



## Maid-Rites' New Owners Are Making It Right...Again

*They're reviving this legendary Iowa sandwich... and soon the whole world may get a taste of our state.*

By Lynn Betts

MENTION “Maid-Rite” to most Iowans with a little silver in their hair, and it’ll conjure up mouthwatering memories of a tasty, loose-meat, fresh ground beef sandwich...one that maybe you and your date enjoyed after a movie...in a 1950s-style diner or drive-in...with the juke-box playing “golden oldies” in the background.

But start talking about a Maid-Rite to folks east of the Mississippi or west of the Missouri and they’ll likely say, “Huh?”

That’s because Maid-Rite is a uniquely Iowa sandwich—invented here and sold primarily within our borders for most of its

84-year existence. Maid-Rite is so “Iowa”, in fact, that many former Hawkeyes make sure they have one every time they return home.

Bradley Burt recalls a conversation with a World War II veteran at the Iowa

*“America’s first drive-in restaurant was a Maid-Rite...”*

State Fair a few years back: “Son,” the man said, “I’ve been eating Maid-Rites longer than you’ve been alive.

“I had a Maid-Rite the day I shipped out,” the veteran continued. “I fought overseas as a paratrooper, and the whole

**MAID-RITE U.** As the Burts (rear) look on, their chief trainer, George Iskander, schools new franchisees in the business.

time I was over there, I thought about Maid-Rites. The day I got back home to Iowa, the first thing I did was order a Maid-Rite.”

Over the last 20 years or so, the bright red-and-white logo and the “Maid-Rite Maiden” had gradually faded from the scene. But Bradley and his wife, Tania, are out to change all that and restore this Iowa Legend.

“It was an opportunity that comes only once in a lifetime,” says Bradley. “Like many other Iowans, we’d grown up eating Maid-Rites all our lives.

“We knew it was a popular sandwich. It was and still is an Iowa icon, with a unique brand recognition most companies take years to build.”

### Invented in Muscatine

For you trivia buffs, it was a butcher from Muscatine, Fred Angell, who created the Maid-Rite and opened the first store in 1926.

As the legend goes, inspiration for the name came from a deliveryman who was asked to taste the new sandwich. After a few bites, the man replied, “You know,



Urbandale

Fred, this sandwich is just made right.”

Fred opened a second store with his son Francis that featured carhop service—the first drive-in restaurant in the United States.

Fred’s grandson William expanded the franchise to 120 stores, before selling the company in 1984. That’s when the bun became undone, so to speak, and the franchise gradually slipped to 60 stores.

Bradley and Tania had been operating a consulting firm, and Bradley was hired to shore up the struggling franchise’s marketing. In the process, he learned the company was for sale...and in 2001 proposed that he and Tania buy it.

For 19 years, Bradley had been a commercial banker at Bankers Trust in Des Moines. “I worked with John Ruan Sr., who taught me the virtue of working hard, not being afraid to think big and pursuing your dreams,” says Bradley, who works 70 hours most weeks.

“I knew taking this on would be a lot of work, but that didn’t bother me. I may not be as smart as everyone else, but I won’t be outworked.

“I had \$50,000 and an option to buy the company. But I had only 90 days to put together an investor group for the rest of the money.

“Then came 9/11, and the financial market for raising capital became very uncertain after that. I still remember very well Tania’s six words one evening after she asked where we stood.”

Bradley used to play baseball, so he pitched her a baseball analogy to explain the situation:

“It’s the bottom of the ninth, we’re behind 3-0, the bases are loaded with two outs and I’m up to bat,” I told her. “I’ve got two strikes on me, and I’m swinging for the fences.

“She said, ‘Well, then, we’re okay, aren’t we!’ We went on to find 20 other Iowa investors who are friends of ours, and the rest is history.”

#### What to Fix First?

The Burts are majority owners of the company. Bradley is chief executive officer and chairman of the board, and Tania is just as involved as executive vice president and a board member. They live in West Des Moines and work at their corporate headquarters in Urbandale.

“When we bought Maid-Rite, the franchise didn’t have the infrastructure, delivery system and consistency that was needed,” Bradley says.



**ALL SMILES** are Tania and Bradley as they work to resuscitate this famous Iowa brand. Tania, who by the way had four lines as a waitress in the movie *Bridges of Madison County*, posed as the new Maid-Rite Maiden. See a resemblance?

