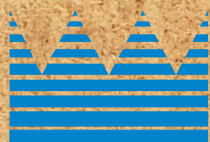


2016 fast casual  
**TOP 100**  
**MOVERS & SHAKERS**

Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment



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## Executive Summary

As the popularity of fast casual brands increases so does the number of emerging concepts, accompanied by a multitude of QSR and full-service franchises that are now rebranding in an effort to join our exclusive club.

With all the new competition, choosing the 2016 Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers was even more difficult than usual. To help narrow down the choices this year, we accepted self-nominations, requiring each brand to answer a variety of questions about their businesses. Besides gaining a lot of quantitative knowledge via growth stats to back up what we already knew — the growth of the industry is on fire — this info also helped judges narrow down the hundreds of nominations. The panel settled on 75 brands and 25 executives to round out the final Top 100.

Judges not only rated brands on growth and sales, but also on innovation across several categories, including technology, design, customer experience, sustainability and menu offerings.

**And the winner is....**

The top spot unanimously went to Dickey's Barbecue Pit for not only its impressive growth performance (a 19-percent year-over-year growth rate with nearly 550 units and plans to open 100 this year), but also because it is a leader when it comes to implementing technology to enhance the guest experience. It also recently launched a new store prototype with an industrial-chic style and sustainable elements

**The people**

While the 75 brands on our list are ranked in order, the 25 executives are in no particular order. Considering it takes so many brilliant and innovative people to lead an industry that everyone wants a bite out of, it will come as no surprise that the competition was fierce.

We tried our best and think you will agree that the 25 execs on the list are truly brand and industry leaders.

**Cherryh Cansler**

Editorial director

Networld Media Group



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## #1 Dickey's Barbecue Pit

Dickey's takes our No. 1 spot for a plethora of reasons, including a 19 percent year-over-year growth rate, an impressive use of technology to enhance business operations and a cutting-edge training program.

Under the watchful eye of CEO Roland Dickey Jr., the chain opened its 500th store in early 2015 and now operates nearly 545 in 44 states. It will open 100 this year and has plans in the works to expand internationally in 2017.

Another way the brand is leading the industry is via "Smoke Stack," a big data, cloud-based platform that it developed in house under the direction of CIO Laura Rea Dickey. The company's speed of growth and the inability of its previous store-by-store reporting tool to combine data from all restaurants and source systems to provide critical companywide insights inspired the platform.

As if that weren't enough to land the brand at the top of our list, it recently launched a new store prototype with an industrial-chic style and sustainable elements, including a smoker that uses



Dickey's proprietary wood-blend pellets. Dickey's also rolled out a new training program to incorporate a larger focus on the chain's core values and meet the needs of millennial learners and beyond, said Roland Dickey, who employs a full-time training staff at the corporate office. The chain spends over \$1 million each year to make sure employees are on their A games.





## #2 Tom+Chee

Trew Quackenbush, Corey Ward and their wives — Jenn and Jenny — wanted to start a tomato-soup-and-grilled-cheese restaurant in Cincinnati but couldn't afford restaurant space or even a food truck. What they had, however, was a tent and a griddle, so the couples pitched the tent next to an ice-skating rink on Cincinnati's Fountain Square in late 2009, augmenting their original soup-and-sandwich concept with rinkside hot chocolate.



"We went through gallons of hot chocolate that winter," Corey said. "It kept us in business."



But they sold a lot of grilled cheese, too; 363 days after serving that first sandwich at the ice rink, Tom+Chee opened its first brick-and-mortar restaurant. The chain now has about 40 units, thanks to Trew and Corey appearing on ABC's "Shark Tank" in 2013. The friends struck a deal with two of the show's investors, Mark Cuban and Barbara Corcoran, for \$600,000 and also received more than 9,000 requests from people hoping to become franchisees.

Tom+Chee has received national attention from "Man v. Food Nation," NBC's "Today" show, ABC's "The Chew," the Huffington Post and NPR.

## #3 Slapfish

Slapfish's goal of redefining seafood to make it sexy and approachable is in full swing as the six-unit chain not only is signing franchise deals but also is growing via corporate-owned units. The chain, which reported \$1.3 million in sales last year, is planning to add 10 locations before the year's end and is creating an app to allow customers to order and pay with its reward points program.



Although the sustainable seafood brand is based in Huntington Beach, California, it enjoyed national exposure this past year while its founder and

executive chef, Andrew Gruel, hosted FYI's "Say It To My Face," a reality TV series that shows how critical it is for restaurants to correctly handle online reviews.

"I personally respond to each and every online review we get — positive or negative — with an individualized response," Gruel said. "And I know, that might sound excessive or just plain crazy. I agree, it is kind of crazy! But that is how much you have to CARE — because it will directly impact your bottom line."





## #4 Panera Bread Co.

Panera Bread has been leading the industry when it comes to technology since 2012, when it first launched Panera 2.0, the chain's digital transformation of its customer journey. The rollout has positioned Panera as a leading restaurant e-tailer, offering end-to-end digital pathways, including Rapid Pick Up and Fast Lane Kiosks, which increase accessibility for both to-go and dine-in guests.

"Our 2.0 cafés are demonstrating that restaurants can leverage



technology — not just to improve a stand-alone function like payment, but throughout the customer journey — to heighten and differentiate the total

experience," said Ron Shaich, founder and CEO.

Panera's digital ordering interfaces also integrate with the company's

loyalty program — MyPanera — which is used in 60 percent of digital orders, and more than 80 percent of mobile orders through the Panera app. By linking digital orders to the program, guests are able to save their favorites, earn and track rewards, and receive 1:1 tailored content. Since Rapid Pick Up launched nationally in August 2014, 2.2 million guests have downloaded the Panera mobile app.

The company has obtained patent protection for aspects of the Panera 2.0 platform.



## #5 Tropical Smoothie Café

Tropical Smoothie Café began a brand refresh last year that included not only a new logo, café design and menu rollout, but also a revitalized focus on franchisee relations — from improving food and labor costs to increasing profitability and adding better

communication systems, including the company's intranet, TropLife.

This past year was the best in the chain's history; it reported same-store sales of 11.25 percent, and its sixth consecutive quarter of double-digit positive comp sales, and

it signed franchise agreements to develop 199 new cafés across the U.S. Traffic and sales were up by 7.8 percent and 3.5 percent, respectively, over 2014. Additionally, the company, which plans

to hit 500 units by the end of 2016, reported its highest-ever average unit volume of more than \$578,000, with the top 50 percent of cafés reporting an AUV of \$734,000.

A leader in embracing technology, the chain is rolling out several solutions this year, including an app-based loyalty, rewards and mobile pay program; a new POS system that includes a consumer-facing scanner and Jolt, a performance accountability and training tool that has a learning library, a franchisee/employee communication tool, a data-code printing and labeling to help increase food-safety compliance, HR functions, a labor module and a gamification point system to recognize superstars versus poor performers.





## #6 Shake Shack

Shake Shack has continued to shake up the industry since going public in 2015, reporting that its total revenue increased 60.8 percent to \$190.6 million, while same-store sales increased 13.3 in 2015. Last year, the chain also opened 21 units: 13 domestic company-operated stores and eight international-licensed ones.

Since the original Shack opened in 2004, in New York City's Madison Square Park, the company has established more than 70 locations throughout 13 states and around the world, including in London, Istanbul, Dubai, Moscow and Tokyo.

"We are very proud of what we have been able to accomplish in our first year as a public

company,"

said CEO

Randy Garutti,

"Looking ahead, 2016 is shaping up to be another outstanding year with a strong pipeline of new domestic openings, and plans to enter four new markets."

The chain embraced chicken last year as it added a chicken sandwich to the menu, after testing it at Brooklyn Shacks.

