



On a roll
Shane Thompson and his backers believe the rib shack he opened near Atlanta four years ago could be a national chain. 7D

DallasNews.com

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OPENING BELL All is calm in markets for holiday

Two regional manufacturing indexes will kick off a quiet week between holidays today.

The Richmond Federal Reserve's manufacturing gauge is due at 9 a.m. Dallas time, followed by the Dallas Fed's counterpart at 9:30 a.m.

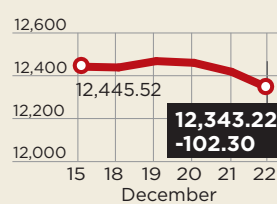
Wall Street will be almost empty this week. No initial public offerings are planned, and only the thinnest smattering of companies have scheduled earnings reports.

From wire reports

THE MARKETS

Last week's trading

DOW JONES



NASDAQ



S&P 500



ENERGY WATCH

Weekly changes



Crude
\$62.41
-1.02
Near-term futures, per barrel

Gas
\$2.21
+0.023
Dallas, regular unleaded

INSIDE BUSINESS

MySpace fighting spam, scams

The site bills itself as a "place for friends." Increasingly, it is also a place for unfriendly attacks from digital miscreants. 2D



Nothing to watch in DirecTV's switch

Subscribers will see little immediate change after the deal Friday in which Liberty Media Corp. became the largest shareholder in DirecTV. But in the long run, the service may add features that could benefit consumers. 4D

Small firms forgo retirement plans

Most small companies' owners believe they can't afford to help workers save, but new financial products could fit their budgets. **Small Business Report, 6D**

Robert Miller

Business Day column, 4D

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The little things that ring up big smiles

Growing popularity of gift cards means fewer returns after Christmas

By MARIA HALKIAS
Staff Writer

Millions of Americans will go shopping this week, with an estimated \$24 billion worth of gift cards collectively burning holes in their pockets.

The continued growth of gift

cards means lines at registers should remain long, while lines at return counters will see fewer dads bringing back purple sweaters.

"It would logically follow that if someone receives a gift card that they'll use it to get exactly what they want and there should be fewer issues with size, color and personal preference," said Sherrie McAvoy, partner and U.S. retail sector leader for Deloitte & Touche LLP.

The holiday season isn't quite over for retailers. And they'll be

watching their numbers closely because, according to accounting rules, they can't book gift card sales as revenue until they are used to purchase merchandise.

"The week after Christmas has come to represent 10 to 15 percent of a season's sales," said Scott Krugman, spokesman for the industry's National Retail Federation.

Retailers don't report gift card sales separately, but surveys find that shoppers are using them more. "We think there was a big surge

of gift card buying the last weekend, as the level of procrastinating was a little higher this year," Ms. McAvoy said.

Retailers also like gift cards because shoppers who use them are more likely to pay full price for merchandise and will supplement the card value with their own money. Also, some shoppers lose their cards or never use them, giving chains a windfall.

The National Retail Federation has commissioned a gift card sur-

vey from BIGresearch the last four years. It estimated gift card sales would reach \$24.8 billion this holiday season, up from \$18.5 billion in 2005. The average consumer planned to spend more on gift cards — \$116.51, compared with \$88.03 in 2005.

Still, an estimated one in three consumers will return a gift this year, according to the retail organization.

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What color is your bamboo shoot?



Photos by JOHNNY HANSON/Special Contributor

Plants grown at Hibiscus Hill Plantation in Waller, Texas, can be used to color food products like culinary vinegar. Producers of organic foods are fueling demand for organically grown crops to be used as pigment in their products.

Organic foods try to lure buyers with right tint

Demand for pigment leads farms to grow crops for their natural hue

By PAULA LAVIGNE
Staff Writer

The makers of organic food can't put artificial colors in their products. But they can use colors from natural sources such as beets, seeds and flowers.

The result can mean beets in ice cream, carrots in candy and vegetables in fruit smoothies — which may not sound appetizing but is supposed to make organic food more desirable.

To compete with mainstream rivals, the rapid-

ly growing organic foods industry wants its pastas, cookies, cereals and other foods to appeal to the eye as much as the conscience of the average consumer.

"Food is a sensory experience," said Kelly Shea, vice president of organic stewardship for White-Wave Foods, a subsidiary of Dallas-based Dean Foods Co., one of the largest producers of organic products. "When we eat, we're feeding our taste buds and our eyes and our nose."

Organic colors come in a relatively limited palette. Yet the organic trend is to encourage the creativity to devise natural coloring agents.

Certain strains of beets and carrots — along

"A hibiscus is ... a giant billboard saying, 'Here I am. Eat me. I'm healthy.' It's nothing but pure pigment the size of your hand."

Carlton Colmenares, research farm manager for Hibiscus Hill Plantation

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Late rush expected as Medicare deadline looms

Seniors have been slow to enroll in drug plans, but there's still time left

By BOB MOOS
Staff Writer

Mary Farrell is under some deadline pressure. Like millions of other Medicare beneficiaries, the 70-year-old Dallas woman has until midnight New Year's Eve to switch to a drug plan that better fits her needs and pocketbook.

Ms. Farrell, who's on 11 pre-

scriptions, has been shopping for a plan that will reduce her out-of-pocket expenses in 2007. This year, she fell into the drug benefit's coverage gap in June and spent more than \$3,000 for her medicine.

"I'm looking for a comprehensive plan that's going to help me pay for my prescriptions through the doughnut hole," the retired systems analyst said. "I've narrowed my search to two plans and just have to compare them."

Medicare's second open enrollment for drug coverage has been quieter than the first one a year ago,

but Medicare officials are still bracing for a last-minute rush as seniors try to find a better deal before the New Year's Eve deadline.

Polls by health care organizations have shown that about one in 10 seniors with Medicare drug plans, or slightly more than 2 million beneficiaries, will make a switch during this year's six-week enrollment period.

Seniors who are satisfied with their drug plan don't need to sign up again; they'll be automatically re-enrolled for 2007.

Still, Medicare officials urge all

beneficiaries to check their drug plan's cost and coverage for 2007, since many insurers have announced changes in their monthly premiums, co-payments and the medications they'll cover next year.

"What worked for you this year may not be your best option for next year," said acting Medicare administrator Leslie Norwalk.

Texas seniors can choose from 60 stand-alone drug plans for 2007, 13 more than in 2006.

A nationwide survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 77 percent of enrollees belong to

DigitalEXTRA

6 Links: Log on for a table comparing the plans available to Texans.

DallasNews.com/Extra

plans that are increasing their premiums for 2007 and that 28 percent are in plans where the increases exceed 25 percent.

Kaiser also discovered that more plans will offer gap coverage

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