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On Location: Restaurants Go Hollywood

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Restaurants provide a unique microcosm of life, and for that reason, filmmakers often use restaurants as backdrops. But before you get your operation ready for its close-up, take two to consider some less-than-glamorous details associated with movie-making.

By Keith W. Strandberg

As restaurants have become an integral part of the American landscape, foodservice operations — from fine-dining establishments (in *Moonstruck* and *Big Night*) to diners (featured in *Diner* and "Happy Days") to coffeehouses (in "Friends," and "Frasier") — have become fixtures in movies and television shows.

Movie production continues to expand beyond its once-traditional home of Southern California, giving more and more restaurants around the country the opportunity to serve as locations for feature films, television shows and commercials. This article provides a script for operators who may want to offer their restaurant as a movie location the next time Hollywood comes to town.

There's no business like show business

Almost all production companies prefer to shoot scenes on location as opposed to a Hollywood backlot, according to movie insiders. Although a set allows producers and directors to control cost and a host of other variables, such as lighting, camera placement and sound, a real location provides viewers with ambience and character.

"Artie Bucco's place in 'The Sopranos' used to be a real restaurant, a restaurant called Punta Dura in Astoria, Queens, although in most of the [2000–2001] season, the restaurant was reproduced and filmed on a stage," says Mark Kamine, a Montclair, N.J.–based location manager for "The Sopranos," and the motion pictures *The Hurricane* and *Men in Black II*. "We were going to be doing so much work there, they decided to build it instead. It's very expensive to build sets, so...if you are only going to shoot a couple of days, it makes sense to shoot on location. . . . We've shot 20 or 30 restaurants during the run of 'The Sopranos,' and there is no way we could have built that many restaurants with that many looks."

For the restaurant, the added exposure and additional income can counterbalance the inconvenience of disrupting the day-to-day business of running an operation. Having recognizable cast members on site also can enhance your restaurant's reputation. However, your restaurant will be shut down completely during prerigging (preparing the location for the shoot), the actual scene shooting and striking (breaking down equipment). A day or two of filming might boost business through media exposure, but an extended period of downtime potentially could disrupt business.

"If you are featured in a movie, a TV show or even on the evening news, you get your brand out there," says Pat Warner, director of communications for Waffle House, Inc., a chain of 1,350 units headquartered in Norcross, Ga. Waffle House restaurants have been featured in movies like *Tin Cup* and the new Britney Spears feature, music videos, television shows and newscasts. "People know Waffle House, but they may not have gone to eat there lately. They see it in a movie or on TV, and it piques their interest. Any time you are in a movie in a positive light, it has to help your brand," says Warner.

Jamba Juice has had its share of movie and TV appearances, both as a store location and through product placement. "Taping on location is really a motivator and a great uplifter for the entire employee team. They are all invigorated by having people from the world of Hollywood in their store," says Jim Mizes, vice president of

operations for the Jamba Juice Company, based in San Francisco. "When the movie or TV show airs, you have brand recognition and brand awareness that you wouldn't have had before. It's great to see people who are admired using our product."

The color of money

"All production companies know that this is a business for everyone involved," says Crystal Palmer, director of the Washington DC Office of Motion Picture & TV. Here are some things to keep in mind when a production company calls.

- **Compensation.** Normally, the cost of renting a restaurant is based on the establishment's daily intake. Factor in the time it will take to prerig, shoot and strike. "Some restaurants will cut their rate in exchange for their name and logo being featured prominently [in the final scene cut]," says Palmer. "If your establishment is so unique, you could probably charge a premium price based on that."

In order to save money, many production companies might be willing to shoot during nonpeak hours or even when the restaurant normally closes for business. "Almost always, we need the restaurant to shut down," says Kamine. "We ask what they usually make, and we pay them that amount plus something extra, and it's all negotiable. If we want to use the name in dialogue, then maybe that's worth something to the restaurant owner, and we'd look for a little bit of a break," he says.

"[For example], I had a restaurant we shot last year, called Paris Commune in New York City, where [The Sopranos' characters] Meadow and her boyfriend went to dinner," says Kamine. "The [owners] offered to discount the price substantially if we used their name. David Chase, the head writer and executive producer, is very particular about the dialogue, and he won't put something in the dialogue that doesn't flow with the story or the language. In that circumstance, we couldn't put the name of the restaurant in, so we paid the higher fee. They understood that."

