



Colleen Greer, manager of the Savin Rock Roasting Co. in Stratford, where the restaurant chain is headquarters, gets ready to seat customers. *Photo: Contributed Photo / Connecticut Post*

## Savin Rock Roasting heats up state

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Less than a year after opening its second location in Stratford, Savin Rock Roasting Co. has opened two more restaurants with plans for another two in Stamford and Bridgeport.

"I believe the market continues to be ripe for good, old-fashioned American comfort food," said Joseph Collier, Savin Rock's founder. "People want great food with great value, like our turkey, beef and pastrami -- all cooked overnight in old-fashioned commercial cookers so the meat is juicy, extremely tender and full of flavor. It is the exact opposite of today's typical fast food."

Collier's popular restaurant opened in West Haven in 2007 and has continued to be a draw in this Long Island Sound beach community. The restaurant is named in honor of the West Haven waterfront neighborhood where it's located and the old amusement park that once rivaled Coney Island. The decor and menu carry the Savin Rock park motif, and you can order sandwiches such as the Thunderbolt, named for the old roller coaster.

In February, Collier, who has formed a holding company with Tony and Gabe Villano and Luciano and Lorenzo Coletta, all veteran restaurateurs, opened the Stratford Savin Rock. The company has let no moss grow under its feet, opening restaurants at 120 New Canaan Ave., in Norwalk, in the former Costa Brava Spanish restaurant, and one in Hartford. There are Savin Rocks planned for Bridgeport and Stamford openings this year.

Allen Christopher, chairman of Savin Rock Roasting 2 Inc., said the new company decided to use the economy to its advantage to build a strong Connecticut restaurant chain.

"It's pretty simple," he said. "There were a lot of restaurants behind on rent and on the bubble."

He said the Savin Rock group goes in, talks to the owner and the landlord about reworking the lease deal and then creates a new limited liability company that the former owner can become a minority partner in. Then, Savin Rock remodels the restaurant, trains the staff and opens.

Christopher said the deal is predicated on the kitchen being in good condition.

Costs are held down this way, he said, noting it would take more than \$100,000 to open a small restaurant from scratch. He would not disclose investment data on the build-out of new restaurants. This is a private business and the costs of renovating and opening are being handled with "a pass of the hat among the investors," Christopher said.

He also said the partners in the company know a lot of contractors and also have received good deals on labor and materials in an economy where many construction crews have been idled.

The bad economy makes it tough to raise money, but the group knows each other and has found ways around the tough market conditions.

Christopher, a local developer and founder of the proposed Dogstar Studios in Stratford, was working with the Villanos and Colettas as a real estate and business consultant. His Dogstar project, though stalled in bankruptcy, is moving forward, he said and there will be more news on that later this year.

The Savin Rock model is proving successful, he said.

"The Norwalk business is holding its own. It's in the black." That Savin Rock opened in August.