Jack Clark

The Rot and Re-ripening of Sweet Tomatoes

By: Jack Clark

History of Sweet Tomatoes

Sweet Tomatoes started back in 1978 when it opened its first location in San Diego. The restaurant was started by Dennis Jay, who was working in the restaurant industry as a bartender in Springfield Wagon Works, a pioneer in salad bars in El Cajon, California. Jay was aware of the rise of both healthy food and buffets, so he decided to combine the two trends to open his restaurant named "**Souplantation**" with John Turnbull and Scott King. The restaurant caught the attention of two businessmen, Michael Mack and Tony Brooke, who were both working at a consulting firm in England. They would soon sell the two-restaurant chain to Garden Fresh Restaurant Corp in 1983 to continue operating its business. They agreed to a deal to give up 95% of ownership, and Dennis Jay was no longer significant to the business. In 1986, Mack and Brooke made plans to expand the restaurant to 50 locations by 1990.

However, things didn't go as planned, as they only reached 22 locations instead of 50. The company was so focused on its growth and increasing its sales, it didn't address some of the problems that were getting bigger. The new locations were poorly managed because they weren't choosing the right managers. This led to unwanted differences between the restaurants' poor management, low-quality food, and their buffet being a mess at times. By 1990, they were losing money because the chain grew too fast and needed major changes. Tony Brooke retired from Garden Fresh, and Michael Mack was now positioned as CEO. He ignored advice from more-experienced people around him, which meant he continued the original expansion plan. In 1991, Dennis Jay, the founder, died in a car accident in Germany when he was 44 years old. Later that same year, John Bifone was hired as the new CEO of the company after Mack stepped down.

Bifone immediately made some positive changes, one of which was stopping the expansion plan before it was the right time because he thought it was best to slow down those plans in favor of revitalizing existing sales. He started a training program for future employees that led to better quality and better management. He also made a momentous change in the company. As he changed the restaurant's name from Souplantation to *Voila*! Sweet Tomatoes! Outside the San Diego area. In San Diego, it was still known as Souplantation, but there was a bit of controversy due to the word "**plantation**" being used. The word itself is commonly associated with slavery, especially in the South.

By 1994, the board reinstated Michael Mack, and this time, he did a better job running the company. The next few years were a decade of growth for the company. The company went public as Garden Fresh in 1995, paid off some of its accumulated debt, and opened up more locations.

In 2005, Garden Fresh was bought by an investment firm called Sun Capital Partners. After years of growth, it started a slow decline, and higher costs resulted in Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2016. They found another private investment company the year after, and while it helped do away with some of its debt, there were still major problems with how it could be profitable with the rising costs. Soon as the pandemic hit in 2020. After National Restaurant News interviewed late-CEO John Haywood about the crisis, he stated this:

"The company has been losing about $1 million a week since we temporarily closed restaurants in mid-March. that number would have escalated if we tried to operate a takeout scenario due to the added labor and food costs." - Nancy Luna

By the end of March, Sweet Tomatoes had closed all of its locations and filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy, in other words, **Liquidation**.

Interview with owner of Estrellitas in Los Altos, Carlos Corlay

On a Tuesday afternoon, I was with Carlos Corlay and recorded an interview with him speaking to me at Estrellitas before the restaurant got busy for his evening rush. The following comes from the conversation I had with him. The first question I asked him was, "So, what's the biggest difference between the restaurant during Covid and before Covid?". Mr. Corlay responded and said that the restaurant was full of people a lot, but he also wished it was full of more customers. Just like most restaurants around the pandemic, he also had to shut down his restaurant for a while. He also stated that the government helped a lot, but it was a tough time, because he and his family were very different.

I also asked Mr. Corlay if he ever worried about his restaurant closing down, and he answered that he was, as he stated it was a very hard time when the pandemic first began. During the pandemic, he said that no sales were coming through and nobody was buying any food from them, and they were largely overshadowed by takeout food. He thought it was okay at first but he felt it was almost nothing like having a restaurant open, but he said that the government helped a lot with the Estrellitas business and the way it is right now.

