



Anthony Leone / Photo by Bob Giglione

Pudgie's gets naked

By: [David Winzelberg](#) August 19, 2014 0

Following a name change and new menu, [Pudgie's](#) has once again taken wing on Long Island.

The chain, known as Pudgie's Famous Chicken, has been newly rebranded as Pudgie's Naked Chicken, which opened its first prototype restaurant at 7 Hicksville Road in Massapequa last month. Its owners are seeking franchisees for as many as 30 more Naked Chickens throughout Nassau and Suffolk counties within the next few years.

Once best known for its skinless fried chicken and barbecued ribs, the revamped Pudgie's has added grilled chicken, chicken burgers, salads, sandwiches, rice bowls and more.

Gary Occhiogrosso, President & CDO of Manhattan-based [TruFoods](#), which bought the Pudgie's chain, as well as Arthur Treacher's and Wall Street Deli, in 2007, said the company struggled in its efforts to sell franchises under the old Pudgie's take-out-only model and decided to reinvent the chain, giving the business an extensive makeover.

"In the '80s and '90s, the dining experience was different," Occhiogrosso said. "But now we needed to build restaurants that had seating. We had to change the menu and have healthier options."

To assist the relaunch, TruFoods has added veteran restaurant franchisor Anthony Leone as COO. Leone founded New York City-based Energy Kitchen, which had a 16-year run before closing last year.

A former district manager for chicken specialist Boston Market, Leone said the name recognition for such a popular brand as Pudgie's is still a plus, but the new concept is designed to have a much broader appeal.

"It's right for now because there is something for everyone," Leone said.

While the chain had as many as 40 area locations in its heyday in the 1990s, there are just five Pudgie's Famous Chicken franchised stores remaining on Long Island: East Islip, West Islip, Selden, Smithtown and Valley Stream. Occhiogrosso said the franchisees of those stores will have the option to convert to the new Naked Chicken format or stay the same.

One of those franchisees, Aman Singh, who owns the Pudgie's on Main Street in East Islip, said he has already begun incorporating much of the new menu offerings there.

"I think this change from Pudgie's is past due," Singh said. "We pushed them to open more stores to create more awareness. I think this will help turn it around."

Occhiogrosso, a former Dunkin Donuts franchisee who helped launch the Ranch One chicken fast-food chain, admitted Pudgie's Naked Chicken will face several obstacles, especially getting customers to understand that the food is assembled fresh and takes a few minutes to prepare – most customers expect fast food to be served in under a minute, Occhiogrosso lamented – and finding qualified franchisees.

All-in costs for a Pudgie's Naked Chicken franchise range from \$220,000 to \$620,000 depending on location. The ideal space is between 1,800 and 2,400 square feet in a grocery-anchored shopping center or a downtown business district with ample foot traffic. For the moment, the company is focusing its franchising efforts in Nassau, Suffolk and Queens.

"The goal is to take it regionally and then nationally," Leone said.

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