PAUL CONFORTI ’92 wants to teach the world the value of a luscious dessert. “I want to educate people on the difference between a junky $4 piece of cake and a premium, $10 plated dessert,” says Conforti, co-founder of Finale, a popular, upscale Boston eatery specializing in desserts.

So far, Conforti is getting his lesson across. Finale, which opened in 1998 in a location a block south of Boston Common, has not only survived in the notoriously tough restaurant business, but has thrived, adding branches in nearby Cambridge and Brookline, with plans for further expansion afoot. Finale has earned positive reviews from food critics, an armful of local awards for the best desserts in the Boston area, and even national press coverage for its variety of gourmet cakes, pastries, tarts, puddings, and sorbets, among other favorites, served in a casual but upscale atmosphere.

While Finale serves some light fare, it bills itself as a “desserterie” or, as Conforti sometimes calls it, a “dessert restaurant.” Finale tries to lure diners to skip the cheaper, generic goodies of other cafés and to try something like its signature $10.95 Molten Chocolate Cake, a muffin-shaped concoction with a warm, creamy interior that reviewers have called “achingly rich,” “intense,” and “to die for.” Or two people can dig into the two-person “Fantasia” plate, a combination of fruit tarts and tortes, chocolates, miniature cakes, crème caramel, pudding, and sorbet, for $16.95. Even Business Week has called Finale’s food “creative.” BY PETER DIZIKES
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The idea for Finale was hatched as a yearlong project at Harvard Business School, where Conforti earned his graduate degree while whipping up the concept. Conforti found that few companies have tried to stake out the culinary turf Finale aims to capture. Now that he’s identified a largely vacant niche in the restaurant industry, Conforti wants to make Finale a unique national chain— the place where you’ll find a dessert that costs a little more but the experience will make it worth the price.

Conforti’s mission is “to do for dessert what Starbucks has done for coffee.” Conforti explains, “Starbucks educated people about the difference between a 50-cent cup of coffee and a $3.50 latte.” Before the 1990s, millions of people habitually bought the former and then discovered they were willing to pay more for coffee specialties. So if Americans will behave that way about coffee, Conforti reasons, why not cake?

Rensselaer might not seem like a starting point for a future purveyor of fine desserts. But Conforti says his undergraduate studies helped provide the platform for his career. “RPI is the backbone, it’s the foundation of whatever success I will have had,” he says. A as a major in management, he adds, “I really liked that my courses were coming at things from an analytical perspective,” finding that his finance classes, for instance, gave him tools he still uses.

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After Rensselaer, Conforti started out in the insurance industry, and he soon found himself as a project manager for Travelers Insurance Company in Hartford, Conn., where, Conforti says, he had an epiphany one day as he walked past restaurants on his way to the office and realized the restaurant business might provide the right challenge for him. He was promoted to a position managing a call center in Albany, but kept being drawn to thoughts of the restaurant industry. While managing insurance operations was fine, it was not the ideal line of work for his personality. “I am more of a people person. I wanted that face-to-face contact you get in a retail or restaurant environment,” Conforti says.

Conforti sees the hand of good fortune in his success. “A ny entrepreneur who tells you there is no luck involved in being successful is not telling the truth,” he says. The first example of this luck was meeting a prospective business partner at Harvard Business School with equal enthusiasm for the idea of Finale—Kim Moore, a classmate with whom he developed a second-year project at Harvard called “Room for Dessert.” Conforti and Moore analyzed the prospects for a chain of upscale dessert eateries and found the idea had enough chance for success to turn it into reality after graduating with their MBA’s.

While their Harvard credentials have helped Conforti and Moore gain attention and connections, upon graduation both took jobs in restaurants to learn more about the business and to show potential investors they were serious about their plan. Conforti took a job as a waiter, while Moore got a job at The Cheesecake Factory plating desserts. “We joked we were the lowest-paid members of our graduating class,” says Conforti. “I was making $2.63 per hour plus tips, while Kim was earning her MBA to negotiate $9 an hour from the Cheesecake Factory, instead of their usual $8 starting wage.”

Conforti took the job as a waiter to learn how to carry a tray full of dishes, open a bottle of wine, and speak the lingo of the industry. “I figured how can I, as a manager, ask my employees to do something if I myself don’t know what it entails?” Conforti asks.

Moore thinks this attitude is one of Conforti’s best business traits. “Paul has an enormous work ethic, and he’s a great leader by example,” she says. “We have a team culture. There’s no dictatorship at Finale.” A good example of the Conforti leadership style comes from a memo he gives all his managers, informally dubbed “Paul’s Profile,” about what to expect on the job, with items ranging from serious to lighthearted. “You’re allowed to make any mistake once,” notes item 13. “If the same thing happens twice, we’ll probably talk about it.” Then item 14 reads: “I sweat. Not because I’m stressed, but because I’m hot (it’s a genetic thing). Don’t read too much into it.” Conforti tends to focus on Finale’s finance and operations, while Moore generally works on the marketing and branding of the company.

By 1998, the duo had raised enough capital to open their first restaurant, figuring Boston’s nearby theater district would provide their customers. Instead, in another fortuitous development, several new restaurants opened within a few blocks of Finale. “If people come by after the theater,” says Conforti, “you might have a two-hour window of activity, after 10 p.m. With all these restaurants around, we now have a bigger window in the evening.”

Many of their customers skip dessert at other restaurants and head for Finale instead, where table service begins in the early evening. During daytime hours, customers can stop by its bakery counter for baked goods they can carry out or eat at a table.