"The Chick'n Shack embodies our modern approach to fine casual American cooking," said Shake Shack Culinary Director Mark Rosati. "It's about providing a simple, pleasurable, uncomplicated experience, but with high-quality, responsibly sourced ingredients. It wasn't until we found the chicken sandwich to be as flavorful as our ShackBurger that we knew we'd crafted something special that had earned its place on the menu."



## #7 &pizza

In 2012, &pizza's co-founders, Michael Lastoria and Steve Salis, set out to create a different kind of pizza concept with the following ethos: to celebrate oneness, make it personal, keep it fresh and elevate everything.

Staying true to its core values, &pizza has expanded to 13 locations in the Washington, D.C., area and has become a part of the "urban fabric of the community," from how it refers to employees as tribe members to the localized design of the stores. Employees are so loyal, in fact, that many have the

brand's ampersand logo tattooed on their bodies.

"We had 10 people in a tattoo shop getting the 'ampersand' tattooed on them," Lastoria said. "It's a really cool thing. It's a different thing," Lastoria said.

The brand, which plans to open eight shops in 2016, is focused on strategic brand extensions, including &TEA, &WINE and &SNACKS.





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## #8 BONMi

BONMi — a Vietnamese-inspired brand that serves banh mi sandwiches, noodles and rice bowls and green — sources clean ingredients and makes its items by hand from scratch. For meats, BONMi chefs use sous-vide cooking techniques, which require no ventilation and are intended to cook meat more evenly, ensuring that the inside is properly cooked without overcooking the outside, while retaining moisture. Food is sealed in airtight

plastic bags then placed in a water bath or in a temperature-controlled steam environment for longer than normal cooking times—96 hours or more.

Although the chain got its start in Washington, D.C., it now is based in New

York City and has three units with . It has partnered with Fransmart to begin franchising all over the country and will open at least five units in 2016, said Brian Berger, co-CEO and a principal at JBH Advisory Group, the concept's developer and group of investors behind BONMi. The other co-CEO is Lynne Jacoby.

In March, BONMi opened a location inside an NYC Whole Foods Market; it also has partnered with the retailer to support the Whole Planet Foundation, which has a mission of poverty alleviation through microcredit in communities around the world that supply Whole Foods Market stores with products.



## #9 Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza

Blaze — founded in 2012 in Irvine, California — is one of the leaders in the fast casual pizza category, with more than 115 operating units and plans in place to open its 1,000th location before its 10th birthday. In 2015, it opened 55 units and reported a 7 percent increase in same-store sales and \$1.4 million in

average unit volume.

This year's growth plans include adding 70 to 80 more units, including a site at Walt Disney World.

The chain launched a new mobile app this year, enabling guests to order and pay from their smartphones,

while earning their way to free pizzas and other Blaze benefits. It also leverages mobile-sales reporting, online ordering, an NCR/Aloha POS and digital-platform intelligence to review all guest comments.

"We're a young company, but already we have hundreds of thousands of fans on social media, and had over a hundred thousand online orders last year alone, so we certainly recognize the importance of technology in our business," said Jim Mizes, president and COO of Blaze Pizza. "Guests today want to be part of the conversation, and be able to order, pay and earn loyalty from their phones. Now, we have the tool in place to make this easy. We're thrilled with the initial response the app has received."



**FAST-FIRE'D.**





## #10 Smashburger

Smashburger is one of the nation's fastest-growing better-burger chains, with more than 350 restaurant units employing nearly 7,500 employees. The chain, founded by Tom Ryan, continues to experience 20-25 percent unit growth year over year and plans to open 60-80 units this year.

Smashburger not only sold 187 franchise units in 2015, it also sold 40 percent of the company to Jollibee Foods Corp., Asia's largest restaurant company.

Jollibee, which operates more than 3,000 restaurants worldwide, will help Smashburger expand into Asia and additional areas of Europe over the next several years.

World domination seems to be in the cards for the chain, as it

recently opened in the UK, expects to open 25 units

in Egypt in the next several years and has increased its focus on growing the brand's presence in nontraditional locations, including airports, casinos and college campuses.

To appeal to millennial consumers, Smashburger has increased its focus on building its social media following and engagement by hiring a new millennial-focused agency and putting a larger budget toward engaging younger customers. With improved photography and videos, the brand more than tripled its fan following on Instagram last year and debuted its presence on Snapchat and YouTube. It also launched its most successful social media campaign to help promote a limited-time offering that eventually became the brand's highest-selling LTO item in company history.



**SMASHED FRESH. SERVED DELICIOUS.**



## #11 Pincho Factory

Although the brothers-and-cousin team of Nedal and Nizar Ahmad and Otto Othman launched Miami-based Pincho Factory in 2010 on a shoestring budget — \$77,000 to be exact — the chain reported \$2.5 million in sales last year. The idea for the concept came from a Fourth of July family barbecue when Nedal was grilling burgers and pinchos, a small snack often served on a kebab.

"I looked at him and said, 'Man, I wish we could eat like this every day. I'm so tired of eating burgers that we have no idea what they are made of,'" Otto said.

With only \$6.27 left in Nedal's bank account, the first Pincho Factory opened in November 2010. The restaurant has a

locally brewed beer, 627 Ale, named after that \$6.27.

The chain since has been nominated "best fast casual" in 14 U.S. cities by Zagat.com, despite having only four units in operation with 10 more under development. However, the partners have big growth plans to open 50 stores by 2018 and recently opened a location inside American Airlines Arena, home of the Miami Heat basketball team.

## #12 Dog Haus

With 14 franchised and two corporate locations, Dog Haus is filling a niche market by offering gourmet hot dogs and sausages. Another 30 units will open in 2016, giving the brand a presence across

eight states, including Colorado, California and Arizona.

Dog Haus, which reported \$1.3 million in average unit sales per store last year and



has 100 franchise deals in place, relies on various forms of technology to ensure that operations go smoothly. Examples include FranConnect, ChowNow, Focus POS, Wunderlist and Zenreach.



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Additionally, two franchise locations offer an iPourIt beer system that allows guests to dispense their brews through an iPad system.

Last year, the chain added a highly specialized team to monitor customer feedback on all channels. It also made a goal to work with each location to cut down on response times to put the customer's experience first.

"As excited as we are about our growth, in truth the number of franchises we sell is important only if the quality of the experience is maintained," said Co-founder Quasim Riaz. "We started Dog Haus because we wanted to offer guests something better than what previously existed in the category. We've been successful in that regard and plan to continue building upon that commitment as we grow."

## #13 Fazoli's

Fazoli's, which has more than 215 units with plans to open up to 16 this year, continues to prove it is among the top leaders in the highly competitive fast casual segment. One of its most noteworthy accomplishments is the continuation of its record-shattering

sales performance. Same-store sales rose 5.3 percent in 2015, far above the industrywide average of 1.6 percent.

Under the continued leadership of CEO Carl Howard, Fazoli's entered 2016 armed for even more growth in sales and franchises — as well as menu innovations — with the hiring of three new senior-level executives and expansion of its field marketing force. It extended its record-setting sales performance to 33 straight months of same-store sales increases and broke the \$1 million mark in average unit volume. Franchise operators' sales have been up in 66 of the previous 69 months.

Last year, the chain introduced a new prototype, incorporating a distinctive 35-foot tower, improved lighting to make the building more visible at night, prominent placement of the Fazoli's tomato logo and a versatile color scheme that gives the brand a fresh, modern image. It also launched an aggressive, five-pronged franchise development program, with incentives for new franchisees, including reduced fees and royalties.

"The franchise community sees that Fazoli's is a very different concept than it was just a few years ago," Howard said. "The brand has been completely transformed and now competes very successfully in the fast casual segment. In fact, we often earn guests' business from full-service casual players."

