

Spoletto Italian Kitchen cooks up Central Florida expansion plans

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Spoletto Italian Kitchen may be new to Central Florida's culinary scene, but it's already concocting plans to be a major player in the fast-casual market.

The Brazilian-based Italian chain — where diners create pastas, flatbreads and salads from a variety of ingredients — is on target to open four local restaurants this year, and Spoletto will open six more here in 2016, said [John Velasquez](#), president of Spoletto USA.



Spoletto's first location will open near the University of Central Florida, followed by one in The Florida Mall's new food pavilion on June 1 and one in August in Winter Park.

[Valesquez](#) added that the chain may open a Lake County location this year, and in 2016, may debut in Lake Mary, Altamonte Springs, Windermere and Winter Garden. Here's what he revealed about the expansion plans:

Why Orlando for your first U.S. location? We looked at Washington, D.C., Colorado and California and felt Orlando gave us more opportunities. It's a tourist market, so it gives us a chance

to interact with people from across the U.S. and the world, and showcase the brand. It's a growing city and there's a lot of different communities, growing industries and a good talent pool.

Why the UCF area for your first Orlando location? A large university allows us to connect to an important demographic to our brand — they're very digital. UCF also has a lot of industry around it. We're creating a good connection with UCF and its business school, because we're counting on it to build a pipeline for future leaders of our company, as we look to scale up in Orlando to 20-25 units. We're also building strategic relationships with UCF's Rosen School of Hospitality to attract future talent.

How does the Orlando restaurant differ from your eateries in Brazil? The U.S. Spoleto concept is different, but it does carry the same DNA. We're going into larger stores, a fresh-casual environment, the branding looks a bit different as we adjust to the environment, so it's more American-modern. But the brand is consistent to what we're doing across world.

What other U.S. markets do you plan to expand to? We've received inquiries from New York City and Texas. Our strategic goal is to stay in Florida for a while. There are great opportunities in Tampa, Miami and Jacksonville. Florida gives us a great area to grow and make sure our options are right. We want to be controlled and strategic in every market in which we open.