After having a little side-chatter with him for a little bit, I asked Mr. Corlay, "Where are you now?". He didn't get what I said at first while bursting into laughter, but what I meant to say to him was how the Estrellitas restaurant is doing right now. He responded that it was pretty full, but Mr. Corlay still wished it were full with more people inside, and they're getting through with it now. I told him if he ever heard of Sweet Tomatoes, and he did. Mr. Corlay said he took his family there and had dinner there. He also remembers reading about the announcement that it's closing.

As you can see from my interview with Mr. Corlay, he said that restaurants had a tough time during COVID, especially when takeouts weren't enough. He also said he got help from the government and his landlords. I'm not sure if Sweet Tomatoes looked for the same kind of help, and even if they did, why didn't they use it to help them get through the pandemic? The reason is probably that it wasn't going to be enough.

Interview with my sister, Abby

When Abby learned that her favorite restaurant, Sweet Tomatoes, was closing down, she was very sad about it and wished it were still open. During the recording I took from the interview with her, she said she always had a good time going there and enjoying the food she ate, especially the ice cream. She also said it was good for families because there was a large variety of food, and it brought them together, and she also said she had friends who also went to Sweet Tomatoes for parties during the summer or at the end of the year.

I asked her another question, she said she's heard about the new location opening in Arizona. She also mentioned to me she's been to a place in Gilroy that's similar to Sweet Tomatoes called Fresh Salad, and thought it was pretty cool. I've also asked another of how she reacted when she heard the news that Sweet Tomatoes will reopen soon, and she was very hopeful it might make a comeback someday. When I asked another question to her about how the community shaped her personal connection to the brand itself, she said that the old Sweet Tomatoes location in California was close to many neighborhoods and it was easy to walk there for many families.

I asked yet another question to her about how Sweet Tomatoes' closure reflected on what the restaurant industry was struggling around that time. Her response was that people weren't able to go there but the only option was to order takeout or delivery, and buffet restaurants just like Sweet Tomatoes weren't able to do takeout because of the nature of the business, which caused them to lose a lot of their business and led to eventual bankruptcy.

Sweet Tomatoes was a beloved restaurant by my family and many other people. They miss it and hope it will come back in the future someday. It must've been vulnerable to close so fast during COVID. It must have been due to something that affected not only due to Souplantation shutting down, but also other businesses that have buffets. My sister remembers Sweet Tomatoes very fondly when she was young, and she loved it because it was a place for her to have the food she loves, especially the desserts. She was very sad when she heard the news that Sweet Tomatoes was closing down during the pandemic.

Where is Sweet Tomatoes now?

In March 2023, the company's brand and rights to its name were bought by a private company, ST Three LLC, and they finally reopened a location in Tucson on April 1, 2024, with big crowds. This is what the company had to say that day in a press release.

"We are thrilled to announce that Sweet Tomatoes is making a comeback, under new ownership, we are excited to bring back your favorite dishes and create new memories with our loyal guests. Our first location is set to reopen in Tucson and we can't wait to see everyone" - Donnelly

The opening was a huge success, and the fanbase keeps on coming back since there have been reports that it's doing very well. The fanbase has proven their loyalty and they've shown up. But ST Three is being very cautious, their website has not announced any other openings so far. But really, who could blame them? They want to make sure they have a winner and that they're doing things right, so although no plans have been announced, I believe it's part of their strategy to grow the brand, and they'll produce a good product, but after all, they're in it for the money.

In conclusion, I'm excited about the prospect of Sweet Tomatoes making a comeback, locally from the reports I've read about buffets making a big comeback. The article on the website, Today.com, said that many people that had seen buffets were not gonna be making a comeback anytime soon, but they were wrong, as some have been able to make a come back, according to an article on Yahoo,

"We did a little digging and uncovered a few buffet chains that also seem to be on an upward trajectory after experiencing some setbacks. Cicis Pizza, Golden Corral, and Mr Gatti's Pizza have all been making waves as of late, whether celebrating major milestones, working on brand updates, or embarking on continued growth and expansion".

All I know is that if Sweet Tomatoes reopens close by, I will be the first person in line!

About the Author

Jack Clark is a Junior at Mountain View High School and animation student at Freestyle Academy. He lives in Los Altos with his parents, grandmother, younger sister, and his schnauzer named Ellie. He is part of the Yearbook Club and is a hardworking student who's determined to get his work done. Outside of school, he enjoys scrolling on the internet, exercising, watches movies and TV shows, and sitting around the couch.

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