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Owners of fast-food chain Roy Rogers want to make a Philadelphia comeback

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The owners of Roy Rogers want the brand to make its Philadelphia comeback, but will the market bite? Experts say nostalgia could play in the fast-food-chain's favor, although it is debatable if that will be enough to bring about success.

In its heyday, there were more than 60 Roy Rogers locations in the Philadelphia region, including 25 in Philadelphia city limits. And, in South Jersey, there were at least 17 more outposts.



Roy Rogers. ROY ROGERS

That's a different story now. The number of Roy Rogers locations in the Philadelphia and South Jersey markets declined dramatically in the 1990s when former parent company Hardee's – unable to convert existing Roy Rogers to Hardee's locations – sold off the real estate to the fast-casual chain now known as Boston Market.

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Other restaurants in other markets were sold to Wendy's, Burger King and McDonald's through 1996. The number of Roy Rogers locations dropped from 650 to only about 75 franchised locations in 2002 when current parent company The Plamondon Companies purchased the brand from Imasco, former parent company of Hardee's.

Now, the restaurants closest to Philadelphia proper are located in Elverson in Chester County, on the New Jersey Turnpike and the Atlantic City Expressway, and in Allentown in Lehigh County.

The Plamondon Companies, from the time it acquired the company to the past few years, has been rebuilding the brand. Part of the rebrand included pruning the number of locations to about 40 for quality control, i.e. weeding the "bad" operators out of the system, according to [Jim Plamondon](#), who was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and now owns the company with brother Pete Plamondon Jr.

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Their father, Pete Plamondon Sr. was one of the Marriott executives who created Roy Rogers. Plamondon was recruited to Marriott in 1965 from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., to head up the Roy Rogers division.

It was only in roughly the last two years when the company started opening locations that the Roy Rogers brand started its comeback. This year six restaurants opened – three in New Jersey, one in Virginia and two in Maryland. In 2015, two locations opened, in Maryland and New Jersey.

"It started hitting the tipping point where the brand is growing again," Jim Plamondon told the Philadelphia Business Journal.

Now there are 54 restaurants in six states – 24 corporate and 30 franchised locations. The restaurants are located in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

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There are no leases in the works yet for the Philadelphia market, but a franchise agreement was signed for a new restaurant in Matamoras in Pike County, Pennsylvania, meant to increase the chain's presence in the state.

It's slated to open in spring 2017. The franchisee owns three other New Jersey locations.

The Plamondon Companies will rebuild the Roy Rogers brand in the Philadelphia market in multiple ways, including:

- Leveraging technology like mobile apps and social media to reach a broader geographic and demographic audience more readily and regularly
- Leveraging existing sites Philadelphia residents are likely to visit like those on the Atlantic City Expressway and New Jersey Turnpike (these locations are operated by HMSHost)
- Investing in marketing campaigns, including professional sports sponsorships

"Philly was a very successful market for Roy Rogers," Plamondon said. "About 80 percent of the units were in the Northeast, and up and down the 95 corridor. We're going to expand in the mid-Atlantic where we know it was successful."

The strategy is to open up to six restaurants a year for the next five years. They will be a mix of corporate and franchise locations, but franchised locations are a

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"smarter way to grow" in the Philadelphia and New Jersey markets, Plamondon said.

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The challenge will be finding qualified management – owner/operators living in and familiar with those markets, who can find the real estate and recruit the staff.

Plamondon, however, said he feels "very strongly about the Philadelphia market because of the history that Marriott had, and the success they've had."

A fondness for the restaurant experiences of one's youth may play a part in Roy Rogers' success in the Philadelphia market, according to experts.

"Roy Rogers is one of those hallowed brands from our youth that, for most people, holds a high degree of equity," said Steven H. Gartner, managing director of retail at CBRE. "It may be the first place most of us ever experienced fast food. For the last while, it has only lived at interstate rest stops."

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"Others have tried to resurrect dormant brands in the area, including Gino's and Horn & Hardart, and did not succeed, but I'd love to see the Double-R-Bar Burger come back," Gartner said.

There may be some "residual good will" for the Roy Rogers brand in the market, which could give the brand an advantage over other players that do not have a history in the local market, according to Wesley S. Roehl, professor of tourism management at Temple University's School of Sport, Tourism & Hospitality Management.

The major quick-service restaurants have **relatively low levels** of penetration in Pennsylvania and New Jersey compared to the rest of the United States, Roehl said in an earlier interview.

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"Their big question is how much good will towards their brand remains since they have been absent from the Philadelphia market for some time, and the brand's last years in the area were characterized by poor performance and poor service," Roehl said of Roy Rogers.

One expert, however, is not convinced of Roy Rogers' future in the Philadelphia market.

"It is very much an old school, dated restaurant concept and brand which would likely have no resonance or relevance with today's core family restaurant customer base – millennial families," said Mark Lang, associate professor of marketing at St. Joseph's University.

"This is likely another example of a finance play rather than a food one," he said.

Kenneth Hilarlo covers hospitality, restaurants and takes on general assignments and breaking news.

