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CREATIVE  
ENERGY

*Inside the nonstop mind  
of Texas Roadhouse  
CEO Kent Taylor – and  
his next big idea*

HALEY CAWTHON, 4-6

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## ‘I HAVE THIS CREATIVE PROBLEM ...’

**Kent Taylor’s restaurant concept, Jaggers, is set to open in Louisville – the latest in a long line of ideas from the serial entrepreneur**

BY HALEY CAWTHON

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Kent Taylor doesn’t sit still for very long.

The founder and CEO of Texas Roadhouse Inc. is always creating something, from designing the new “cosmic garden” at the company’s headquarters on Dutchmans Lane to developing entirely new restaurant concepts at the drop of a 10-gallon hat, one of his signature style pieces.

His latest endeavor? Developing a new fast-casual concept called Jaggers – which will open its first Louisville location on Wednesday, Dec. 9 – that has been a full-circle moment in the career of the serial entrepreneur.

Between Texas Roadhouse and Bubba’s 33 – another Taylor restaurant creation that has grown to 30 locations since its founding in 2013 – Taylor said he feels like he’s captured lightning in a bottle twice.

But he’s not done yet.

“I have this creative problem. Every few years I have to create something. ... I think I might have to go to therapy someday,” he said while laughing.

### W. Kent Taylor, troublemaker extraordinaire

Taylor began his career in the restaurant industry working for Bennigan’s in the mid-to-late 1980s and later as a manager at KFC. He said he was always pushing new ideas – such as from-scratch potato soup at Bennigan’s and hot wings at KFC – that usually got him into trouble.

“I thought I was going to really impress the big shots,” Taylor, 65, said. “I took one [KFC] store and was doing chicken sandwiches, chicken tenders, bottled water ... things that they do today that they didn’t do back then. And so when the big shots came in, I got in big trouble – big shots, big trouble – for trying to show them a new way to go.”

After that bout of rule-breaking, one of KFC’s regional managers gave Taylor a book: “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen Covey.

Taylor, who was raising two daughters on his own in Charlotte, North Carolina, at the time, realized he was more likely to get fired rather than promoted at KFC.

That’s when he decided to try and raise capital for one of his own restaurant ideas.

“One was a Texas cowboy-themed steakhouse and the other was a Colorado-themed steakhouse. And then I had Pelican Head Inn, which was a seafood concept, and a Florida salad company back when salads were a thing in the ‘80s,” Taylor said.

“I would pitch these ideas, and then in ‘91 teamed up with John Y. Brown [Jr.] (former Kentucky governor) for Buckhead Grill.”

Taylor’s first concept, Buckhead Hickory Grill – now known as Buckhead Mountain Grill – was founded in 1991 and still exists today, with locations in Jeffersonville, Indiana, and Bellevue, Kentucky.

(Note: Just before press time, Buckhead announced it was closing the Jeffersonville location on Dec. 5).

Before selling his interest in Buckhead Mountain Grill in 1994, Taylor launched the first Texas Roadhouse in Clarksville, Indiana, in 1993, with a \$300,000 investment from three Elizabethtown, Kentucky, doctors – John Rhodes, Patel Desai and Amar Desai.



KENT TAYLOR

Age: 65

Hometown: Louisville

Lives: Louisville

Education: Bachelor’s degree in business, University of North Carolina

Career history: Chairman, Texas Roadhouse, 2004-present (currently he is the interim president as well as CEO and chairman of the board); president and CEO, Texas Roadhouse, 2000-04; president, Texas Roadhouse, 1993-2000; partner, Buckhead Grill & Bar, 1991-94; area manager, KFC Corp., 1990-91; manager, Hooters, 1989-90; manager and general manager, Bennigan’s, 1983-89

Family: Two daughters, a son and four grandchildren

Hobbies: Skis 40 to 50 days a year; bikes because his knees don’t allow him to run any longer; watersports, specifically water skiing and boating

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## ON THE MENU

Kent Taylor said that when developing Jagers' menu offerings, they focused on the grind and the percentage of fat in the beef, as well as the texture and flavor of the buns that are baked on site. Additionally, Jagers' menu features freshly prepared salads — which goes against the prepackaged offerings of competitors.

Jagers also offers crispy and grilled chicken sandwiches and chicken tenders, with house-made sauces like the tangy Jagers sauce.

As far as sides, the restaurant has a few uncommon items for a fast-casual spot, such as macaroni and cheese and edamame.

For dessert, Jagers has milkshakes in seven different flavors, chocolate chip cookies and triple chocolate brownies.

## WHAT'S WITH THE NAME?

Kent Taylor has a thing for names.

He had a dog named Max and then later named the dance club he created in 1979 Maximilian's. In 1995, he named his son Max.

Aspen Creek was named in honor of his favorite hobby, skiing, and Bubba's 33 is derived from a nickname, Bubba, that was given to him by Texas Roadhouse employees in 1999.

Jagers is no exception — and no, it's not named after Mick Jagger.