The movie *Traffic* approached the owners of Fio's restaurant in San Diego about shooting a scene on the patio. "This was the first project that came in and bought us out," says Jack Berkman, general partner with Pamela Gerhardt of Fio's. "We're only open at night, and they shot here during the afternoon, so it was pure profit. It was a great opportunity to have a lot of activity going on during the day. Lots of local people stopped [by], and it was a real showcase. We would do it again in a heartbeat. We got lots of press locally about it, and we got some nice mentions. In San Diego, everyone knew that Fio's patio was in a major scene in *Traffic*."

"When you are talking about location fees, restaurant owners should try to get more than the day's receipts," says Jan Talamo, chief creative officer of the advertising agency STAR Group, and owner of Catelli Ristorante in Voorhees, N.J.

Talamo has shot many spots in other restaurants, but has never allowed his own restaurant to be used as a location. "I know how places can get trashed by crews. To have a crew come in and shoot in our restaurant — which is a beautiful restaurant and has great shooting potential — would create a major inconvenience for our customers," he says. "You have to weigh the pros and cons of allowing people to shoot in your place. If the director likes the look, and they really think it makes sense to shoot there, then you can ask a premium. If you usually do \$4,000 on a Monday, look for 1.5 times that."

Junior's Restaurant in New York City didn't charge a fee when it was used as a backdrop for "Good Morning America," an LL Cool J music video and other productions. "If it doesn't inconvenience the restaurant, we don't usually charge," says owner Alan Rosen. "We see it as a benefit to the restaurant. When they do shoot in your restaurant, make sure you are there, because production crews don't have any regard for your business or your property. They aren't worried about how quickly you get open [again]."

- **Insurance.** A production company might have to reconfigure your restaurant's interior for the setup and tear down of shooting, which often causes damage to walls, ceilings, floors, etc. Make sure the production company has at least a \$1 million liability-insurance policy. Ask to be added as an additional insured, and keep a copy of the insurance certificate in your files. Location contracts also should stipulate that the production company will repair any damage to the interior at its cost.

- **Content.** Although a restaurateur may not be able to review a script, he or she should ask about the gist of the

scene to discern whether something controversial might take place. "If there is something controversial going on, like a fight or a loud confrontation, we'll tell them upfront so there is no misunderstanding," says Kamine. "The last thing we want is to be in the middle of a scene and find out that the restaurant [owner] is offended. . . .We try to work it all out in advance so everyone knows what to expect."

Because a restaurant's reputation is of utmost importance, an owner should be protective of how his or her operation is portrayed on film. Having something like a bloody fight scene or characters who curse a lot happen in your restaurant might only take a day to shoot, but could stay in the public's collective memory forever.

"We would never have any negative scenes shot in a Waffle House," says Warner. "We look at each project individually, and we are very protective of our brand. We want Waffle House to be portrayed in a positive light. We want script approval and veto power. We make sure to have our people there during a shoot, and they have the power to stop the shooting if something is not right. If a production company is just looking for a restaurant for a set, we respectfully decline. If they want to use Waffle House for Waffle House, we want to hold true to what our customers expect," he says. "For example, some productions want our restaurants to serve pancakes, but we don't serve pancakes, so we wouldn't allow that."

Tom Carran, general manager of Planet Hollywood in New York City, agrees. "The first thing you want to do is make sure the restaurant is pictured in a positive manner," he says. "If it's going to depict your brand in a way that isn't right for your market, it might work in an opposite way."

Given its name, Planet Hollywood is more open than many restaurants to being used as a location. At the same time, however, even Planet Hollywood has to be a restaurant first and foremost. "Set parameters for the production company before you get started," says Carran. "They are used to . . . stretching the envelope, but if you set the parameters before they go in, you reduce the problems."

Gallagher's Steakhouse in New York City recently was a principal location for the television movie Monday Night Mayhem. "If you can get some brand recognition, I think you should do it," says Bryan Reidy, general manager. "If a film crew picks your restaurant for filming, it's an honor. . . .Negotiate a little to get a mention, or a credit at the end of the movie, an exterior shot, something with your name on it. You have to work with them, keep on top of them, watch what they are doing. They are there to make a movie, and you should be present to see how they are using your facility."

- Reputation. Check out the production company to make sure it's on the level. Search on the Internet under the production company name or call your local film office to verify its reputation. "You should contact your local film office in your state or city," says the Washington DC Office of Motion Picture & TV's Palmer. "When a film company comes into town, we require that they do certain things to get a permit from the government, and that would weed out companies that aren't on the up and up."

