowl** in 2005 with a plan to add a casual restaurant, full bar and bakery to help cover the overhead for the 30,000-square-foot space.

That plan has paid off. Revenue from **The Alley** restaurant represents 60 percent of the total business and has become its own destination. Growing demand for the restaurant's food has led to a take-out window and catering business.

The Uyedas spent about \$1.5 million on renovations, adding a kitchen, restaurant, lounge and bar. They also remodeled the lanes, updated the scoring system and added a pro shop, lockers and a game arcade to the 50-year-old space in the **Aiea Shopping Center** along Aiea Heights Drive.

Despite rent of \$48,000 a month, an electric bill that can run as high as \$20,000 a month, and salary and benefits for the company's 109 employees, Glenn Uyeda said Aiea Bowl's business has grown at a rate of 25 percent a year. He said the company's catering division — with charges starting at \$20 per person — is seeing the most growth so far this year.

Glenn, 48, serves as general manager and executive chef while Gregg, 46, a periodontist, works in The Alley's kitchen twice a week.

Glenn says he and his brother were bowling alley "brats" growing up in Kahala and spent their after-school hours at Waialae Bowl. Their mother, Carol, and older sister, Stacy, also help run the business.

Glenn Uyeda, who trained at Le Cordon Bleu and is an alumnus of New York's famed Le Bernadin restaurant, and chef Shane Masutani created all the recipes for The Alley's homey dishes that have a gourmet edge.

The restaurant is open from 7 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. weekdays and closes at 10 p.m. on weekends. It sells portions in bowls (staying with the bowling theme) and plates that range in price from \$6.95 to \$14. Its best-selling dish is Uyeda's "tasty chicken" — boneless fried chicken morsels covered with a sweet, spicy Korean sauce — which requires the purchase of 3,000 pounds of chicken a week. Other popular dishes are boneless kal bi, furikake ahi and pork chops, and the menu also includes burgers, salads and pizzas.

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On the bakery side, the restaurant is known for its lemon drop crunch cake — a five-layer cake with lemon curd and toffee bits — which sells for \$38 or \$5.95 per piece. The bakery sold 250 whole lemon cakes last Thanksgiving.

“Most people come here to eat, with some of our regulars driving in from Kailua and Kaneohe, Ewa, Laie,” Glenn Uyeda said. “I thought about going into fine dining, but there’s no room because that market is tied up already. What I’ve created at The Alley is what I want to do. But I do have a fine-dining night on Tuesdays, where I get to play.”

He launched his Tasty Tuesdays event eight months ago, offering a \$38 five-course dinner menu that changes monthly. He chose Tuesday because it had been the bowling alley’s slowest day of the week. He takes reservations for up to 50 diners and keeps the rest of the restaurant open for its regular menu.

While the restaurant has taken off, the Uyedas still rely on bowling activities to attract corporate events, birthday parties and fundraisers. Bowling charges are \$16 an hour during the day, \$25 an hour at night.

“League bowling is our mainstay; they’re here every day,” Glenn Uyeda said, noting the 1,000 league bowlers who use Aiea Bowl’s lanes.

To help keep the bowling alley busy into the night, the Uyedas turn it into a nightclub four nights a week to attract the 21-and-over crowd with disco lights, glow bowling, live DJs, music, dancing, and food and drink specials.

The “Her Way Thursdays” are the Aiea Bowl’s No. 1 party attraction, where ladies bowl for free from 9:30 p.m. to 2 a.m. The nightclub averages 150 customers and has attracted as many as 450. The restaurant stays open until 1 a.m. for the events.

The bowling alley also is a venue for businesses to host corporate parties and fundraisers.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Honolulu held its annual fundraising event, Bowl for Kids Sake, at Aiea Bowl in August and raised \$175,000.

“Of the options out there, Aiea Bowl is hands-down the best venue and I can’t say enough about their food as far as variety and taste,” said Roger Higa, head of fund development and marketing for the nonprofit. “They’re very community-minded and accommodating.”

Aiea Bowl invests 10 percent of its revenue in print and radio advertising. Glenn Uyeda also worked out a deal this year with KHON2 for 50 weekly ad spots as part of a package to do live, on-air cooking demonstrations on Thursday mornings.

The company also is taking advantage of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to promote its bowling, nightclub events and food and drink specials.

“I see an instant reaction whenever I put something out on Facebook or Twitter or do an e-mail blast,” Glenn Uyeda said. “Whatever I put out there, whether it’s a \$1-off coupon for bowling or a drink special, people respond and come down.”

Small-business issue

Launching a new business to support a flat business.

Strategies

- Find a related venture that can attract a new customer base.
- Expand the new venture to attract other customer subsets.
- Devote a set portion of revenues to marketing and advertising.
- Don’t neglect the core business.

nkalani@bizjournals.com | 955-8001

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