



AND

FOOD, FUEL FIZZ

Customers get their kicks—and soda pop—at show-stopping Oklahoma c-store

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If you ever plan to motor west on that famed Route 66, keep your eyes open for the giant soda bottle by the side of the road. There you'll find one of the largest monuments to carbonated soft drinks—and a stunning, futuristic c-store to boot.

Pops 66, the brainchild of Aubrey McClendon, head of natural-gas producer Chesapeake Energy Corp., is meant to be both a nod to Route 66's allure—Oklahoma has more miles of the historic highway than any other state—and a grasp at its future. Located in tiny Arcadia, Okla. (pop.: 260), about 20 miles outside Oklahoma City, Pops is hard to miss.

"We always tell people, when you get off the interstate, just get on Route 66, drive five miles and you'll run right into us," says general manager Marty Doepke. "There's nothing else to run into."

McClendon purchased a swath of land in Arcadia, hooked by the rural beauty and rich soil of the valley formed by the Deep Fork River. A small gas station sat on the property, and its owners were



EAT UP: Pops 66 employee Erin Jackson displays a few of the restaurant's options, including chicken-fried steak and nachos. The busy foodservice side of the store employs most of its 76 employees.

looking to get out of the business.

“He said the community had a gas station and needs a gas station,” says Rand Elliott, McClendon’s close friend and, as head of Elliot + Associates, the lead architect on the project. He also sensed an opportunity.

“Rand, we’ve got the opportunity to do a cool gas station here,” Elliott recalls McClendon saying. “Let’s do something interesting.”

The first thing that grabs the traveler’s eye: The silhouette of a 66-foot-tall soda bottle, complete with straw, towers over the site. It’s an homage to McClendon’s favorite beverage, and it’s something that carries as much nostalgic cachet as Route 66.

But for McClendon and Elliott, it was crucial that Pops 66 not be a museum, frozen in time.

“Most people associate any project with Route 66 as old, dying and decayed. Pops is anything but that,” says Elliott, who grew up next to the high-

“On the weekends, we can have lines about 25 to 30 people deep, all with soda—we don’t ever sell any beer. No one wants to wait in line for beer. But they’ll wait in line for soda.”



Photos by Brandi Simons

ROOM WITH A VIEW: About 8,000 bottles of craft sodas and sparkling waters glow in the front windows of Pops 66, providing restaurant patrons with a whimsical view.

way and designed its official museum in Clinton, Okla. “It is really intended to be a project that speaks to the future of Route 66. There’s not intended to be anything nostalgic about it; it’s really intended to be an experience, which is very much what Route 66 in general is.”

Structural Magic

One thing is clear about Pops 66: Its design is the literal interpretation of McClendon’s vision via Elliott’s bold

architectural brushstroke.

Customers undergo three “spatial experiences” during their visit to Pops. On the approach and under the canopy swarm the noises and excitement of Route 66.

“Since we really felt this was about the future of Route 66 and not focused on the past, I turned my attention to location,” says Elliott. “If you look at the building, you see these red stone walls emerging out of the soil. That was intended to be that physical and metaphorical connection to the agrarian landscape.”

At the edge of the stone wall, “this wonderful structural magic” occurs thanks to a 110-foot steel cantilevered canopy that thrusts over the Pops build-

MARTY DOEPKE Pops 66



INTO INFINITY AND BEYOND: Part architectural statement, part practicality, a 110-foot steel cantilevered canopy juts over Pops 66 and its fuel island, pointing toward the future of the iconic Route 66.

ing and fuel island, seemingly without support. “This is really about the notion of the future lunging, reaching forward to imagine what might be out there,” Elliott explains. “The canopy that cantilevers out into the sky is unfinished—it keeps going visually to show that the future is out there someplace, somewhat undefined, but it’s exciting, and Pops is one stop along the way.”

The canopy also creates a vast “out-door room” beneath it, a place where people can gather and socialize. Of course, it has a practical purpose as well.

“Today when you see convenience stores and gas stations, the gas pumps are aloof from the building and not covered, or if they are covered, it’s a small canopy and you get wet while pumping gas,” says Elliott. “Pops doesn’t have that—the canopy connects the building, and it’s intended to be much more polite in a way, so we really set out to reinvent what this experience would be.”

The second spatial experience occurs inside. Open the front door and you are surrounded by the smell of home-cooked food from Pops’ sit-down restaurant, laughter and “a convivial atmosphere that relates to the fact that there are 8,000 bottles of pop in the window,” Elliott explains. The soda bottles—organized in a rainbow of color and representing Pops’ category

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RAND ELLIOTT *Elliott + Associates Architects*

focus—are affixed to glass shelving that floats above the front entrance.