## #14 Pie Five Pizza Co.

Pie Five Pizza, with nearly 90 units, is planning to again double its number

of units. The fast casual pizza chain opened 55 locations in 2015 and reported \$46,615,533 for the year. The impressive numbers don't stop there; systemwide



retail sales increased 131 percent compared to the prior year, driven by a 91 percent increase in average units open and a 19.6 percent increase in systemwide average weekly sales, and comparable-store sales increased by 11.2 percent.

Pie Five Pizza, which boasts "the fastest oven in the segment at 140 seconds," also touts its loyalty program — Circle of Crust — as one reason for its success. It has added 500,000 members in under two years.

Growing as quickly as Pie Five has means the chain must select successful franchise partners, a skill CEO Randy Gier has honed over the years.

"Show me a great restaurant, and I'll show you a great restaurant operator," said Gier, who prefers to work only with existing franchisees. "Many people are in love with the idea of owning a restaurant, but the reality of running a restaurant is not so glamorous. To maximize the success of our brands, we want franchisees



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who have lived the challenges and been successful. We don't have time to train rookies or weed through amateurs."

## #15 Starbucks

It's no surprise that Starbucks has made our list; in March 2016, the coffee giant reported record revenues of \$19.2 billion, which was a 17 percent growth over 2014, a 19 percent increase in earnings per share and \$3.7 billion in non-GAAP operating income in 2015.



Starbucks also is leading the industry when it comes to helping feed the nation's undernourished with its new program, FoodShare, in partnership with Feeding America. The chain has set a goal to rescue 100 percent of food available to donate from its more than 7,600 U.S. stores.

In the first year alone, FoodShare will provide nearly 5 million meals to individuals and families in need of nourishing food. Starbucks intends to scale the program over the next five years and rescue 100 percent of its food available for donation from participating company-operated U.S. stores. That amounts to almost 50 million meals by 2021.

"Like many of our social impact initiatives, the innovation and inspiration comes from our partners who are volunteering in and contributing to their communities," said John Kelly, senior vice president of Starbucks global responsibility, community and public policy. "They saw the need for us to do more and find a way to use our scale to bring more nourishing and ready-to-eat meals to those in need."

## #16 Jersey Mike's Subs

Celebrating its 60th year in business, Jersey Mike's is turning 2016 into a year of growth. The chain, which has more than 1,050 units, expects to open 250 new locations this year and is focused on its nontraditional development strategy. In 2015, it opened 197 units, including its first casino location at the Mohegan Sun in Connecticut and several university sites on New Jersey campuses. This year, it has set up shop at the Orlando International Airport, which joins other travel sites, including Newark Liberty International Airport, McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport and Amtrak's 30th Street Station in Philadelphia.

The chain isn't keeping all that success to itself -- it is dedicated to helping its local communities. Since 2010, Jersey Mike's locations throughout the country have raised nearly \$14 million for worthy local charities and have distributed more than 1.5 million free sub sandwiches to help numerous causes.

At its core, Jersey Mike's is a training company, so it requires three times the hands-on experience of many franchise systems, said Josh Funderburk, the brand's director of training.

"In 2015, 60 certified trainers offered 300 local training sessions to thousands of people including franchisees, managers and team members in all markets. The goal for 2016 is to redouble our efforts and offer a minimum of 600 local sessions from coast to coast."

## #17 Uncle Maddio's Pizza Joint

At nearly 50 units in 14 states, Uncle Maddio's has grown by 300 percent over the past three years. With newly acquired capital from investor S&S Group, the chain, which was founded in 2009, will open 17 Uncle Maddio's locations this year in both existing and new states. It



plans to have 300 units open in five years.

Its management team, which includes the co-founder of Moe's Southwest Grill, is one of the most experienced in the fast casual pizza category and accounts for the chain's phenomenal growth trajectory.



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Although pizza is the chain's bread and butter — its fast-bake ovens can produce 200 pizzas per hour — Uncle Maddio's also serves gourmet salads and soups, all prepared with locally sourced ingredients and salad dressings, and 30 other menu items that are made on-site daily.

Under the vision of Matt Andrew, founder and CEO, the chain last year created the Foldwich, a new pizza sandwich item that customers watch employees build using a layered approach, ensuring the flavors of the fresh ingredients are enhanced through the toasting process, not hidden.

Uncle Maddio's also has launched a new online ordering system, implemented new POS equipment and added a second line to the kitchen, which will increase throughput by 30 percent. The chain began testing online ordering last November as part of the rollout of the POS equipment.

## #18 Firehouse Subs

Firehouse Subs, which now has 1,000 units, went international last year when it planted a flag in Canada. Inspired by its above-average performance, the chain will open five more units outside the U.S., plus 120 domestic locations before 2016 ends.

In its 21-year history, there has not been a single day when Firehouse Subs hasn't grown. In the past five years, the brand has yielded double-digit compounded revenue increases; in 2015, it opened 108 new units.

The chain relies on technology to fuel

its growth, boasting a mobile app that integrates with its NCR ordering platform, allowing customers to place orders with their phones. Its cloud-based POS runs on Verifone MX 925 terminals that accept Apple Pay and Google Wallet, and also allows customers to enter their telephone numbers to link to the mobile app. The chain uses digital training videos and an enterprise-level dashboard reporting on KPIs, and it has a mobile website and a strong social media presence that provides the brand with a solid online presence.

## #19 PizzaRev

In just three years, PizzaRev has grown to 30 locations with more than 150 additional corporate and franchise locations under development. It will double its presence this year by opening the doors to 30 new stores, a move that includes entrance into Massachusetts, Nevada, New York,



Ohio and Tennessee — and the brand's international debut into Mexico.

The brand continues to push the envelope with cleaner ingredients and a fully customized dining experience — from Coca-Cola Freestyle machines to its “Rev It Up” counter with a custom line of hot sauces.

The brand launched the delivery of online and mobile orders through Postmates, an on-demand delivery service in June 2015. Since the launch, sales from Postmates deliveries have increased by more than 400 percent and continue to climb each month, introducing the brand and product to new customers and offering an even more convenient way for PizzaRev fans to enjoy their favorite personal pizzas.

When it comes to technology, PizzaRev is no slouch as it uses Rosnet, a multiunit restaurant management solution; Reputology, an aggregate of online restaurant reviews to track customer sentiment per region and per store; Bridg, an automated one-to-one marketing platform; Sparkfly, a digital offer manager; Smartsheet, a cloud-based project management software to collaborate across the corporate staff and franchise system; Aloha's POS and online ordering platform; ADP, a comprehensive payroll and human resources management solution; and Snagajob, a digital recruitment tool.

## #20 Muscle Maker Grill

The healthy fast casual chain had an exciting 2015. Besides opening six new units, reporting that systemwide AUVs increased 10 percent and having its founder appear on the TV show “Undercover Boss,” it was acquired by American Restaurant Holdings. The strategic partnership provided the Muscle Maker Grill brand with the resources to provide additional support to current franchisees, to increase the number of its

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corporate-owned stores and to expand in new markets.

This year will be just as busy, as the chain — which has 50 units — plans to open 25 new locations and will launch a mobile loyalty app that fully integrates with its POS.

“Our plan is to build upon the great brand and footprint that Muscle Maker Grill has established over the years,” said Tim Betts, chairman of American Restaurant Holdings. “Our priorities are to work closely with our current franchisees, continue franchise growth and development and open more corporate locations in both new and existing markets. We look forward to continuing the expansion of the Muscle Maker Grill brand nationwide.”

## #21 Burger 21

Burger 21, founded in 2010, credits brand differentiation and menu diversity largely for its success. In addition to its 10 certified Angus beef burgers, the chain offers 10 beef-alternative, one-of-a-kind burgers made with sushi-grade ahi tuna, shrimp, turkey, chicken, vegetables or black bean. Focused on providing premium ingredients — such as toasted

brioche buns, pickled cucumbers, applewood-smoked bacon and sweet potato fries with toasted marshmallow sauce — Burger 21 has 40 locations open and in development in 10 states.

