



NICHHA USA CASE STUDY

Portillo's Restaurants: Preserving a Beloved Brand Look While Accelerating National Expansion



PROJECT DETAILS

LOCATION

Texas and Arizona Expansion

PRODUCT(S)

RoughSawn (Espresso), Sandstone (Autumn Brown), CanyonBrick (Shale Brown), TuffBlock (2 Custom Colors)

PROJECT TYPE

National Brands Quick Serve Restaurant

DESIGNER

Daliah Zarour

As **Portillo's Restaurants** continues expanding far beyond its Chicago roots, the design team faced a growing challenge: how to carry forward the iconic warehouse-inspired aesthetic of traditional Chicago brick, warm wood tones, and industrial character into new markets across the country. The company's Texas and Arizona locations needed to feel unmistakably "Portillo's," even though local materials, labor, and construction demands differed significantly from those in Illinois. Maintaining the signature look while staying on schedule and on budget became increasingly difficult, especially as the company's development pipeline accelerated.

CHALLENGE

Portillo's needed to maintain its iconic Chicago warehouse aesthetic while expanding into new states with faster timelines, different labor conditions, and tighter material constraints.

SOLUTION

By using Nichiha's durable, realistic, and versatile cladding across interior and exterior surfaces, Portillo's preserved its signature look while accelerating construction and standardizing design.

RESULTS

The company now achieves consistent brand identity across markets, faster builds, and long-lasting performance in high-traffic environments, all supported by hands-on collaboration from the Nichiha team.



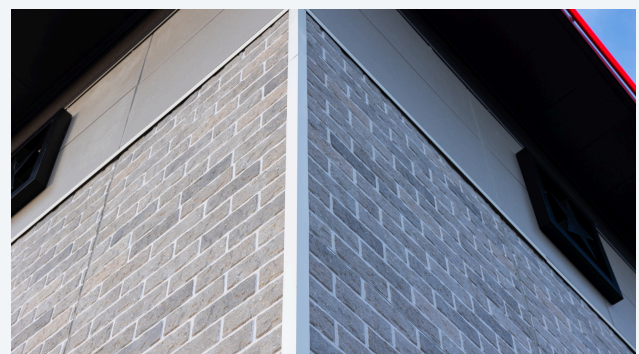
PROTECTING CHICAGO TRADITION

In 1963, Dick Portillo invested \$1,100 into a small trailer to open the first Portillo's hot dog stand in Villa Park, IL, which he called "The Dog House." Today there are more than 70 locations across several states.

Design Manager [Daliah Zarour](#) needed a solution that delivered the same visual authenticity and texture as brick and reclaimed wood, but with far greater durability, flexibility, and efficiency. Early in her search, she found that Nichiha offered something rare: a cladding system that looked incredibly realistic up close, performed reliably under heavy use, and could be installed at almost any stage of construction. What began as an interior design experiment quickly turned into a breakthrough. Nichiha's materials allowed her to recreate Portillo's signature warehouse feel inside and out, without relying on traditional masonry or custom carpentry, both of which were slower, more expensive, and increasingly difficult to source consistently across states.

Zarour quickly saw the advantages. Nichiha's brick panels carried deep shadow lines and tactile texture that read authentically from both near and far. When illuminated at night the façades came to life with the same depth and character that guests recognized from Chicago. At the same time, fiber cement durability meant the material held up to harsh sun, heat, cleaning requirements, and the constant wear of high-traffic restaurant environments. The ability to use the same panel technology indoors and outdoors gave Zarour more creative freedom, allowing her to unify entire restaurant concepts through consistent finishes, colors, and textures.

The design team was also able to blend multiple looks seamlessly on the same façade. Wood-look panels, brick textures, and TuffBlock base elements all installed with the same system, creating visual variety without complicating construction. Nichiha even color-matched custom browns and beiges to ensure that every finish, from rustic wood tones to muted brick hues, worked harmoniously across the brand palette. This meant every new restaurant could honor the company's heritage while still adapting to local contexts and architectural constraints.





Today, as Portillo's grows nationwide, Nichiha has become a key component of maintaining the brand's recognizable identity, delivering the warmth, texture, and character that define the Portillo's experience, along with the durability and efficiency required for modern expansion. The result is a cohesive look that honors Chicago heritage while supporting rapid, reliable development across the country.

Beyond materials, Portillo's found a genuine partner in Nichiha. The company's architectural and technical teams supported Portillo's from concept through construction, often visiting job sites, walking installers through details, and resolving challenges in real time. As Zarour put it, Nichiha was present "every step of the way," offering prompt communication, troubleshooting, and a shared commitment to the final product.



"Knowing that I can use it for interior and exterior was very helpful when I was designing restaurants because I can get whatever feel and texture I needed with a very durable material."

DALIAH ZAROOR, DESIGN MANAGER
PORTILLO'S RESTAURANTS



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Nichiha USA, Inc., a subsidiary of Nichiha Corporation, was established 1998 and is headquartered in Johns Creek, GA. Nichiha Corporation, an international leader in fiber cement technology for more than 35 years, has 13 plants worldwide and markets distinct patterns of fiber cement siding products in the U.S. In 2007, Nichiha opened its first U.S. manufacturing plant in Macon, GA, responding to an increase in demand for fiber cement products in the Southeast market. For more information, call 1.86.NICHHA1 or visit www.nichiha.com. © 2025 Nichiha USA, Inc. All rights reserved.