For the third experience, visitors can then exit through a second set of doors to a 2,356-square-foot patio that overlooks McClendon’s redbud tree farm. “You literally are between these big stone walls, and get a sense of peace, tranquility,” says Elliott, explaining that the word “arcadia” means “tranquility.” “You get a sense of what this agrarian valley is like, this peaceful, wonderful place.”

Soda on Stage

Aesthetics and vision aside, Pops 66 is also a business.

The building, which measures a little more than 5,000 square feet, includes a 2,000-square-foot c-store offering the usual mix of snacks, smokes and general merchandise. Nine and a half of the store’s 13 cooler doors are stocked with single-serve bottles of more than 400 craft sodas and “un-sodas” from all

over the world, in flavors as exotic as green apple, raspberry lime, huckleberry and black cherry, as well as all of the major CSD and noncarbonated brands. Cardboard carrying containers sit nearby for customers to pick and choose their own packs.

“Especially on weekends, you never see anyone buying just one soda—it’s always about three to six sodas at a time,” says Pops 66’s Doepke. “When

we first put a couple cooler doors in for beer, we really didn’t think that’d be enough. But what’s been funny is, on the weekends, we can have lines about 25 to 30 people deep, all with soda—we

don’t ever sell any beer. No one wants to wait in line for beer. But they’ll wait in line for soda.” The store sells about 10,000 bottles of soda per day.

Customers also have the option of custom-ordering cases of soda pop at a kiosk developed especially for Pops by The CBORD Group Inc. The kiosk offers a choice of 2,000 soda varieties, which can be ordered by the 24-bottle case or in smaller quantities.

A visit to Pops wouldn’t be complete without stopping in its restaurant and shake shop. The 1,460-square-foot space serves up diner fare with a gourmet flourish: NoName Ranch all-natural beef, herb-roasted chicken and hand-dipped Blue Bell ice-cream and shakes are just a few of the offerings.

Out on the forecourt, Star Fuels of Oklahoma LLC supplies Pops 66 with STAR brand fuel; the gasoline island features six Gilbarco Eclipse MPDs. Despite the industry norm and Pops’



CHOICES, CHOICES: Nine and a half of Pops 66's 13 cooler doors are stocked with single-serve bottles of soda and sparkling water, including the store's own Round Barn Root Beer. Customers typically purchase three to six bottles at a time, at no more than \$2 per bottle.

to 9:00 p.m. on weekdays, and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends.

Although the owners have no plans to expand the Pops concept beyond its current location, there is talk of starting up outdoor music and children's events, as well as sodas of the week and month programs, a soda club and even soda "tastings." "Maybe we'd even do soda dinners—like wine dinners, but pairing sodas with food instead," says Doepke. "You can involve your entire family there and you don't have to worry about driving home when you're finished."

The Simple Things

Back outside, the sun is setting and the soda bottle's darkened shape is about to light up.

The bottle, constructed of steel hoops that span 20 feet across at its widest point, looms in front of the building like the modern equivalent of yesterday's roadside novelty statuary. Light-emitting diodes are programmed to change 30 different colors and turn on and off in succession, as if the bottle is emptying and filling, every 40 seconds.

The bottle is so mesmerizing that its lighting each evening has become an event. "People are arriving at Pops before sunset, going in and buying sodas and sitting in the back of their trucks or cars, and waiting for the bottle to come on at sunset," says Elliott. "There's no way we could have anticipated people doing that—it's just fabulous. It just speaks to the notion of simple things in life that are engaging, memorable and fun." ■

remote location, fuel has not proved the main draw for most customers.

"Fuel was going to be the bulk of our sales," Doepke says, "but it hasn't worked out that way." Inside sales are often double that of fuel, especially on weekends. The company would not share sales data, but Doepke says it has exceeded expectations.

The owners chose to do a soft opening to get their footing before the grand opening two weeks later. "We opened up at 5:30 that morning on Aug. 6, and

as I went to unlock the door, I turned around on the steps, and [said], 'I don't know what to expect today, so we'll play it by ear and see what happens,'" says Doepke. "We go over there and there're 25 people in line at 5:30 in the morning. From there, it's kind of snowballed, and we've been very busy ever since."

Now the store sees an average of 1,200 customers per day, and one- to two-hour waits for a table at the restaurant during peak times are not uncommon. The busiest times of day? Interestingly, 6:30



CLEAR CONVENIENCE: The 2,000-square-foot c-store portion of Pops sells the usual mix of snacks, smokes and general merchandise, in addition to nearly 400 varieties of bottled sodas and noncarbonated beverages. The low-profile aisles and lack of product signage keep a neat and clean ship.