The chain reported strong growth in 2015, opening six restaurants and executing eight leases in seven states. It also recently opened its first airport location in the newly renovated Tampa International Airport, where it rolled out its first breakfast menu.

Helping Burger 21 drive traffic and increase sales, the chain’s mobile loyalty app launched nationally in September 2015, which allowed it to build a fan base of over 15,000 guests with spent revenue of \$121,000 by the end of December 2015. To enrich its learning and development program, Burger 21 added a digital kitchen solution called FusionPrep. FusionPrep not only digitized the company’s Kitchen Reference Manual, it also has allowed the brand to move its training materials such as orientation guides and job aids onto an iPad system that resonates with team members. Adding this program has saved franchisees and operators money on printing and shipping, and it has given Burger 21 the ability to make immediate changes in mere seconds.

## #22 Wow Bao

Wow Bao has grown from five company-owned stores into a thriving brand with more than 12 units, including three on college campuses, two inside airports and two in Major League Baseball stadiums.

A player in the healthy segment of the fast casual industry, the chain, which plans to open three or four new units in 2016, cooks its “hot Asian buns” with steam,



each averaging 179 calories. Other menu options include pad thai salad, soups, and rice or noodle bowls topped with teriyaki or Kung Pao chicken. Homemade ginger ale and Thai iced coffee are also available, and some locations offer potstickers and breakfast foods.

An early adopter of technology, Wow Bao uses self-ordering kiosks, a mobile app, mobile ordering, mobile gifting, online training and digital display screens. It also has partnered with several delivery companies, including Postmates and UberEATS, to ensure customers can eat Wow Bao without leaving home or work.

Fans can find a variety of bao flavors, including Teriyaki Chicken, BBQ Pork and Whole Wheat Edamame, in the freezer section at 55 grocers throughout Chicago and Michigan.

## #23 BurgerFi

BurgerFi spent 2015 building the corporate infrastructure needed to take the brand from 78 units to 300. It hired a





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new chief operating officer; directors of human resources, franchise development, real estate, social media, customer care and restaurant operations; a senior creative director; two territory marketing managers; and eight corporate trainers.

The chain, which opened 22 units last year, reported a 3.14 percent increase in sales at its stores open for 13 consecutive months.

Looking to technology to help improve operations and the customer experience, BurgerFi implemented the Trello management collaboration and communication system to enhance interdepartmental communication and to help organize restaurant data. The chain also uses a digital POS computer system, a MICROS enterprise system to track real-time sales and a closed-circuit television to prevent loss and for risk management. It has implemented online ordering and a mobile ordering app and also uses QR codes to provide digital training videos to employees.

The chain — which plans to open up to 30 units in the U.S. along with locations in the UK, Panama and Mexico — recently developed a proprietary grill that reduced cooking time from 4 minutes and 30

seconds to under 57 seconds. Now that is “fast” food.

## #24 Which Wich

Opening 55 new locations in 2015, with plans to cross the 400-unit threshold by mid-2016, Which Wich took strides to continue propelling the brand's forward thinking. For menu innovation, the brand completed the R&D and test market launch of a new kids menu, developed and introduced the new Superfood Wich, and rolled out several new LTOs, including a Shrimp Banh Mi, Ultimate BLT (featuring a bacon-flavored shake) and a specialty Thank You Turkey tied to the brand's philanthropic endeavor, Project PB&J.

Project PB&J — an initiative in which every PB&J sandwich purchased in-store causes one to be donated to a local organization and one to be banked for the global fund — also flourished in 2015. Thousands of sandwiches were donated in local markets across the Which Wich system, feeding those who otherwise might not have had meals.

Finally, the brand innovated in the areas of restaurant design and technology, enhancing its online ordering and loyalty platforms, while debuting a new drive-thru model and touchscreen ordering technology that both supports the drive-thru model and introduces kiosks in areas without available brick-and-mortar real estate for ordering from nearby locations.

## #25 Zoup!

Since it hit the fast casual scene in 1998,

Zoup! has seen slow, steady growth, relying on its strength in predicting trends and giving customers what they want — even before they know they want it. Last year, for example, it expanded its menu with globally inspired flavors and uncommon proteins, including rattlesnake sausage and bison, that offered customers a new eating experience. Zoup!, which has nearly 90 units with plans to add 24 in 2016, also debuted unique flavor profiles, including Singapore Squash, Dill Pickle Chowder, Curry Thai Chicken, Dragonfire Noodle Bowl and Maryland Crab Chowder.

Just as important as taste in Zoup!'s menu development is nutrition, which is why it is committed to offering healthy options, including low-fat, dairy-free, vegetarian, spicy and gluten-free recipes.



The chain is in the process of re-crafting more than 20 existing recipes with entirely gluten-free ingredients. Also, in keeping with consumers' preferences for cleaner foods and ingredients, it has extended the Zoup! brand by creating a line of “Good, Really Good” super-premium broths, sold in grocery and specialty stores.

Lastly, Zoup! has focused on upgrading technology and adding staff to support

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franchisees' growth. Specifically, it enhanced its POS, online ordering, back-office management, inventory management, digital menu boards, communications tools, catering platform and Z!Net, its intranet that serves as a central point for everything franchisees need to run their businesses.

## #26 Chipotle Mexican Grill

After a series of food-safety outbreaks in 2015, Chipotle once again has shown why it has been a leader in the fast casual industry. To regain the confidence of its customers, Chipotle is leading the industry in new food-safety procedures and in February announced its \$10 million commitment to using fresh produce from local farms. The new Local Grower Support Initiative will help suppliers meet Chipotle's new safety standards



by providing food-safety support and education, giving financial assistance in the form of grants or premiums and developing new partnerships with farmers using greenhouses and other technologies around the country that meet Chipotle's food-safety standards.

Despite the setback, Chipotle saw a

double-digit increase with teens and young adults in 2015, and the brand looks to 2016 to show its following why it has been a leader in the industry.

Bonnie Riggs, an analyst for The NPD Group, a research firm that tracks U.S. consumers' awareness and concern about food-safety outbreaks, said Chipotle will build its business back up quickly due to the loyal customer base.

"To win back the trust of their former customers, Chipotle will need to continually communicate all of the ways in which they are preventing any future outbreaks and prove to them that they are able to deliver on their 'food with integrity' promise," she said.

## #27 Rise Biscuits and Donuts

A sincerely chef-driven concept, Rise is aligned with fast casual's move toward authenticity and real food. Not only is Rise's combination of biscuits and donuts unique in bringing together sweet and savory offerings, but it does so in an underserved, rapidly growing corner of the fast casual market. Rise is innovative and nimble, attentive to trends in both food and technology. As of Feb. 1, it had four locations, three of which opened in 2015, 16 franchises sold and two corporate locations in development. Ten more are being planned for this year, which includes growth in North Carolina and expansion into Georgia and Texas.

In 2015, Rise created a company Internet site called Rise Dashboard. The

Dashboard is the go-to place for all Rise employees (owners, managers and staff alike) to find everything they need to operate their stores. The site includes a company blog, guides and checklists, training videos, marketing materials and more.

## #28 Sweetgreen

Innovation was key for Sweetgreen in 2015. Its rollout of the update to the Sweetgreen app is the culmination of two



years of massive infrastructure changes. This app required a complete rebuild, from staffing at headquarters to replacing registers, to the way its team uses range of motion in the kitchen. The chain predicts app sales to hit 50 percent in the next few years and believes that there's no such thing as a successful business in an unsuccessful community and that everyone has the right to a healthful life.

In addition to serving simple, seasonal, healthy food, Sweetgreen is investing in local communities with its Sweetgreen in Schools program. The curriculum is a hands-on series of educational workshops that focus on nutrition, fitness, sustainability, seasonality and eco-literacy, which encourages the students to



develop a preference for healthy fruits and vegetables throughout the school year. To date, Sweetgreen in Schools has touched more than 5,000 students.

