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Agra Culture Kitchen & Press

This local healthy, casual-dining chain impresses our columnist's gut—in multiple ways



**Dennis
Monroe**

Editor's note: Each month, Dennis Monroe reviews a new restaurant's business proposition, based on his years in the business as a business attorney and former CEO of a local multi-concept restaurant company.

ONE OF THE REWARDS OF practicing law in the restaurant industry is coming across new concepts you feel confident will succeed. And while their road to success may still have some trampling through the weeds to go through, your gut says you've come across that special concept consumers will like and the unit economics that will work out. That's how I feel about Agra Culture Kitchen & Press. Aaron Switz is one of the owners behind this innovative concept with the mission statement: "Food everyone can enjoy." He's also one of the creative forces behind Yogurt Lab and SotaRol.

Agra Culture already has three locations: 50th and France (which is in an old retail building); Uptown—Girard (north of Lake Street); and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. I dined at both the 50th and France and Uptown locations.

The concept is "polished fast casual" with healthy, sustainable and delicious fare. It has bright, user-friendly menu boards plus handouts listing food and beverage choices, though the cuing

system could use some help. There are so many options that it can slow down the ordering for first-timers. The range of offerings is impressive, from sandwiches (an average price of \$10) to flavorful proteins with several choices of sauces (in the \$4-to-\$7 range) to a wide variety of salads and side dishes—everything a vegetarian or green-eating person could desire. Beverages include smoothies and cold-pressed juices, as well as a full line of coffee and tea products and a limited selection of wine and beer.

The breakfast menu has both traditional items and non-traditional but interesting items, such as a breakfast sandwich with kale, pesto and prosciutto or an arugula and bacon sandwich.

Even though Agra Culture is still in its infancy stage, the restaurants do a steady business at lunch, and the dinner business appears good as well.

Another unique aspect of Agra Culture is its carryout business. The 50th and France store is 50 percent carryout and Uptown has about 40 percent, according to Switz. This is an important revenue channel for fast-casual businesses.

I am impressed by the prices the owners are able to garner across the board. They have not been bashful on pricing and, given the number of times I have eaten at Agra Culture, I'd say the quality justifies the pricing.

Let's dial down and look at the specifics.

Décor and Investments: At the two locations where I dined, the décor has a similar feel but unique touches. The restaurants occupy between 2,500 and 3,000 square feet,

which is on the large size compared to other fast-casual concepts. In this case, the square footage is justified because the restaurants have several stations.

The industrial décor with cement floors fits the image one would associate with this type of food. Switz believes the core package, leasehold improvements, furniture, fixtures and equipment will total between \$750,000 and \$1,000,000 in the future. This amount is on the high side for this type of restaurant, but I think it is money well spent. And, since they have only opened a few restaurants, that figure will continue to come down.

Rating: In terms of ROI, I would rate it 3 out of 4, since the restaurant is still new and there is work left to do to reduce the cost. Agra Culture is certainly on the right track.

Menu Pricing: According to Switz, the check average is \$18. Agra Culture has good bottles of wine on the menu, but it's fairly pricey at \$12 per glass, and you could easily spend \$30 on a meal if you have a glass of wine.

Sandwiches and salads are in the \$10 range. Steak salads are \$14; tuna nicoise is \$15. The side dishes are reasonably priced at \$3.50. The children's menu is a bargain at \$6, and they throw in a cold-pressed juice or bottle of juice. The 16-ounce "Eye Love" drink (which has carrots, apple and lemon) is \$9.25. Fresh-squeezed orange juice and lemonade are \$6. Smoothies range from \$6 to \$8.

Even though the prices are a bit on the high side, it is a value proposition—you get great-quality, healthy food. **Rating:** 2½ out of 4.

The only reason I am giving Agra Culture a 2½ is that I believe it will take some education for customers to recognize the value of the higher-priced items, or how to select less expensive items if they're on a budget. I do like Agra Culture's strategy at this point, and to attract crowds with an \$18 check average in this space is incredible.

Service and Labor Costs: The 50th and France restaurant seems to have an effective general manager and other key supervisory staff. While it helps with labor costs to cross-train staff, the restaurant appears a little disorganized because staff is switching from the cash register to the back to the line to take-out. Switz told me labor costs are running about 32 percent (which is a good percentage). This has probably come down since the concept opened, but they have a labor-intensive menu, even though a lot of things are prepped. I believe they have some work left to do on the efficiency of management and labor.

Rating: Again, given the fact that this is a new concept that has to work out some of the bugs, I give 3 out of 4.

Potential Revenue: Switz believes the 50th and France store will do \$2 million to \$3 million (probably closer to \$3 million). The Uptown store will do \$1.2 million to \$1.4 million, which is a respectable number for the fast-casual sector. If Agra Culture expands, it will need to go into a fairly affluent market or high-profile office setting. If it cuts down the square footage, it could become an ideal skyway location. This restaurant deserves to be at an airport, and its pricing would work there. With great revenue potential, expansion possibilities are endless.

Rating: 4 out of 4 because of the high check average and the overall appeal to a broad demographic group.

Chance for Long-Term Success: I believe Agra Culture can go national and could even become a franchise. To become a franchise, however, it would need to attract experienced food

operators, as the chain's process is much more than "chop and assemble." This complexity might limit its growth if the owners do decide to franchise.

Overall, I think this concept has a bright future. Its full name, Agra Culture Kitchen & Press, is clever, but I think people will eventually shorten it to Agra Culture. The take-out revenue is a big plus.

Rating: I believe its overall chance of success is 3.5 out of 4. The only reason I nicked them is that when chains expand to multiple locations, they get some bad sites, and Uptown might be one of those sites. But all in all, Agra Culture is a winner. [FSN](#)

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