

NFL Players to Open 20 Denny's

Donnell Thompson is changing the face of Denny's. The former Baltimore (Indianapolis) Colts Defensive End says it's a new day at the once troubled franchise, which was sued in a class action discrimination lawsuit in 1994 for mistreating minorities.

"Denny's has changed their whole model through the leadership of chairman John Miller and the Heritage theme, which celebrates all people that make up America," said Thompson, whose operations are based in Snellville.

Thompson and Ron Wooten, a friend who played football together in high school and college, have opened 10 Denny's locations in metro Atlanta and the Carolinas so far under the company name RWDT Foods. They plan to open 20 more in the next four years.

"We are already in Gainesville, Snellville, Stockbridge and close to opening in Suwanee," Thompson said. "We are also looking at Marietta and have started the plans for one in Lithonia. We are really going to build this brand in and around Metro Atlanta."

Thompson and Wooten opened their first Denny's restaurant in 2012 in Fayetteville, North Carolina. It was a huge success, Thompson said, largely because of its location near the large Fort Bragg military base. They opened their Snellville Denny's on Jan. 29, 2015.

"We've been opening them up at a rate of about one every 90 days. I love Metro Atlanta and the people here. My wife and I live in Buckhead. I have a daughter here and grandchildren here," said Thompson. "We've got a nice little foot hole in Metro Atlanta and we look forward to building on that."

Thompson says their next Denny's will open in Suwanee in about 80 days. He says full-size stores, which usually range from about 5,000 to 7,000 square feet, usually cost just over \$1 million to open.

"There are two sides to it, the development part of the business and then the operations part. I am on both sides of the business," said Thompson. "I'm lucky and blessed to have experience on both sides of the business and I'll continue to use my experience to aid my business partner and great friend as we continue to grow this brand."

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Thompson says he enjoys representing the new face of Denny's as a black owner and operator.

"Denny's is stronger than it's ever been. I'm proud and excited to grow the brand here. We have changed the whole persona of the Denny's brand. When you come into the Denny's restaurants now it's a whole new look and feel," said Thompson. "People are often surprised to know that I am the owner of a Denny's but I enjoy surprising them and making new and returning customers out of them."

In 1994, the full-service pancake house and casual family restaurant chain settled a \$54 million discrimination lawsuit for providing inferior service to minorities, especially black people.

The class action lawsuit made history and publicized stories of black customers being forced to pay up front and wait for hours while white customers were seated immediately.

Since the historic settlement, Denny's improved its service and image.

In 2001, Fortune magazine named Denny's the "Best Company for Minorities" and in 2006 and 2007, Denny's was deemed one of Black Enterprise's "Best 40 Companies for Diversity." Denny's has more than 1,700 franchised, licensed or company-owned restaurants globally.

Thompson says stocks and profits with Denny's are doing extremely well, especially in the last three years.

Thompson says he looks forward to offering customers great prices through specials like Denny's \$2 \$4 \$6 \$8 value menu.

"We have something for everyone from seniors to kids. We love to feed people. We want people no matter who they are to have a great experience and come back and see us again and again. I guarantee when you come into one of our stores you will leave with a whole new thinking of Denny's," said Thompson, adding that the chain prides itself on restaurants that are clean inside and out and its great service. "Come as you are and enjoy some great food and even better service."