

# Smooth operator

Brinker operations chief is always ready to pitch in, whether at home or abroad ● BY DINA BERTA

After traveling the globe in her new operations leadership role with Brinker International Inc., Carin Stutz recently found herself in a somewhat less exotic place — in the kitchen of an On The Border restaurant at the Oak Park mall in Overland Park, Kan.

The new senior vice president for strategic operations for both global and domestic business was in the back-of-the-house doing prep work for two days over the Christmas holiday.

“I wanted to make sure my skills were up to par when we make decisions for the brand globally,” Stutz said. “It puts me

in a position to get good feedback from our managers and team members.”

That hands-on approach comes as little surprise to those who know her. Caring about operations and caring about the people in the restaurants has propelled Stutz throughout her career, current and former colleagues say. Since beginning as a management trainee at Wendy’s International Inc., she has run restaurants, assisted franchisees, managed and developed people. A board member of the Women’s Foodservice Forum, Stutz has built relationships and a network of supporters.

“Carin is one of those rare

people that what you see is what you get,” said Lou Kaucic, former chief people officer at Applebee’s International, who hired Stutz in 1999 as executive vice president of operations for the casual-dining chain. “She does not have a huge ego, and she is not a person who is into status and wealth. She loves achieving results. She loves ops, and she loves people.”

The results-oriented Stutz joined Brinker last June. Founded by the late Norman Brinker, the company has nearly 1,700 casual-dining restaurants in the United States and abroad. Part of Stutz’s role will be to help the company reach 500 interna-



Above: Carin Stutz of Brinker International has employed a hands-on approach throughout her career.

Right: Stutz and her husband Roger visited an elephant farm in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, near the River Kwai in January 2009.



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tional units by 2015. Currently, there are 212 Chili’s Grill & Bar, Maggiano’s Little Italy and On the Border restaurants in 28 countries and two territories.

In taking on her new duties, Stutz traveled to five countries in three weeks: Japan, Korea, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Then she visited Brinker franchisees in Canada and Mexico. She also did a similar stint in a Chili’s restaurant in New York as she did with On the Border.

“Carin is just a die-hard operator,” said Kelli Valade, chief operating officer for Chili’s and On the Border restaurants. “She lives and breathes operations. She loves to be in the restaurants, almost more than any executive I’ve ever seen.”

In fact, Valade noted that Stutz keeps her no-slip shoes in her car so she can be ready at a moment’s notice to help out when visiting restaurants.

“We met for lunch one day, and I said, ‘Let’s try to visit some

restaurants if our schedules allow,’” Valade said. “She walked in with this little bag of shoes.”

Being in the restaurants helps executives stay in touch with the real needs of operators, said Stutz, who remembers her days as Wendy’s manager wondering about some of the decisions coming out of the corporate office in Dublin, Ohio.

“It’s easy to sit back when you are in a field position and say, ‘Who thought of this,’” Stutz said. “When was the last time people back in corporate had been in a restaurant? When was the last time they walked in my shoes?”

Stutz has always enjoyed operations. Growing up in Aurora, Ill.,