

# Entrepreneur

## How a Customer and a Restaurateur Teamed Up to Bring Amsterdam Falafelshop to Boston

*Franchise Players is Entrepreneur's Q&A interview column that puts the spotlight on franchisees. If you're a franchisee with advice and tips to share, email [ktaylor@entrepreneur.com](mailto:ktaylor@entrepreneur.com).*

Back in college, Matt D'Alessio was a frequent customer at Amsterdam Falafelshop, a fast-casual, late-night eatery. Years later, after graduating and moving to Boston, he had the chance to introduce his friends and family to the chain by becoming a franchisee. D'Alessio teamed up with veteran restaurateur Laurence Wintersteen to open the first Amsterdam Falafelshop in Boston. Together, the pair is now growing the concept in the greater Boston area. Here's what they've learned.



**Name:** Matt D'Alessio and Laurence Wintersteen

**Franchise owned (location):** Matt owns the existing Amsterdam Falafelshop location in Boston's Davis Square neighborhood. Matt and Laurence will be opening a forthcoming shop in Boston's Kenmore Square neighborhood.

### How long have you owned a franchise?

The Davis Square location opened in July of 2012. The Kenmore Square location is projected to open in March.

### Why franchising?

**Laurence:** Having a background in the restaurant industry, I had always considered investing in a franchise concept. In fact, when I owned a series of sandwich shops in Boston, I was approached by a large restaurant group about franchising my business. In a moment of enlightenment, I realized that I rather be on the ground as a franchisee that serve in the role of franchisor.

When I was introduced to Amsterdam Falafelshop and learned the business had begun franchising, I was ready to move forward with launching the franchise location in Kenmore Square. Now, Matt and I are looking to grow the concept throughout the greater Boston area.

**Matt:** I was not exploring franchise opportunities when I chose to move forward with bringing the first Amsterdam Falafelshop to Boston. While I had expressed an interest in owning and operating my own

business, I was holding down a corporate job and hadn't begun the process of looking at business opportunities.

When I learned Amsterdam Falafelshop had begun franchising, everything changed. I was convinced that this was the right concept for me. Before proceeding with the investment, I had friends in the restaurant and franchise industry review the documentation and provide their sign-off that I should move forward. From there, I connected with Laurence who shared my enthusiasm for all things Amsterdam Falafelshop. We met with the founders, Arianne and Scott Bennett, signed the paper work, and we haven't looked back since.

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#### **What were you doing before you became a franchise owner?**

**Laurence:** Prior to signing-on with Amsterdam Falafelshop, I owned five Pressed Sandwich shops in Boston. I sold the businesses and launched a company called Caliber Marketing Investments, which owns and develops residential properties and takes equity positions in startup companies in the consumer products, technology and healthcare sectors. While building Caliber Marketing Investments, I kept pace with new restaurant concepts, especially in the fast-casual space. I knew the market conditions were right for a concept like Amsterdam Falafelshop as soon as I became introduced to the business.

**Matt:** I was in a quasi-consulting role with Northeast Energy Efficiency Partnerships (NEEP), a regional non-profit that increases and coordinates energy efficiency and market transformation efforts. Prior to joining NEEP, I spent a year teaching skiing lessons in Colorado. I also spent time traveling throughout South America.

#### **Why did you choose this particular franchise?**

**Laurence:** Amsterdam Falafelshop was an appealing investment for several reasons. For one, the product is sensational. The sandwiches are made-to-order with fresh, high-quality ingredients. Secondly, the vibe in the restaurant is magnetic. Customers line-up down the block to reserve a seat in our shop.

There was no doubt that the market conditions were right for Amsterdam Falafelshop to succeed in Boston and throughout the country. The fast casual space has been growing steadily for a number of years. On top of that, the trend towards menu specialization and customization has been gaining in popularity. Today's consumer wants healthy options that can be customized to appease their dietary needs and restrictions. While our menu is focused, we offer a broad range of combinations that appeal to all types of diners.

**Matt:** I have been passionate about Amsterdam Falafelshop from the very beginning. In fact, I become nostalgic when I think back to my initial experience dining at the shop while I was in undergrad at George Mason University. Years after graduating, I knew that I wanted to bring the brand's incredible falafel sandwiches to Boston so my friends and family could try them. My passion for the business is what drove me to raise the capital needed to move forward with the investment.

#### **How much would you estimate you spent before you were officially open for business?**

**Laurence:** The estimated initial cost of an Amsterdam Falafelshop franchise ranges from \$365,400 to \$493,450, which includes the build-out, certain start-up expenses and the initial franchise fee, which is \$29,500 for the first store.

#### **Where did you get most of your advice/do most of your research?**

**Laurence:** I have been involved with the restaurant industry for years. My parents were food critics for a newsletter about the New York restaurant scene. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit and review hundreds of restaurants. These experiences helped shape my career.

In addition to the experience gained as a child, I have a number of friends in the restaurant business that have offered me guidance and support as we grow and develop Amsterdam Falafelshop throughout the area.

**Matt:** Arianne and Scott Bennett have served as important mentors to us as we build and grow our restaurant units. There is no one that wants us to succeed more than Arianne and Scott. Our success is their success.

In addition to the Bennett's, I have also received advice from a close friend that owns multiple restaurants throughout Boston. My former little league coach and family friend has also been instrumental throughout this process. He owns multiple McDonald's and has been able to share invaluable advice about the industry and how we should proceed when faced with certain obstacles.

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**What were the most unexpected challenges of opening your franchise?**

**Laurence:** Finding the right real estate has proven challenging. In the fast-casual sector, securing a-ranked real estate between 2,500 to 3,500 square feet is highly competitive. We eventually secured real estate for both of our restaurants but the process has been rigorous.

The other major challenge has been securing the documents and certifications needed to open a restaurant. We filed the necessary paperwork 10 months ago and yet, we are still waiting on certain inspections so we can move forward with opening our new shop.

**Matt:** The process to building and opening a restaurant can be drawn out. It can be months or even years before you get to the point where you are serving customers. For this reason, it is important to have the capital needed to fight through all the red tape.

**What advice do you have for individuals who want to own their own franchise?**

**Laurence:** I would advise anyone exploring business ownership opportunities to be patient. The process can be arduous but the pay off is certainly worth it.

My other piece of advice would be to find a concept that you are passionate about. Reservations about the business will make the entire process more challenging. To find the right business, it is imperative to do adequate research.

**Matt:** I would recommend other prospective franchisees consider investing in an emerging concept. There is value to getting in on the ground floor so you can have a greater impact on the direction of the business.

**Q: What's next for you and your business?**

**Matt:** We are preparing to grow Amsterdam Falafelshop throughout Boston.

Later this month, we will be opening our new shop in Kenmore Square with a massive grand opening event. Looking ahead, we are looking to open additional units throughout the Greater Boston market.

Right now, before we begin planning to open any additional units, we want to guarantee both shops are performing at a high level. We are busy hiring, training and helping with the day-to-day tasks that will ensure our shops continue to meet and exceed customer's expectations.