



ELVIS PERAZA / SAN ANTONIO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Alfonso Tomita launched his first Sushi Zushi restaurant in 2001, just a few months after 9/11.

Local restaurant owner is fishing where customers bite

BY MIKE W. THOMAS

When Alfonso Tomita needed to expand his Sushi Zushi restaurant in 2002, he found that it was necessary to do so while keeping it open for customers.

"It was like changing the turbine on a jet plane while you are flying," he recalls. But the customers were happy that the restaurant was growing and didn't seem to mind the construction.

"I had customers tell me they were bringing all their friends so that we would survive and stay open," Tomita says. "We had great support from the community."

And survive they did. Tomita expanded his Northwest Side restaurant in the Colonnade shopping center from 2,000 square feet to 4,000 square feet. The next year he built another restaurant in the Stone Oak area on the city's North Central Side that was 5,000 square feet.

Today Tomita owns eight Sushi Zushi restaurants, with four in San Antonio, See **SUSHI ZUSHI**, Page 49

Eagle Ford Shale nets new employer for S.A.

Louisiana safety firm opening regional office here

BY SANFORD NOWLIN

Lafayette, La.-based Safety Management Systems has opened a San Antonio operation that could grow to employ up to 100 people providing safety services to oil and gas firms in the nearby Eagle Ford Shale.

The company launched the operation late last month with 40 employees, says Joe F. Moseley III, regional operations manager. Some will teach safety classes to oilfield workers at SMS' new San Antonio offices. Most, however,

will work at job sites across the thriving 24-county shale play.

"Our people are safety advisers, if you will," Moseley says. "They work in the field, helping the companies with OSHA compliance, on the various safety standards they need to meet, and of course keeping their workers safe day-to-day."

SMS is the latest firm opening an Alamo City operation to support energy companies tapping the Eagle Ford's oil and gas reserves. According to a recent University of Texas at San Antonio study, Bexar County is poised to gain 4,000 jobs by 2020 related to work in the shale.

SMS's Northeast San Antonio offices at 11127 Osgood St. include a four-classroom training complex featuring equipment such as CPR-training mannequins and fire gear. When the company makes additional hires, it will seek staff with state and federal safety and safety-training certifications, Moseley adds.

Energy giant Shell and pipeline operator El Paso Corp. are among its Eagle Ford clients.

The company also operates offices serving other shale plays such as North Dakota's Bakken Shale, Wyoming's Pinedale Anticline and Arkansas' Haynesville Shale.

Its flagship training facility in Lafayette trains up to 30,000 See **SMS**, Page 49



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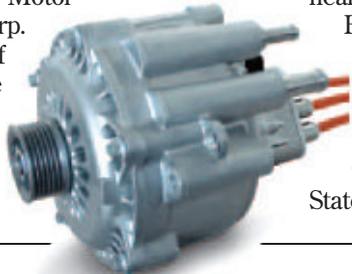
Safety Management Systems Regional Operations Manager Joe F. Moseley III shows off fire gear on administrative assistant Neccia Sanchez during a safety training class.

Auto-parts maker Continental is expanding workforce in Seguin

BY SANFORD NOWLIN

Continental Automotive Systems will hire 100 additional full-time workers at its plant in Seguin to keep up with growing orders from automakers such as Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Corp.

The company, a unit of German conglomerate Continental AG, employs 1,000 people in the city just east of San Antonio, producing electronic



components for the auto industry.

Two of the nation's "big three" automakers sought bankruptcy reorganization in 2009 as new-car purchases dropped by nearly half during the recession.

But demand is rising again, and Continental — which produces control modules for the engines and transmissions for one of every three cars sold in the United States — is reaping the benefits.



"Our volumes have picked up this year," says Eric Garza-Colvin, human resources manager for the 320,000-square-foot plant. "We're seeing extra orders from our customers, so we're growing here in Seguin. There are a lot of opportunities."

