

Checkers burger restaurant comes to East Tennessee

Cortney Roark, USA TODAY NETWORK | Dec. 14, 2017



Spend some time in the East Tennessee area and it won't take long to pass a yellow and red Lee's Food Mart sign.

Terry Lee and his brother Gary Lee opened the first Lee's Food Mart in 1988 and have grown the convenience store chain to operate more than 40 stores in Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia.

Now, one of those yellow and red signs is joined by a red and white checkerboard previously nonexistent in East Tennessee. Terry Lee's son Wesley Lee joined the family business about a year ago as a zone manager of eight Lee's Food Mart stores. But he was quick to jump on a new business opportunity - opening the doors of a Checkers fast food restaurant attached to the Lee's Kodak, Tenn., location.

An idea sparked by chili cheese fries

The location of Wesley Lee's first Checkers location is by no means random. Lee has spent many summer days at Dollywood's Splash Country in neighboring Pigeon Forge where his son developed a love of chili cheese fries.

"So like any kid, 'Hey dad I want chili cheese fries tonight for dinner,' " Lee said. "So I started buying the Checkers fries (at the grocery store). They're really great fries, and as I did some research, I learned they're not represented in this marketplace, period."

For Terry Lee, the idea made sense. He had always been interested in franchising and knew his son was the right man to take on the operational aspects of owning a franchise.

"That was Wesley's challenge and his opportunity to make a difference in the company," Lee said. "I told him, 'This is your opportunity to make your mark, so go for it.' "



Checkers restaurants are traditionally drive-thru only. But to draw customers in to the convenient store from the restaurant and vice versa, Lee decided to give this Checkers a dining area.

Like father like son

Wesley Lee was four when his father opened the first Lee's Food Mart. A Sunday tradition in the Lee household was to practice baseball and clean the market's self-serve car washes.

"I can wash a car wash," Lee said with a laugh. "I'm pretty mean at it."

He worked in the stores every summer and periodically through school, but never imagined he'd go in to the business beyond that. He spent seven years as a high school history teacher and football coach before changing paths.

As a businessman who owns two Ford Lincoln dealerships, owns a steel fabrication company and is CEO of Commercial Bank, Terry Lee recognizes when someone has what it takes to succeed. It's something he knew his son had way before he joined the family business.

"You've got to let your kids find their own way," he said. "I felt it was important for him to find out what motivated him in life and make that determination himself versus saying, 'Here, work in this.' Now he's come at it with more energy than he would have if that was the only thing he'd ever done."

"He never once missed a baseball game"

The eight stores Wesley oversees keep him on the road most of the time, as they are spread throughout Clinton, Bulls Gap, Kodak and Knoxville.

It was when he was his busiest starting in the early morning and getting home at 11 p.m. to get the Checkers ready to open that he realized how hard his father worked when he was a kid.

"It made me think back to the times he would be at the office for long hours and get home real late," Wesley said. "We were really heavily involved in sports, and all his working and constantly growing his convenient store business, as well as other businesses that we're in, he never once missed a baseball game or a football game. Never missed it. He would take his vacation, and we would go to football camp. It blows my mind.

"It's an eye opener how much he had to sacrifice for us, and it's something you don't really see when you're younger."