## #29 The Halal Guys

The Halal Guys, a street-food giant in New York City that began in 1990 as a hot dog cart, is delivering Middle Eastern street food all over the country. Originally catering to NYC's cab drivers, The Halal Guys created a halal meal of chicken and gyro over rice that has grown in popularity over the past 25 years. The street vendors, who serve dishes in accordance with Islamic law, now are turning the



brand into an exciting franchising opportunity. With 11 current locations, 10 of which opened in 2015, the "Chipotle of Middle Eastern food" is looking to open 25 additional locations in 2016.

Since partnering with Fransmart and announcing the launch of a franchise program in 2014, The Halal Guys has opened two corporate brick-and-mortar restaurants in Manhattan and has more than 200 franchise units in development in Georgia, Philadelphia, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and California. It also is considering

international locations for the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Canada.

## #30 Mama Fu's Asian House

Mama Fu's Asian House went international in 2015. The Austin-based Asian concept — which offers dishes inspired by Vietnam, Korea, China, Japan and Thailand — has created a partnership with GGICO Gourmet in Dubai.

"Taking the brand international was a big endeavor for the company, but the operations team under the direction of Chief Operating Officer Stephen MacManus did a fantastic job adapting Mama Fu's operations and menu to suit the UAE (United Arab Emirates) culture," said Randy Murphy, president and CEO of Mama Fu's.

In addition to its international expansion, the brand is opening 20 locations over the next two years throughout its native state of Texas. The rapid growth is part of Mama Fu's new business model, which focuses on delivery and takeout. In February 2015, the company introduced branded delivery vehicles in all corporate-owned markets. The cars, which have large numbers painted on them to resemble race cars, are part of the company's plan to increase overall brand awareness.

## #31 Buffalo Wild Wings

Buffalo Wild Wings prides itself on giving consumers what they want. In 2015, it

appears that customers wanted beer, with beer sales amounting to 25 percent of total sales. Over the past year, BWW — which has more than 840 locations across the United States and Canada — has studied the industry to give customers the options they crave. Each month, BWW showcased the "Beer of the Month." Stores also are featuring local and regional



beers to better connect with guests, and the strategy seems to be paying off. In fact, craft beer sales rose from 6.5 percent to 11 percent within the last three years and now make up 34 percent of total beer sales. With the beverage industry declining overall, BWW is proving that taking a proactive approach is key.

## #32 Schlotzsky's Deli

Schlotzsky's has continued to show momentum since overcoming bankruptcy in 2007. It just finished its ninth consecutive year of positive comparative-store sales and exceeded \$300 million in systemwide sales, a 6.4 percent increase from 2014. Schlotzsky's opened 15 restaurants and sold 44 franchise deals in 2015; it also launched a new pasta platform on the menu and, as a result, increased its dinner daypart. Schlotzsky's anticipates exceeding 380 restaurants this

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year and plans to develop new restaurants in Washington, Montana, South Dakota and Iowa.

Schlotzsky's is refreshing its menu by introducing a new line of specialty sandwiches with higher-quality, hand-carved meats and specialty breads. It also is upgrading the internal training program through a new digital platform, making it easier to train managers and employees through interactive videos. Continuing to evolve, Schlotzsky's completed an Attitudes, Awareness, and Usage study to understand where the future of the brand is headed and to reinvent its brand positioning, which will launch later this year, including a new restaurant prototype.

## #33 MOD Pizza

MOD opened its first store in downtown Seattle in 2008; since that time, it has grown to 100 locations (61 of which opened in 2015), and will double its store count in 2016. Unlike most of the



competitors in this segment, MOD has chosen to expand primarily through company-owned locations, supported by a few select and highly qualified multi-unit franchise partners.

To fund this growth, MOD raised \$45 million of equity in 2015 and \$32 million so far this year, bringing the total amount of capital raised to about \$106 million from PWP Growth Equity.

In 2015, MOD posted revenue growth of over 200 percent to more than \$60 million and same-store sales growth of 12.4 percent. The company added two new domestic multi-unit franchise partners in 2015, bringing its pipeline of U.S. franchise stores to 149.

Internationally, the company announced its first global commitment with Sir Charles Dunstone, one of Britain's best-known entrepreneurs. The company plans to debut the first store in the UK in early summer 2016, with a rapid rollout shortly thereafter.

## #34 Pei Wei

2015 was a big growth year for Pei Wei, with the chain opening 12 restaurants. In 2016, Pei Wei will open 15-plus restaurants. It plans to double in size over the next five years without entering any new markets. Last year, the introduction and expansion of Pei Wei's sushi offerings broadened the brand's appeal and compressed core user frequency by providing guests with lighter, everyday menu options.

The first Pei Wei opened its doors 16 years ago, but in the last few years it has made quite the impression throughout the fast casual industry. In 2014, Pei Wei entered the sushi world and sales boomed with the introduction of the

fan-favorite Kung Pao Sushi in 2015. In January 2016, Pei Wei rolled out a new Lighten Up model, which includes healthier and customizable options. Guests can order any of their favorite flavors with wok-steamed chicken or shrimp and choose salad instead of rice to cut calories and carbs.

## #35 Illegal Pete's

Colorado-based Illegal Pete's became a pioneer in terms of employee satisfaction last year with the "Illegal Pete's 2015 Living



Wage Initiative." Founder Pete Turner said his goal always has been to pay a "living wage-plus."

"It may not be popular (for other business owners), but I typically aim for \$11- to \$12-an-hour wage," he said. "If I can make my employees feel more secure, then I'm all for it."

All Illegal Pete's employees are paid industry-leading wages. While that model has led to larger payrolls, it has paid off in terms of employee retention as Turner has seen relatively no turnover. Known for its celebration of humanity and individuality, Illegal Pete's is growing. When the first restaurant opened in 1995, it was known



for its fun and energetic atmosphere where employees and customers both had a good time. Combine the atmosphere with fast, healthy food and the love of its employees, and Illegal Pete's is sure to continue its growth.

## #36 Wahlburgers

Wahlburgers was founded with the idea that there is no better feeling than sitting at the table together, sharing good food, a few laughs and lots of love. At Wahlburgers, staff share a bit of that feeling every day with every guest. Founded by brothers Mark, Donnie and Paul Wahlberg, this family-inspired burger joint has become a widely respected and unique fast casual/full-serve hybrid that offers higher-quality ingredients, a more upscale yet approachable atmosphere, a broader menu and more service options than are typical in its category.

Under the direction of Executive Chef Paul Wahlberg, the menu features fresh, high-quality, yet simple food that highlights some of his family's favorites. In addition to being the subject of an Emmy-nominated A&E TV reality series, since the debut of the brand's first location in Hingham, Massachusetts, in 2011, it has expanded from two to six units in 2015, with an additional 15-20 planned for 2017, and over 100 under agreement by the end of the first quarter of 2016.

## #37 McAlister's Deli

McAlister's Deli has been making waves in its industry segment with a reported \$548 million in systemwide sales in 2015, an 8.7



percent increase from the previous year. It successfully opened 27 restaurants and signed 59 franchise deals in 2015, and the coming years will be focused on driving profitable growth, maintaining excellent franchisee relationships, executing outstanding operations and differentiating the brand with genuine hospitality.

McAlister's is gaining strong momentum in its category and anticipates coming close to 400 restaurants as it aggressively develops in new markets. In 2016, it continues to build on its higher-than-industry-average beverage incidence by offering guests a new tea option as well as to elevate its restaurants by increasing the quality of ingredients.

In 2015, McAlister's officially launched its new restaurant design, which caters to a more thoughtful guest experience by creating a warm, inviting space with a variety of flexible dining options, more group and family seating and a Wi-Fi bar with outlets for laptops, tablets and mobile devices.