Great expectations

Once you've double-checked that the production company is bona fide and negotiated a contract, here's what to expect on the day of shooting.

Lots of people. A film crew can include 40 to more than 200 people — all of whom will traipse through your restaurant. "You'll have grips [workers responsible for moving things] and gaffers [electricians] walking around, not being careful, doing what they normally do," says Talamo. "The question is whether you want to benefit from the publicity. . . .If you milk the exposure, it can be a huge benefit. Any time the movie is played in that marketplace, it can have a tremendous amount of value."

The Waffle House makes sure its customers are not inconvenienced by the shooting. "Our restaurants are relatively small, about 44 seats, and we don't want to do anything that disrupts the restaurant," says Warner. "We ask production companies to reimburse us if we have to shut the restaurant down. Often, we will [direct] the customers to another Waffle House that is close by. [It's] the customers [who] are going to be coming back day after day, not the film crew, so we have to take care of our customers."

Before you agree to let someone from Hollywood shoot in your restaurant, make sure you get everything spelled out very clearly. "One, you want to understand how much time they are going to be in your location, and what their expectations are," advises Jamba Juice's Mizes. "When they do film on site, we make sure it's not happening at peak times. . . .The key is to be aware of balancing the needs of the entertainment industry and the needs of the

customers. Customers are very forgiving when they see it's Hollywood involved."

Barbara Sukmonowski, director of sales and marketing for The Stanhope Park Hyatt in New York City, advises any restaurant owner to be as involved as possible. The Stanhope Park Hyatt is a frequent location for movies and television shows filming in New York City. "Make sure your manager is involved in every step, from location to contract to the actual filming itself," she says. "There are so many details, and you want to always have the control. Don't leave anything to chance. Things can happen, and you have to make sure you are in contact with the people doing the filming."

- **Changes.** Sometimes production companies will make improvements to the restaurant that you want to keep. "They may actually improve your restaurant, so you might not want them to strike what they do," says Palmer. "They might give your restaurant a face lift, paint or put in wood molding, and you might want them to leave it up."

"We've never allowed anyone to change the restaurant," says Rosen of Junior's. "It would have to be a benefit that they could leave here. If it were for the good of the operation of the restaurant, I would probably do it. We're in the restaurant business first and foremost, we're not in the movie business."

- **Damage.** If there will be any kind of action sequences shot, like hand-to-hand fights or gunplay, make it clear that any damage must be repaired by the production company.

For example, when the 1996 action movie *SuperFights* was being filmed in Harrisburg, Pa., the script called for a man to fall through the picture window at Chopsticks House, a Chinese restaurant serving as a location. The owner of the restaurant made sure the location contract stipulated that his restaurant would be returned to its original condition. The stunt coordinator replaced the window with candy glass for the scene, then put the real glass back into the frame after the scene was filmed.

- **Noise.** Keep in mind that when shooting is going on, movie and television companies need absolute quiet to record sound. If your refrigerators run loudly, you might have to turn them off and make alternate arrangements for food storage.
- **Catering.** Offer to cater meals during the production company's stay. This can provide an additional source of income and keep your employees working during filming.

A star is born

If you've been bitten by the Hollywood bug, the first step to getting your restaurant featured in a film or television program is to put the word out that you're interested. "If they want their property listed, restaurants can call us," says Marsha Fetsko, administrative officer with the Pennsylvania Film Office in Harrisburg. "We don't go out and solicit listings, but if a film company comes into Pennsylvania and wants to film in a restaurant, if I know a restaurant is interested, we'll contact [that restaurant] first."

Talamo advises providing the film office with background information about the restaurant, such as location, size, style and any unique aspects, such as a view of the U.S. Capitol. "Take digital pictures [of the interior and exterior of your operation] and give them to the film office for their files," he says.

Warner says restaurants should consider every project individually, and make decisions based on the script. "If your restaurant is going to be shown in a positive light, you should consider it," he says. "We get requests for acts of violence to happen in the restaurant or not-so-family dialogue, and we turn those down. For every five requests, we turn down four. It's your brand out there. You don't want your restaurant linked to something bad that happened in a movie, because people remember that."

Having a film or TV production company shoot in your restaurant can be glamorous, as well as inconvenient. But if the movie is a success or the television show becomes a hit like *"The Sopranos,"* your operation could benefit from the additional exposure. After all, people do want to eat where stars dine — even if those stars were playing someone else.

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