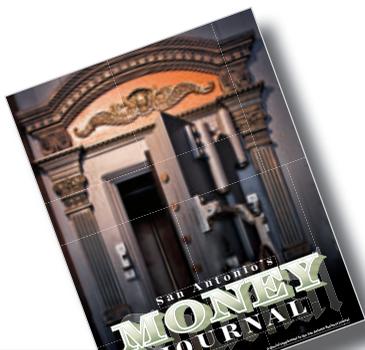
The Seguin plant primarily produces electronic controls for auto engines, transmissions and hybrid-control units.

Major auto producers — "just about everybody but Toyota," Garza-Colvin says

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SUSHI ZUSHI: San Antonio restaurant chain is looking to add more locations in Texas

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two in Austin and two in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. And he plans to open at least two more in the Houston area in 2012.

What has sparked that kind of growth, Tomita says, is a focus on American-style service and hospitality while providing a full and diverse menu of the highest quality Japanese sushi available.

"Most other sushi restaurants have a home-style feel rather than an American style of service," Tomita says. "We want our customers to feel welcome when they come in to our restaurants."

Sushi Zushi restaurants have large sushi bars with room for up to six sushi chefs, Tomita says. He also has expanded the menu to appeal to the palates of South Texans by including local fare such as serrano and jalapeño peppers, cilantro and chipolte.

Business school

Tomita, who is Japanese, grew up in Mexico City where his family owns a chain of office supply stores.

He came to San Antonio in 1995 to work on his MBA at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

While in school, he worked with Lynda de laViña, then a professor and now the dean of the business school.

Tomita has been invited back to UTSA several times to speak to students about his business experiences.

He says he had no idea that he would end up running a chain of restaurants while he was in school. After graduation, he took a job consulting for Encyclopedia Britannica, which was then trying to transition from selling printed encyclopedias to offering language courses.

Tomita moved to Japan where the company was selling English language courses and soon became president of the company's Japan division.

The problem with the language courses, Tomita says, was that they were expensive — costing several thousand dollars — and the sales staff was often criticized for being too pushy. So he began to help transform the company from being a language school into being an Internet-based information portal. Unfortunately, he says, those dreams vanished with the collapse of the dot-com bubble in 2001.

So Tomita decided to move back to San Antonio because he loved it while going to

school here. When he came back, he noticed that sushi restaurants were starting to become more popular across the United States but had not yet caught on in San Antonio. So he decided to open his own.

"My wife and I had always had this romantic idea of opening a restaurant when we retired," he says. "We just didn't realize then how much hard work was involved."

Tomita opened his first restaurant only a few months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks had occurred. In retrospect, he says that may have helped his business because it allowed him to get a good deal on the space, in what used to be a bagel shop.

"I had to admit that we were not a franchise and we had no experience, but (the property managers) decided to let us move in anyway because there were not a lot of other options (for them) at the time."

Tomita worked with the San Antonio Small Business Development Center from 2001-

2005 as he opened his first three restaurants. David Baenziger, assistant director of SBDC, says the center helped Tomita develop a business plan, conduct site analysis and demo-



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Sushi Zushi owner Alfonso Tomita plans to open two new restaurants in Houston next year.

graphic research and find lenders.

The SBDC has not worked with Tomita since 2005.

"Some entrepreneurs learn enough and become savvy enough that they understand everything and don't need our assistance once they get going," he says. "But it depends on the client. We are happy to keep working with people as they have needs. Mr. Tomita has clearly been successful."

Top chefs

Tomita also was able to attract some top quality sushi chefs from the Dallas area to come down and work at his new restaurant. That was partly due to the economic downturn following 9/11 as well, he says.

Many of the top restaurants in Dallas were not doing well at that time, so Tomita was able to lure the chefs to San Antonio, even though it was seen somewhat as a step down at the time. But once they got here, the chefs were excited by the enthusiastic response they were seeing from customers.

"(The chefs) are very sensitive about how people leave their plates," Tomita says. "When they see people cleaning their plates and not even leaving a grain of rice, they see that as a vote of confidence."

Tomita says he believes strongly in the Japanese philosophy of employment for life. He tries to make sure all of his employees have a career path that allows them to stay with the company for the long term. This philosophy has fostered the low turnover rate Sushi Zushi has experienced over the years — around 25 percent as opposed to the more common 100 percent in the restaurant business, he says.

