

THE FACES OF ORGANIC

GRILLA BITES: Chico entrepreneur monkeys with the fast-food model

- Carol Ness, Chronicle Staff Writer

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You're out on the road, you're hungry, but there's nowhere to eat where the food tastes good and is made from healthy stuff.

Sound familiar?

Up in Chico, Fred Marken thinks he has the answer -- a chain of sustainable, mostly organic fast-casual cafes called Grilla Bites -- complete with an arm-swinging gorilla logo.

The name comes from the grilled sandwiches -- Tofu Grillas, Grilla "Burgers," you get the idea -- hot off the panini press, his concept's menu mainstay.

Marken, 64, opened his first Grilla Bites in downtown Chico in 2003. By the end of the month he'll have four -- two in Chico, and two more a few hours north in Medford and Ashland, Ore. The Ashland cafe is set to open May 15.

"We're rockin'," says Marken.

His idea is simple: sell the name and the concept to entrepreneurs who would run their own cafes along his guidelines -- buy locally, from sustainable producers, and buy organic as much as possible.

For his Chico cafes, he buys his organic tofu from Cal of Chico. His organic bread is made for him by Tin Roof Bakery, just across town. During the summer, especially, most of the dozens of vegetables on his salad bar and in his soups are organic, and many are grown by local farmers. The cooler is stacked with organic beer from the nearby Butte Creek Brewing Co.

The mozzarella and cheddar he uses on the Grillas aren't organic because organic cheese costs too much. The turkey and pastrami aren't organic, either.

His downtown cafe isn't as crowded as the burger joint down the street, but Marken says he's doing all right.

This is just the latest round of organic entrepreneurship for Marken. In the early

1990s, he ran a couple of organic food companies in Boston and Burlingame, making organic pasta sauce and teriyaki that he says he sold to Costco and Trader Joe's. He moved to Chico to be near family.

He's not the first to have the organic fast-casual dream. The founder of the Stonyfield Farms organic yogurt company started O'Naturals five years ago with a fast-casual cafe in Falmouth, Maine. The concept has grown to four cafes, all in New England.

A variation on the concept, O to Go, serves organic and natural sandwiches and salads in cafes and or delivers them right to your door. O to Go, started in 2004, won organic certification in February, and has outlets in Seattle, Los Angeles and Orange County.

The Bay Area has its share of organic and natural cafes.

Marken's idea, though, is to have enough Grilla Bites out there that when you're headed down the freeway with a car full of hungry kids, there's an organic option.

"We're building a brand," he says.

Grilla Bites, 119 W. 2nd St. (between Main and Broadway), Chico; (530) 894-2691.
Also 196 Cohasset Road, Chico; (530) 343-4876.

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