In October 2002, Conforti and Moore opened the second branch of Finale, in the ground floor of a building just off the center of Harvard Square in neighboring Cambridge, an area heavy with pedestrians willing to pay for a gourmet dessert (the average customer spends about $17). And this summer Finale opened its third branch in the Boston suburb of Brookline. According to Conforti, the first two branches have shown revenue growth every year, with the only period of decline coming in late 2002 and early 2003, during the wider economic slump that hit Boston. And now Finale’s owners are hoping to accelerate their expansion plans. Conforti is looking at locations in the Greater Boston market, as well as sites in Providence—near his hometown of Cranston, R.I.—and Connecticut as possibilities.

All Finale venues follow the same formula: airy dining spaces with a relaxed ambience. The Boston and Cambridge branches have light streaming in from plate-glass windows on two sides, illuminating yellow walls. Dark wood tables with black tops, brown and red seats, burgundy carpets, built-in wooden wine cabinets, and wait staff dressed in black all add a slightly more dress-up, formal feeling. Jazz, swing, and big band music plays in the background.

Finale’s own research shows a significant cluster of patrons around age 30, with more women than men visiting, and a high level of education; many customers have graduate degrees. But there is no stereotypical Finale customer. Visits to its branches reveal business executives discussing plans alongside students and senior citizens—a variety Conforti finds reassuring. The point of Finale, after all, is not to make fine food exclusively for the wealthy but to bring the joys of upscale desserts to the masses.
"It's true that it can cost $15 per person at Finale," says Conforti. "But it's $15. It's not $50 or $100. Maybe instead of going to Applebee's for dinner, you eat in, but then come to Finale for dessert." And he adds, breaking into a smile, "for $15, we can make you feel like a million bucks.”

Visits to Finale, primarily the Cambridge branch, make it clear Conforti has a point. The M olten Chocolate Cake earns its “to die for” rave, and even the pre-made treats at the bakery counter are excellent. The Ultimate Chocolate Cake, which seems to reveal a hint of cherry, and the Dark Chocolate Decadence cake, a creation akin to a truffle, are dangerously addictive and cost $6 for a solid piece three inches in diameter.

Conforti and his colleagues have also been bolstered by a large helping of positive media. Since 1998 Finale has been covered or reviewed in the Boston Globe, U.S. News & World Report, Bon Appetit, and Business Week. The company also earned an endorsement carrying more weight than just about any other in New England when Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, the two-time Super Bowl M.V.P. cited Finale as one of his favorite places to eat in the Boston area, deeming it “cool” in an interview for American Airlines’ in-flight magazine.

Finale managed to gain some more yardage from the Brady connection with the quarter-back’s Visa commercials featuring Finale desserts. Meanwhile, several Boston Red Sox players have patronized the place—outfielder Manny Ramirez has stopped by to pick up desserts for his family on his way home after ball games. A variety of other celebrities have been spotted in Finale as well, including actors John Lithgow, Charles Durning, and Dana Delaney. Even in Boston, which has some entrenched, prominent eateries, Finale may be on its way to becoming a local institution.

Finale Double Chocolate Cookies

Executive Pastry Chef Nicole Coady

You’ll never make brownies again after you indulge in Double Chocolate Cookies from Finale. Some helpful tips in maximizing cookie enjoyment: Use the best chocolate you can find. It will seem like a lot of chocolate, but that is no mistake. The cookies cannot be stored for a long period of time. As this is a delicate recipe, they are best when consumed within 24 hours of baking. Avoid over baking. They will taste dry and powdery, when they are supposed to be moist and chewy.

6 eggs
2 1/2 cups granulated sugar
1 tablespoon vanilla
6 ounces bittersweet chocolate
17 ounces semi-sweet chocolate
1 cup unsalted butter
1 cup all purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
3/4 teaspoon salt

Melt chocolate and butter together in a double boiler until blended. In a separate bowl, whip eggs, sugar, and vanilla until thick and light. In another bowl, sift all dry ingredients together. Slowly add chocolate mixture to egg mixture on low speed. Fold in flour mixture slowly. The cookie batter will be liquid. A low to sit for three hours at room temperature.

Scoop heaping tablespoons onto cookie sheet that has been lightly sprayed with a non-stick spray, at least 3 inches apart. Bake on a doubled cookie sheet (one sheet inside of another) at 350 degrees for 10 to 15 minutes or until the center of the cookie is firm to the touch (cake-like firmness). Finale Double Chocolate Cookies should be baked as close to serving time as possible. Yields 3 to 4 dozen cookies.

In fact, in the restaurant industry, Finale is following a familiar pattern. A nationwide chain often starts out as a popular local eatery, establishes a strong reputation over many years, then expands locally and regionally. If a company has a good idea and good timing, it might succeed nationally. Starbucks opened in Seattle in 1971 and remained a local operation until 1987, when it still had a grand total of just 17 outlets. One of Starbucks’ competitors, Peet’s Coffee & Tea, opened as one cafe in Berkeley, Calif., in 1966, and is now a publicly traded company with more than 120 outlets and customers intensely loyal to the brand.

Conforti thinks Finale can settle somewhere in between these two business models. “Are we going to have 11,000 locations?” he asks. “Probably not. We’ve been doing this eight years and we have three branches. But can we open a few hundred of these? I think so.”

Conforti and M oreo envision Finale having outlets in the 75 biggest metropolitan areas in the country. Indeed, adds Conforti, “That’s why I’m interested in trying Providence. It is just about the 75th biggest market in the country. And it’s close. We can supply Providence from here. If we opened our next location in O maha, hundreds of miles from the next-largest city, it might be a lot harder.”

But could it be that Boston—a relatively affluent city with a host of upscale restaurants and a lot of “foot traffic”—is especially well-suited for a place like Finale? Conforti doubts it, asserting the concept should work all over. “Everybody loves dessert,” he says. “Even those who say they don’t like it can be tempted to give a sensational dessert a try.”

Which means a Finale could be opening in a city near you in the future. Prepare to go back to school in dessert appreciation.