## #38 MOOYAH Burgers, Fries & Shakes

While a lot of brands are in the better-burger space and even more are in the fast casual arena, no one is doing it quite like MOOYAH. For starters, the chain

has what it describes as a ridiculous number of ways to customize its beef, turkey and veggie burgers. With more than 27 different toppings and sauces, mathematicians have confirmed there are more than 1 million ways to build a burger at MOOYAH. But it doesn't stop with fully customizable burgers, fries, salads and shakes. MOOYAH serves them up in an environment like no other created by team members, who are "all about fun." Today, MOOYAH has 78 open restaurants in 21 states, and 14 international restaurants in seven countries. The chain is looking to build on that momentum by adding 30 locations by the end of 2016, which will result in it hitting the 100-unit mark.

## #39 Pollo Tropical

Pollo Tropical, a Caribbean-inspired fast casual concept founded in 1988 in Miami, boasts industry-leading AUVs (\$2.7 million) and 25 consecutive quarters with positive same-store sales. The company has a strong focus on regional growth and owns and operates 150 locations in Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas, plus licensed restaurants on college campuses and franchised locations throughout the Caribbean, Central America, South America and Puerto Rico.

In its first 26 years, Pollo Tropical grew at a consistent pace to about 90 locations in its home state of Florida. Since expanding the brand westward beginning in 2012, and launching in Texas in March 2014, Pollo Tropical has grown rapidly, with new restaurants in Tennessee, Georgia and throughout Texas. Pollo Tropical opened 32 restaurants in 2015 and is on track to

open nearly 40 additional restaurants in 2016 – doubling the size of the company in just four years.

## #40 Einstein Bros. Bagels

Einstein Bros. Bagels gave customers a reason to love Mondays in 2015. As part of its #RandomActsOfMonday campaign, the bakery offered a baker's dozen of bagels for only \$6.

"Monday is typically a drag. People could use a little extra something to get motivated for what's ahead," said Tekla O'Rourke, vice president of marketing. "We're on a quest to help our guests



Un-Monday their Monday with \$6 Bakers Dozen bagels, which are sure to make every Monday better."

To continue the love, guests were encouraged to pass it on by performing "Random Acts of Monday" to make as many Mondays great as possible. Guests posted on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag #RandomActsOfMonday to document the campaign. Headquartered in Lakewood, Colorado, Einstein Bros. has more than 730 locations across the country.

## #41 Farmer's Fridge

When Luke Saunders got tired of eating unhealthy food while on the road for his outside-sales job in 2013, the idea for Farmer's Fridge was born. Farmer's Fridge self-serve kiosk system, which is completely automated, allows customers to choose their products, and an elevator within the kiosk delivers their meals. Options include salads, breakfast items and snacks such as fruit cups, tofu dishes and healthy trail mixes. The food is prepped in a facility centrally located in Chicago and items are delivered to the kiosks early each morning.

There are 30 kiosks in Chicago, and plans are underway to expand to 100 throughout the Midwest by the middle of this year. In addition to opening more locations, Farmer's Fridge is overhauling its software to enable the kitchen to have direct connection with each kiosk.

## #42 Salata

Entering its 10th year of business, Houston-based Salata, "The Next Generation Salad Bar," is resonating with consumers, having doubled in size over the past two years with 53 units and 10 additional locations scheduled to open this year in Texas, Southern California and Chicago.

In addition to that growth, Salata has invested in its future with the launch of a \$1 million "Fresh First" clean-ingredient commitment to meet the needs of consumers who want to eat cleaner, lighter, fresher meals, at every price point. Immediate changes included converting

all of its chicken to antibiotic-free, switching to mayonnaise made with cage-free eggs and using sustainable soybean oil for its house-made dressings.

The company will reformulate its protein marinades to reduce sodium levels and switch its iced-tea selections to organic, among other updates throughout the year. Through its "Fresh First" commitment, Salata is striving to offer the freshest, cleanest ingredients



available to its guests. This year, the chain will open its new 35,000-square-foot corporate headquarters that will house its corporate office, a training restaurant and a production facility, where it will manufacture and distribute its own dressings, sauces and soups.

## #43 Pieology Pizzeria

Pieology Pizzeria's growth plan for 2016 is simple: smart, strategic and steady expansion. With commitments for more than 600 locations, the company is on track to open over 130 additional locations by the end of 2016, and 100-120 locations are scheduled to open each year for the next four to five years.



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In 2015, Pieology Pizzeria rolled out its custom salad program, which now is offered at the majority of Pieology's 87 locations and will be available at all locations by the end of 2016. Since its founding in 2011, Pieology has been dedicated to giving guests the freedom to create meals that are completely customized to their personal tastes. The newly implemented salad program is no exception, allowing the same personalization that guests love about Pieology's artisan-style pizza, using unlimited fresh ingredients to create refreshing salads that are literally made just for them.

## #44 Newk's Eatery

In 2015, Newk's set its sights not only on upholding its commitment to an entirely made-from-scratch menu, open kitchen design and fresh ingredients, but also on rapid expansion. The company increased its store count by more than 25 percent — with 20 new restaurant openings, six new market entries and eight new franchisee signings. In December alone, the company opened six new restaurants, and three of which were on the same day.

Newk's unveiled its "Generation Two" design with the opening of its



first Lafayette, Louisiana, location in October. A similar floor plan and kitchen design allow the new elements to be incorporated efficiently into existing units. Also in 2015, Chris Newcomb — Newk's president, CEO and co-founder — hired several industry veterans to establish a strong foundation of leadership, laying the groundwork for the most aggressive growth in the company's history: 30 new restaurants planned for 2016 and a goal to exceed 200 total units by the end of 2018.

## #45 Bean Sprouts

The family-friendly Bean Sprouts concept continues to catch attention from parents looking for healthy options for their children. Founded by California natives Shannon Seip and Kelly Parthen, this hip and healthy brand offers yummy, good-for-you food that pleases both children and adults. The pair opened its fourth location in 2015 and is looking to double in size to eight locations in 2016. To continue its growth strategy, Bean Sprouts hired seasoned COO Joe Lutz, who helped to increase profits 15 percent in 2015.

Bean Sprouts aims to create a culture of health, innovation, positivity and playfulness in its restaurants. It encourages a playful environment by having every employee take on a Bean Sprout-y name." Some favorites include Bean Jovi, Katniss Everbean, Great Gatsbean and Lady Guava.

## #46 Penn Station East Coast Subs

Penn Station East Coast Subs reached

30 years in business in 2015; during that time period, Penn Station has had only two restaurant closings out of almost 300 restaurants. Penn Station has achieved that longevity focusing obsessively on profitability and ROI for franchisees, using a strategy of unit-level economics. For example, Penn Station signed new multi-unit agreements for major markets,



including Atlanta and Chicago, in 2015. It also made some significant brand updates in 2015, including a new logo, website and restaurant design.

As it is with everything Penn Station does, ROI for franchisees was a top priority in choosing the new look. Comparative-store sales increased by almost 7 percent in 2015, and systemwide sales increased by more than 11 percent. Projections call for the opening of 25 restaurants nationwide in 2016; the chain is targeting Kansas City, Missouri; Atlanta; Chicago; Pittsburgh; Richmond, Virginia; and Dallas for franchise expansion.

## #47 Cowboy Chicken

Cowboy Chicken, which pioneered wood-fired rotisserie chicken in a fast casual environment, embarked on its largest brand initiative to date in 2015. It

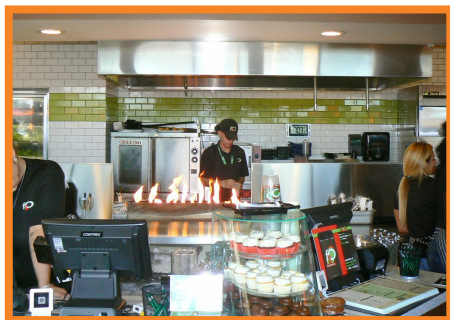
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conducted extensive consumer research to determine the greatest leverage points and opportunities for the brand, which led to it crystallizing its brand architecture and developing a creative communication strategy and message points. The research also inspired the brand to design a store prototype and remodeling platform that will help launch it into new markets.

