

Feb. 28, 2012

## Front Burner to take The Melting Pot to Saudi Arabia

By Lisa Jennings

Multi-concept operator and franchisor Front Burner Brands said Tuesday it has struck a franchise agreement to bring The Melting Pot brand to Saudi Arabia.

The Tampa, Fla.-based restaurant management company is affiliated with founders of The Melting Pot Restaurants Inc., which operates and franchises 141 locations of the casual-dining fondue concept across North America.

The move into Saudi Arabia will be The Melting Pot's first step overseas. Under the agreement, franchisee Dr. Mazen Almugbel of Albabteen United Food Company LLC will open five Melting Pot restaurants, with the first scheduled to open in Riyadh in late 2012.

The Melting Pot joins a growing number of U.S.-based restaurant companies expanding in the Middle East, including Elevation Burger, The Cheesecake Factory, Pinkberry, Texas Roadhouse, Beef O' Brady's and Spicy Pickle.

Outside the United States, The Melting Pot has one franchise location in Edmonton, Canada, with a second planned for Toronto this spring, and two in Mexico City, with a third scheduled to open there later this year. Domestic growth also continues, with Melting Pot locations expected to open in Syracuse, N.Y., and Mobile, Ala., later this year or next.

Front Burner also is growing its fast-casual Burger 21 brand, which has two locations in the Tampa area. This week the company said it made its first agreements with two franchisees who plan to open a total of three units in the Orlando, Fla., market.

In addition, Front Burner is planning to open another two corporate locations in the Tampa Bay area later this year, the company said.

"Our concept's success in Tampa has exceeded expectations, and we're excited to bring our crafted burgers and shakes to Orlando while continuing expansion efforts in the Tampa Bay area," Mark Johnston, Burger 21's president and chief concept officer and president of Front Burner, said in a statement. "We're confident that Orlando will embrace Burger 21 and its premium ingredients, innovative recipes and gourmet experience without the gourmet price."

Alisha dos Santos, Front Burner's communications manager, said the original location of Burger 21, which opened in November 2010, saw sales of about \$1.7 million in its first year.

GrillSmith, a third concept within Front Burner's portfolio, is a six-unit "refined-casual" concept offering creative interpretations of classic American dishes.

Dos Santos said Front Burner is planning to develop a 5,000-square-foot prototype with a simplified menu and operations, which, if successful, could be a model for franchising that brand. Current units are typically 6,500-square feet.

On the back burner is a fast-casual pizza-and-more concept called Peel, which the company said last year would open in the Tampa Bay area market. Dos Santos said the ideal inaugural location has not yet been found