According to the Collins English Dictionary, a jagger is a peddler of goods, which is a fancy word for entrepreneur. The name Jagers is an ode to Taylor's uncle, Bill Taylor, who was a serial entrepreneur.

Uncle Bill was involved in everything from operating cleaners, liquor stores and nightclubs to selling real estate and condominiums. He even found time to peddle Christmas trees from lots around his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky.

Taylor said his uncle was, and still is, a jagger.



## Giving competitors 'what for'

For a while, Taylor's creative energy was focused on developing the Texas Roadhouse brand, which had its hiccups. Early on, three of the restaurant's five locations failed, and he had to revamp the menu and look of the restaurants to grow the concept into what it is today, with about 600 restaurants and 70,000 employees.

But, a few years after Texas Roadhouse was taken public in 2004, Taylor's ideas for other new restaurant concepts resurfaced. He revisited the Colorado-themed steakhouse with Aspen Creek in 2009, but ultimately decided to sell it, too, because he thought it competed too closely with Texas Roadhouse. Shortly thereafter, the idea for Bubba's 33 "floated to the top," Taylor said. Well, it actually was sparked by a fateful trip to a CEO summit.

Bubba's 33, a sports bar concept featuring pizza, burgers and wings that takes its name from Taylor's nickname is still growing, having opened five locations since the third quarter of 2019.

"Let's just say the leaders of Outback and Applebee's were there and maybe not so friendly because we compete directly with them, and some of their people had left them and come our way," Taylor said. "For some reason, the leader of Buffalo Wild Wings, who was buddies with those two, was with the 'anti-Kent' crowd. So that night, I was in my hotel room and got a piece of paper out and was saying, 'Why don't we show Buffalo Wild Wings [the] what for?' ... and that's how Bubba's actually got created."

It's that independent, entrepreneurial spirit that Jackson Andrews, managing director of Endeavor Louisville, said makes Taylor a natural fit to serve on the business accelerator's board.

"Having Kent as a mentor to Endeavor Entrepreneurs is invaluable for both the insights and inspiration he brings to the table. He is the real deal and understands from his experiences where an entrepreneur is coming from regardless of industry," Andrews said. "The late Mr. [David] Jones Sr. [co-founder of Humana Inc.] and our founding chair actually recruited Kent to the Endeavor board. As Kent is an apex entrepreneur, it is a natural fit with Endeavor where we push entrepreneurs to think bigger, scale up, and give back."

## A full-circle career moment

Unable to stem his ingenuity, Taylor decided to launch a yet another new concept in 2015: Jagers.

"I've always been impressed with Chick-fil-A, and maybe not as impressed with Burger King or Wendy's," he said. "I also really liked the burgers at Five Guys, so I thought, 'What if Chick-fil-A and Five Guys got married and had a kid? What would it look like?'"

The relatively new, fast-casual concept marks Taylor's return to the quick-service restaurant segment 30 years since he left KFC. Now, he gets to call the

shots, which means made-from-scratch food that he's proud to serve.

If you aren't familiar with the Jagers name, it's because Taylor first built the concept in Indianapolis. He said picked Indiana's capital because it was close enough that he could drive to it and work at the restaurant, but also far enough away that if Jagers failed, he wouldn't have to hear about it from all of his Louisville friends.

Five years and two successful Indianapolis-area restaurants later, Taylor is bringing Jagers home so he can continue to monitor how the new concept performs.

The 3,000-square-foot Louisville Jagers at 6464 Dutchmans Parkway was built atop a parking lot that was formerly home to a Texas Roadhouse restaurant, which has moved to a new location.

Like Taylor's earlier comment suggests, his vision is to combine several top-notch, fast-casual concepts into one. Some fast food joints have a good burger, others have the best chicken strips and another may have excellent salad, but not one has all three, he said.

## Looking to the future

Since the coronavirus pandemic began in March, dine-in restaurants like Texas Roadhouse have been hit hard by government restrictions. As a result, consumers have turned to restaurants with drive-thru, to-go and delivery capabilities.

Texas Roadhouse's to-go sales jumped to 25% of its overall sales due to the crisis, and while dining room traffic has picked back up, the company has adapted many of its normal operations. Taylor said Texas Roadhouse has added glass partitions between booths, converted "corrals" (waiting areas) into to-go areas and packaged its signature peanuts that were previously in communal buckets and barrels.

The company is even testing drive-thru operations at a few of its restaurants.

Notably, because of the uptick in fast food sales during the pandemic, Taylor said he sees high-growth potential in the fast-casual sphere, which is good news for a concept like Jagers.

Taylor said Jagers allows him to create a vehicle for franchising, something that Texas Roadhouse hasn't experimented much with, as the majority of its restaurants are company-owned. He wants to see how the new Louisville location performs first, before considering expansion opportunities.

Even with the uncertainty the pandemic has brought, Taylor is still pushing forward, advocating for innovation from his fellow "Roadies," an affectionate nickname for the company's employees.

"I encourage us to have creative people that try creative things, and so a lot of ideas I'm working on currently are thoughts that have come from some of our creative people," he said. "But news on that later."