The 60 remaining stores in the franchise shared the name and menu, but everything else varied from store to store.

“They had been left without support and guidance. We needed to update equipment, processes, distribution, training, floor plans, menu items—just about everything,” he adds.

“Marketing plans, promotional materials, everything in the package that makes

“John Ruan taught me to think big and pursue my dreams...”

a franchisee successful—none of that was in place when we purchased Maid-Rite.”

Tania put together the new decor package. She talked things through with her mother, Penelope Swan, an artist. The two decided on a retro look of the 1950s diner...keeping the image of the past, including ample use of vintage pictures of the first Maid-Rite stores...but in a contemporary setting.

The Burts’ vision also included an expanded menu, spotlessly clean restaurants (including restrooms), safe cooking and food handling methods, friendly staff

with hometown hospitality, and an uplifting decor in every store, new and old.

#### Change Was Challenging

Establishing that consistency meant lots of changes for existing stores, including new equipment—like computerized cash registers and accounting systems, upgraded fryers and braising skillets, and better ventilation. They also were one of the early restaurant chains to voluntarily establish a no-smoking policy.

Those changes didn’t come easy for some of the franchisees. The Burts closed 35 stores—more than half the remaining restaurants—that weren’t able or willing to deliver the consistency the new standards required.

They remember one in the Des Moines area in particular.

“When we raised the bar in 2002, all five employees in that Des Moines location quit, and Tania and I had a crash course for a month in running a restaurant,” notes Bradley.

“We worked side by side, 12 hours a day, in that restaurant,” Tania chimes in. “But it was really good that we went through that. As a result, we fully understand how things work and can coach our new franchisees from personal experience.”

A Des Moines Register “Iowa Poll” ➔



asked people how they felt about certain foods associated with Iowa, and 27 percent chose Maid-Rite as their favorite food. Another 54 percent said they liked Maid-Rites.

#### New on the Menu

Still, the Burts knew they needed to also cater to new customers—and that meant cooking up an expanded menu.

“In a family of four, two people might want the Maid-Rite, but the others may want fish or chicken,” Bradley says.

Menu choices now include the BBQ Texas-Rite, Taco Maid-Rite and Philly

*“We worked side by side  
12 hours a day...”*

Cheese-Rite. And if you’re still hungry for something else, you can choose the crispy burrito, Chicago dog, Pizza-Rita, chicken sandwich, fish sandwich or chicken wrap. New sides include sweet potato fries, coleslaw and baked beans.

The Burts also added a soup-and-salad combo, a soup of the day and a Taco-Rite Salad. They’ve even developed a new bun that holds heat and juice better.

I can personally vouch for their newest menu items. The Memphis-style Smokin’ Good BBQ sandwiches and dinner specials just introduced in March are now making their way to all the restaurants. The hand-pulled pork (or turkey breast) sandwich goes down great with a chocolate malt!

#### Tomorrow, the World?

After slimming down to only 25 stores while they were retooling for the first 2 years, Bradley and Tania have built back up to 78 stores in 10 states—Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin as well as Iowa.

More than half—41 stores—are in Iowa. Another eight new stores are in the process of opening.

Their plan is to grow elsewhere in Texas, plus in Phoenix and Florida—markets where former Midwesterners live. Their goal: 1,000 stores.

They have three restaurants in Hy-Vee grocery stores, and they’re talking with Walmart about in-store Maid-Rites in the U.S. and abroad. Soon, the world might be enjoying a taste of Iowa.

“We might be on a plane to China before long,” says Tania with a smile.

**FIRST TO MAKE IT RITE.** Fred Angell (fifth from left) sold Maid-Rites for a dime in his first restaurant in 1926.

“Walmart has a particular interest in China because the Chinese go crazy about everything Americana, and the look of our diner-style restaurant fits there. That’s a big market.”

And get this: “Iowans who live out of state don’t lose their love of our one-of-a-kind loose-meat sandwiches,” explains Tania.

“We get calls from people who are hungry for Maid-Rites, and they ask us for some of our special seasoning, hats, T-shirts, aprons, napkins and cups so they can have a ‘Maid-Rite party’. So now we’ve developed a Maid-Rite Party Pack we can send to them.”

For his part, Bradley says failure has never entered his mind. He believes all things are possible, if you believe in yourself and never give up.

And to think it all started with a sandwich concocted by a butcher in Muscatine.

Some might say, “Only in America.” We’d say, “Only in Iowa!”