

PENNSYLVANIA FOOD & DINING

Why go to Royal Farms? For the 'World-Famous' fried chicken, of course

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Wawa and Sheetz might rule in Pennsylvania.

But there's a less-flashier convenience store chain, with out-of-state roots, staking claim in the Keystone State.

It's Baltimore-based [Royal Farms](#).

With 15 stores in Pennsylvania, Royal Farms - or RoFo, as it's nicknamed - has built a following with gas pumps, coffee and a cult favorite - "World-Famous" fried chicken.

This year, the [chain was ranked No. 41 by Convenience Store News](#). Pennsylvania's two most-famous chains ran higher: Wawa at 17 and Sheetz at 23.

Today, there are 193 convenience stores under the Royal Farms umbrella in five states. In southcentral Pennsylvania, Royal Farms stores are concentrated in Adams, York and Lancaster counties.

"They are like one of these quiet up-and-comers in the convenience-store industry," said Don Longo, editorial director of Convenience Store News, an industry publication. "Wawa and Sheetz get all the publicity, but (Royal Farms) quietly does very well."

Royal Farms may not have a high profile, but the medium-size chain receives plenty of praise, Longo said.

"We hear from other people in the industry, and they always speak very highly of Royal Farms as a competitor,"

Expansion in Pa. possible?

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If the chain has its way, more Royal Farms stores could eventually dot the Pennsylvania landscape. One opened on Rohrerstown Road in East Hempfield Township and another is proposed for Springettsbury Township in York

Royal Farms' spokeswoman Shelby Kemp said they are scheduled to open eight more stores this year, however not confirm any openings in the Harrisburg region.

Robert Gorland, vice president of Matthew P. Casey & Associates in Harrisburg, which specializes in supermarket selection and feasibility studies, said Royal Farms follows a similar format to Sheetz, Wawa and Rutter's, with g and made-to-order food.

Whether the chain will forge deeper into central Pa. depends on available real estate.

"Dauphin and Cumberland is pretty over-stored," Gorland said. "I know, and I've seen in the past five years close dozen stores built."

Particularly, Sheetz, he said, has made inroads in Dauphin County with several new locations.

Gorland said it appears, in some cases, Royal Farms selects secondary or less populated areas to build stores. Farms operates stores in Colmar, Delta, Wrightsville and Littlestown but also has stores in Philadelphia and Downingtown.

But Gorland added the chain is certainly aggressive, as witnessed by several high-profile locations along the Delaware Shore. It also recently opened its first New Jersey location.



What are they known for?

While Royal Farms may seem new to some, the chain dates back to 1959 when its owners expanded their Baltimore dairy operation into a milk store.

The Royal Farms' footprint is similar to other convenience-store chains -- gas pumps, lottery tickets, touch-screen ordering and a smattering of tables. Some locations sell beer/wine, and the Lancaster store is in the process of with the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board for a liquor license.

Its stores are large, some nearly 5,000 square feet, compared to the average 2,800 square-foot convenience store, Longo said.

With so much space, the stores carry grocery items, from Royal Farms ground coffee beans to its own line of M Place potato chips - including Chesapeake Bay flavor -- as well as cereal, bread, milk, soda and snacks.

"Even the Royal Farms' name denotes a place to go for basic convenience store grocery items," Longo said. "It's a large trip to the grocery store."

On the food front, customers place orders for breakfast 24-hours a day -- with southern favorites like chicken and bacon egg croissant sandwiches -- as well as sub sandwiches, wraps and burgers.

One menu item in particular, the fried chicken, makes Royal Farms stand out from its competitors.

The chicken sets them apart

An oversized chicken stands near the Royal Farms' store entrance, a beacon of sorts, for what's on the menu. A weather vane proudly tops the store and chicken shaped mailbox is located in the parking lot.

The chicken is Royal Farms' mascot.

"Royal Farms is known as the chicken store and we really believe that is something that differentiates us from other businesses," Kemp said.

The fried chicken sells in a variety of sizes, from \$5 meal boxes to family packs with as many as 50 pieces of chicken. The chicken is pressure cooked to ensure every bite is juicy.

And it's a big mover. On a recent visit to the Lancaster store, the majority of customers purchased chicken.

"I just come for the fried chicken," said Raven Leon of Lancaster. "It's just crispy and super flavorful."

Los Bonilla of Lancaster sat at a table inside the store with a \$5 chicken box.

"I mean, it's cheap. It's definitely cheap," he said. "It's a quick stop-and-go."

In the Mid-Atlantic to be a successful convenience store chain, you have to have a food offering because of the competition, Longo said.

"They get credit for having very good fried chicken," he said.

In fact, the chicken is so revered, Food & Wine magazine named it the best gas station food in America in 2017.

"If a glance at chicken-filled buffet trays glowing golden under the heat lamp alongside lotto tickets and Lays cl
you off, check yourself and just order it already," wrote author Hillary Eaton.

The future looks bright

Longo said he expects Royal Farms to focus on New Jersey and Pennsylvania growth.

"We kind of look at them as a quiet but really good company," he said. "We think there will big things for them in
future."

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