

A Trip Down Drive-Thru Lane

Fast Food Celebrates 50 Years Of Meals On Wheels



A pioneer in drive-thru dining, Jack in the Box opened this restaurant in 1951 on the main east-west thoroughfare leading to San Diego.

(NAPSA)—Fifty years ago, as drive-thru restaurants were beginning to appear in California, the term “fast food” was first used by reference book publisher Merriam-Webster.

In the 1950s, America was enjoying post-war economic prosperity and a blossoming love affair with the automobile. With more cars on California’s developing highway system and more people commuting from the growing suburbs, fast food was becoming a fitting accompaniment to the country’s new on-the-go lifestyle.

Jack in the Box is considered one of the early pioneers in the dining “a la car” concept. Credited with creating the first breakfast sandwich and portable salad, the company’s first restaurant opened in 1951 along the main east-west thoroughfare leading to San Diego.

Equipped with a drive-thru lane that featured a grinning clown head atop a two-way speaker and a few picnic tables for walk-up guests, the tiny restaurant served up 18-cent hamburgers to hungry motorists.

“The drive-thru has been the cornerstone for our success,” said Ken Williams, president and chief operating officer of Jack in the Box, Inc. “People crave convenience, yet they’re often so busy that they don’t have time to stop for a meal. In a matter of a few minutes, they can place an order,

get a freshly prepared, hot sandwich and be on their way. That’s why they call it ‘fast food.’”

Five decades after its founding, the Jack in the Box chain includes more than 1,670 restaurants in 15 states. The definition of fast food has evolved as well, as evidenced by the chain’s increasingly diverse menu. Once limited to hamburgers, shakes and french fries, its menu of fast food now includes french toast sticks, chicken fajita pitas, egg rolls and cheese sticks.

Fast-food restaurants have undergone a lot of changes, too. While their early counterparts featured simple, two-way speakers that provided poor sound quality, today’s drive-thrus feature order confirmation screens on menu boards that can project vibrant color pictures or appetizing videos of foods before or after they’re ordered.

Other changes include dual drive-thru windows that enable guests to pay for meals at one window and pick them up at another. And if guests are short on cash, more and more chains are accepting credit cards. Some are even testing payment systems that debit a guest’s account by reading signals from a cell phone.

Although other concepts combining automobiles and service have gone out of public favor, such as drive-in theaters, drive-thru dining is still going full-throttle.