Although it has been a Dallas tradition for over 35 years, Cowboy Chicken now is franchising with the goal of becoming a national brand with plans to grow to 75 units by 2020. It has successfully launched new locations outside of Texas in both Lincoln, Nebraska; and Birmingham, Alabama.

## #48 Fresh To Order

At Fresh To Order, “fast fine” dining is the emphasis, meaning guests can pop in but still receive fine fare. Featuring panini,



soups and salads all freshly prepared with a unique spin, the Fresh To Order concept combines food typically found in a casual-fine dining restaurant with the service and price point of a fast casual brand.

Featuring made-to-order meals guaranteed to be ready in less than 10

minutes, each for around \$10, the brand partnered with veteran restaurateurs at Progressive Dining Group in 2015 to expand the concept to the Chicago Loop. The multi-unit agreement slated the opening of four units in downtown Chicago with the first opening this year. In 2015, Fresh To Order announced other major market expansions in Texas, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and South Carolina.

## #49 Wingstop

Wingstop’s mission from day one was to be in the flavor business, and its focus on flavor has transformed it into one of the fastest-growing brands in the restaurant industry. Since opening its first location in 1994, Wingstop has grown to more than 800 restaurants across the world. To introduce its new food truck Wingstop on Wheels last summer, the brand created a 10-city U.S. “flavor tour.”

“The purpose of this journey was to serve flavor and spread goodwill through a series of community renewal projects giving back to deserving fan communities,” the company said in a news release.

In June, Wingstop also entered into a partnership with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) that included sponsorship of pay-per-view fights as well as in-store sweepstakes and a UFC 30-pack of wings.

“We are thrilled to partner with UFC this summer to bring our mouthwatering flavors to the fight for wing fans,” Flynn



Dekker, CMO of Wingstop, said in 2015. “Our customers look forward to UFC events the same way they crave our wings. They know any UFC event is not complete without Wingstop.”

## #50 Saladworks

Saladworks is experiencing an exciting amount of progress. It has 102 locations in 14 states and spent 2015 making changes to keep that progress going. With new hires, an updated store design, a new menu and a refreshed plan for development, it has a lot of brand momentum. Over the past year, it has increased staff for support to franchisees (operational support, social media support, local store marketing support) and hired a director of distribution and procurement, who helped reduce the systemwide cost of goods.

Additionally, it revamped its menu and completed the plan for a store redesign in late 2015, which will have a positive impact on 2016. In terms of technology, Saladworks is using a system called MySaladworks.com, an intranet site used for disseminating information to franchisees. It contains manuals, training info and helpful tips. In addition, the brand is using saladworkslistens.com, which monitors customer comments 24/7, in



addition to an online-ordering system and a loyalty program.

## #51 Salsarita's Fresh Cantina

In addition to having signature Quesoritos, Salsarita's is known for being an innovator and influencer in the ever-evolving sector. Made popular by its bright, colorful atmosphere and quick, creative Mexican cuisine, Salsarita's has 70 locations in 19 states and is looking to open 20 more in 2016. This year, the brand, which celebrated its 15th anniversary last year,



will continue to grow with a fresh branding strategy meant to engage customers and add new fresh-Mex lovers of all ages.

"Salsarita's is now in the perfect position to support both company and franchisee expansion properly for years to come," CEO Phil Friedman said. "The confidence franchisees have expressed in us is tremendously telling of where Salsarita's stands in the industry as an opportunity for sustained growth."

## #52 Fresh Brothers

Fresh Brothers is continuing its mission of delivering excellent pizza, salad and wings

to its customers, while offering equally stellar customer service. It furthered this goal in 2015 by bringing on John Onstott as the new COO and Tony Dellamano as the new CFO. The addition of these key leaders led to implementation of new software used to increase sales as well as a major change by Executive Chef Scott Goldberg, who implemented a new portion-control system within all units to reduce waste and increase consistency.

Unlike the fast, pre-made pizza line, Fresh Brothers pizzas are made to order. Customers can choose from deep dish, thin crust and MegaGrain pizza options. The menu also features gluten-free and vegan options.

With 13 locations, the brand is looking to continue its expansion and became the official pizza of the StubHub Center in Carson, California, owned by AEG.

## #53 Luna Grill

Since its founding in 2004, Luna Grill has been on a measured and strategic growth path, currently at 21 units in California and Texas with plans to expand to more than 40 in the next 18 months.

Luna Grill's key brand values are built on the quality of the food, where it comes from and how it is served. A cross between a fast casual and full-service restaurant, Luna Grill features foods, marinades and sauces carefully crafted from scratch daily and served to the table with genuine cutlery and tableware.

Last year, the appointment of key

leadership positions strengthened the management team including Sean Allameh as the new COO, Dan Lowe as the new vice president of operations and Nicole Abraham as the vice president of marketing. In addition to those roles, support departments underwent a strategic expansion to increase support of field operations and overall growth.



Luna Grill also has invested in several new technology platforms such as Restaurant365, a complete cloud-based restaurant management software, and Punchh, a loyalty program and app to launch in March 2016.

## #54 Giardino Gourmet Salads

Giardino Gourmet Salads rolled out a new design and operating features last year, and the first location to do so hit \$1 million in gross sales in under a year. The design features a contemporary rustic ambience and a new line system that has increased speed of service and maximizes the guest experience. In addition, Giardino added information to its menu that shows customers exactly what is in their food in all 15 of its locations. This partnership with MenuTrinfo, a nutritional analysis and training firm, includes helpful information

such as nutritional analysis and allergen- and gluten-free menu development.

"We value our customers and the community and believe in giving our guests nutritional empowerment," co-founder Kenny Lugo said. "In this way, they can choose the best product for them among our offerings of great-tasting salads, soups, sandwiches and wraps. Through this partnership with MenuTrinfo, we are making a commitment to nutritional transparency and to our community and customers."

## #55 Freebirds World Burrito

Last year, Freebirds World Burrito launched Freebirds 2.0, a rebranding effort to streamline and simplify its look while focusing on its food. It implemented a fresh-from-scratch menu, which includes making chips in house, in addition to using innovative culinary techniques.

The brand has 89 locations and is looking to open five additional units across the southern United States in 2016. This year, Freebirds also is focusing on making healthy eating easier for its customers with the launch of its Six Under 600 Calories menu. This menu features a variety of burritos, bowls and salads under 600 calories, featuring low-calorie ingredients.

"The goal of the Six Under 600 Calories menu items is to offer our customers a selection of tasty, high-quality meal options they can feel good about eating," COO Bobby Shaw said. "We want to

spread the word that healthy options were always available at Freebirds, due to our mindfully sourced, fresh ingredients."

## #56 Brioche Dorée

The Parisian-style urban bakery café Brioche Dorée was founded more than 40 years ago and is committed to offering a range of European café options, from fresh espresso-based coffees



and croissant breakfast sandwiches to quiches, pizzas and French-inspired desserts. The menu options and brand aura intend to recreate the classic street-side café in a modern environment that envelops all of the senses.

For that reason, the brand prioritizes opening locations in nontraditional venues, such as airports, universities and health care centers. Whether they are travelers, students, medical professionals or hospital visitors, guests are usually on the go. The brand's goal is to ensure that guests have a wide selection of fresh-made meals and flavorful snack options.

