

CHAIN REACTION

Regional Fast-Food Favorites Eye N.Y.C.

By REED TUCKER

February 28, 2007 -- WE New Yorkers like to claim our city has the best of everything. And when it comes to museums and \$400 bottles of vodka, that's true. Our fast-food choices, however, leave a bit to be desired.

What Gotham seriously lacks is outposts of those beloved regional chains that keep stomachs full and arteries clogged in the rest of the country. Places like Texas' Taco Bueno, Iowa's Maid-Rite and California's In-N-Out Burger remain painfully out of our reach.



While none of those restaurants plan to franchise here, some chains are making inroads into the city. Take L.A.'s Pinkberry, a 2-year-old frozen yogurt empire that is so popular out West, its locations often have lines literally around the block. Rows of cars double-parked outside various locations have even provided a boon in ticket revenue for Los Angeles. "Crackberry," as it's affectionately known, recently opened three locations here in New York, including one a few weeks ago on the Upper East Side.

But that's not enough. We want more - maybe because it's getting close to lunchtime. We decided to check in with six popular regional restaurants to see if they had plans to expand their reach to New York City, so we can all stop wondering.

FATBURGER

Where is it: In-N-Out's chief SoCal rival currently operates 86 stores in 15 states.

Why it's worth gaining 3 pounds: The Cali-style burgers, made with fresh beef, put bigger chains like Burger King to shame.

N.Y.C. prognosis: Fatties rejoice! The chain plans to open three stores in Manhattan in the next 12 months. One in Greenwich Village, one in Harlem and one in Midtown. Rapper Pharrell Williams (inset) is a partner in the venture.

BAJA FRESH

Where is it: The Tex-Mex chain has 298 locations - including a few on Long Island - in 21 states. Why it's worth gaining 3 pounds: Think Taco Bell, only, you know, good. And without the rats. As the name suggests, the chain uses fresh ingredients and makes most everything to order.