"I believe when employees feel appreciated, that is when quality happens," Tomita says. "That is when you do your best effort and that is what we depend on everyday to provide good service."

Sushi Zushi

Owner: Alfonso Tomita

Restaurants: A total of eight in Dallas, Austin and San Antonio — with plans to open two more in Houston in 2012

San Antonio restaurant locations:

- The Colonnade — I-10 @ Wurzbach
 - The International Center — 203 S. St. Mary's @ Market
 - Lincoln Heights Shopping Center — 999 E. Basse @ Broadway
 - Stone Oak Plaza II — 18720 Stone Oak @ Loop 1604
- Employees:** 514
Annual revenues: \$20 million
Web site: www.sushizushi.com

Tomita's business currently has 514 employees and annual revenues of \$20 million. He says same-store sales have tapered somewhat in recent years as the restaurants have reached capacity, but he still saw 6 percent growth this year compared to the year before. Having a stable staff allows Sushi Zushi to maintain a large and diverse menu because learning how to prepare all those dishes takes time and experience, he says.

About 25 percent of Sushi Zushi's business is for pick-up and delivery, but Tomita says he has resisted the idea of opening up a delivery-only restaurant because he feels it is important for people to be able to go in and see where the food is being prepared.

However, he says he is looking into building a central kitchen where the various sauces used in the sushi preparation can be prepared and distributed to the restaurants.

The trend in the restaurant industry today is toward foods that are fresh, sustainable and healthy, says Wendy Saari, vice president of marketing for the Texas Restaurant Association.

That would help to explain the popularity of sushi restaurants in particular, she adds.

"We are finding that people are looking for healthier alternatives and they are also willing to be more adventurous in their food selection," she says.

A recent survey by the National Restaurant Association showed that ethnic foods, in general, are increasing in popularity across the country, and sushi restaurants fit right into that trend, Saari adds.

SMS: Louisiana firm will provide safety training to energy firms working the Eagle Ford Shale

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workers yearly.

"We'd like to have 5,000 people train here in the first year," Moseley says. "That seems like a pretty realistic goal."

Acadian connection

SMS's corporate parent, Acadian Cos., also owns Acadian Ambulance Service, the emergency provider for unincorporated areas of Bexar County and several cities inside the county. In addition to its training and safety-monitoring work, SMS operates health and wellness programs for field workers and provides remote paramedic services for job sites.

"We're there as an extra part of the team, making sure everyone's following safety procedures, making sure people are working with safety guards in place," Moseley

says. "There are a lot of serious rules people need to be aware of on an oil-drilling site."

Safety is a high priority around drilling operations, Moseley says. Falls from the top of oil drilling rigs can cause death or serious injury, as can objects accidentally dropped from one. Employees and contractors routinely work around flammable materials and liquids under extreme pressure.

Two people were injured in the shale last month from an explosion at a Karnes County oil rig owned by Amerril Energy Co. A truck driver was pumping hot oil into the well when backflow set the truck on fire, according to state safety records.

Flow of investment

David Marquez, economic development

THE KEY IS THESE COMPANIES

NEED TO GET UP AND

RUNNING FAST.'

David Marquez

Economic development director
Bexar County

director for Bexar County, says he is unfamiliar with SMS's new location in San Antonio. However, he says it's not surprising given the recent flow of Eagle Ford-related investment in the area.

The county is working with oilfield-services luminaries Halliburton Co. and Schlumberger to develop significant corporate campuses in San Antonio. Houston's Baker Hughes Inc. and Swiss firm

Weatherford International Inc. also said they will build operations here.

"The key is these companies need to get up and running fast," Marquez says. "They need massive amounts of people. They can't just hire in dribs and drabs. You can't find that many people in the counties down south."

The Alamo City's airport, highway access and other infrastructure also make it an attractive location for companies such as SMS, says Javier Oyakawa, senior economist for the UTSA's Center for Community and Business Research.

"I think we're seeing an economic input in San Antonio beyond what we originally expected," he says. "We didn't think of things like safety training companies coming to San Antonio because of the Eagle Ford. It's been kind of a surprise — a nice surprise."