Today, Brioche Dorée has more than 600 bakery cafés throughout North America, Central America, Europe and Asia. It has implemented a robust franchise and

licensing growth strategy that will expand Brioche Dorée by 15 percent annually in the Americas.

## #57 California Tortilla

In a word, 2015 was about one thing for California Tortilla: growth. Opening seven new locations last year, the company sits at 47 locations and is planning 14 more in 2016.

The brand celebrated its 20th anniversary by introducing new menu items that got people talking. It grew its social media following by 8 percent and made significant changes to the loyalty program that leverages the latest in mobile technology, while enhancing the rewards for its most-loyal customers. The mobile app made it easier than ever for customers to locate nearby restaurants, earn and redeem their loyalty points, find their account balances and place online orders at their favorite Cal Tort locations. Within the first week of launch, the Burrito Elito app was ranked 29th in the food and beverage category on iTunes.

In 2015, the chain expanded beyond the Washington, D.C./Maryland/Virginia market into northern New Jersey and central Florida. In addition, it signed a deal with Compass Group, a provider of food and support services, which expanded its presence onto college campuses — the first of which opened at Montclair State University in September.

## #58 Boloco

Boloco, originally named Boston Local



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Company when it was founded in 1997 by John Pepper, is known for burritos, wraps, salads, shakes and smoothies. With a menu inspired by various traditions around the globe, the chain offers burritos representing Mexican, Japanese and Thai flavors.

Last year brought Boloco and Pepper, who parted ways in 2013, back together when Pepper rejoined as interim chief



leader. Pepper, who is known as a strong advocate of restaurants offering employees a better living wage, expanded Boloco from a single restaurant in 1997 to a business with sales of more than \$25 million annually in its 22 locations. The philosophy behind the menu hasn't changed —providing customers with unexpected, delicious choices that surprise the palate with every bite.

As its website states, "At the end of the day, we satisfy stomachs of all colors, shapes and sizes."

## #59 Five Guys Burgers and Fries

Five Guys Burgers and Fries made headlines last year for an advertising campaign for its secret shopper program.

During this initiative, the company gave away \$20 million to its hourly employees because it believes its crew members are the best form of advertisement for the company.

Another popular advertising technique is simply the variety — and lack of cost for that variety. There are over 250,000 possible ways to order a burger at Five Guys, and the chain doesn't charge for common upcharge items including cheese, bacon and guacamole. With more than 1,000 locations nationwide and an additional 1,500 in development, Five Guys is continuing its strategy of going worldwide with stores planned for Spain, France, the Netherlands, Kuwait and Oman.

## #60 MAD Greens

MAD Greens is a Colorado-based brand known for its custom salad, wrap, panini, soup and juice creations, and it is poised for national expansion. In 2015, it expanded to its first market outside of Colorado — Arizona — and opened four new MAD Greens units there. Its openings attracted thousands of fans during its Free Salad Day grand-opening parties and raised thousands of dollars for local charities in the process.

MAD Greens plans to double in size in 2016 (opening 15-17 restaurants), thanks to a \$13 million investment from Colorado-based 9th Street Capital. The latest round of 2015 investment capital will fund its aggressive expansion plans, including six new openings in Colorado and expansion into its newest market, Texas, as well as a

fourth unannounced market.

The first Austin location opened in mid-March 2016 at The Domain, followed by four additional Austin-area locations opening later in the spring and early summer. Mad Greens' strong commitment to the community is evidenced by its annual partnership with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and sponsorship of several MS fundraising events throughout the year.

## #61 Roti Modern Mediterranean

Roti Modern Mediterranean is leading a food revolution for the modern lifestyle — for those who want something better and different; for people who care about what they eat, where it came from, how it's made and how it makes them feel. Roti offers wholesome food made fresh in its restaurants from responsibly sourced ingredients, served fast and made to order. The chain updated its branding last year, starting with a name change from Roti Mediterranean Grill to Roti Modern Mediterranean to better represent what it has to offer. It also introduced a new prototype restaurant called Roti 2.0, which completely re-imagined its concept for the modern lifestyle.



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In addition, the chain opened three new stores in 2015, taking the total to 21 units, with four to six additional units to open by the end of 2016. In addition, it is modernizing technology platforms across the board.

## #62 Tijuana Flats

Last year, Tijuana Flats opened 13 units, taking its total to 116 units, and more are on the horizon for 2016. The Tex-Mex chain is planning to open 15 more in 2016 and has experienced consistent annual growth in both same-store sales and unit count. Not only has Tijuana Flats continued to expand in existing markets, it also is moving into new markets across the Southeast. Its edgy and irreverent brand voice, coupled with its over-the-top guest service, continues to make it a major player to watch in the fast casual segment. In August, the chain announced a strategic partnership with AUA Private Equity Partners to help further the expansion of the Tijuana brand.

"It's been incredible watching the growth and the extraordinary loyalty among all of our guests throughout the years," Brian Wheeler, Tijuana Flats founder, said in the release. "With AUA as a partner and our great management team in place, I look forward to the future and continued success of Tijuana Flats."

## #63 Cafe Rio Mexican Grill

Throughout its 90 locations, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill employees hand-scoop 8,000 avocados, hand-dice 46,000



tomatoes, hand-squeeze 17,000 limes and grate 1,800 pounds of cheese on a daily basis. That's a lot of helping hands.

Cafe Rio has had significant year-over-year growth for the past 15 years and has unveiled a new interior design showcasing its from-scratch kitchen. The design not only will be rolled out in each new restaurant, but also will be implemented into all existing restaurants during remodels over the next three years.

This year, the brand looks to open 16-18 new restaurants, with an additional 11 remodels.

Cafe Rio is growing its use of technology with its mobile app loyalty program, My Rio Rewards, launched and tested last year in the D.C. area. The customer-loyalty program rewards customers for their purchases and allows Cafe Rio to communicate offers and marketing messages directly to them. The mobile app will launch in remaining markets throughout this year.

## #64 Curry Up Now

Beginning as the Bay Area's first Indian street food truck in 2009, Curry Up Now since has expanded to five trucks, four restaurants without wheels, two craft

cocktail bars and a thriving catering business. In 2015, it increased its catering business threefold, built a loyalty app and opened its largest restaurant and bar location in San Jose, while planning to further expand and start franchising in the near future. It will open another restaurant in the Bay Area this year and continue south toward Los Angeles.

With its focus on providing a unique blend of traditional Indian flavors presented in a friendly, recognizable way to the world, the brand is delivering delicious food, while still maintaining the values and excellence that have made it successful.

## #65 La Madeleine

La Madeleine, which opened 10 new locations in 2015, continues to impress with its strategic growth phase that includes a healthy mix of corporate, franchise and nontraditional licensing expansion in select markets.

The French concept not only is adding locations in attractive entertainment destinations, it also is expanding in nontraditional venues, including on college campuses and in airports. It added a location inside Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport in 2015, for example.

The brand has achieved more than five years of positive comparative-store sales and is poised for significant development through corporate openings and franchising expansion in 2016.

It also is committed to using each season's freshest ingredients and



# Top 75 Brands

adapting to guests' varied tastes, while maintaining its French authenticity both on the menu and in each café's warm and comfortable interior.

The brand stands out by giving back to the community. For example, since 2012, La Madeleine has focused on the fight to help end childhood hunger, raising an average of \$250,000 a year.

## #66 Bruegger's Bagels

To continue its focus on accountability, Bruegger's Bagels introduced an operations excellence team in 2015 to ensure its more than 275 bakeries are meeting and exceeding brand standards for food quality and customer service. The team, composed of six leaders who work across both corporate and franchisee-owned bakeries to assess each location's performance on a variety of metrics, already has begun implementing the assessments, which have led to a noticeable improvement in guest counts and other key measurements.



In June 2015, Bruegger's Bagels announced plans to open nine co-branded, company-owned bakeries with Jamba Juice; the first opened earlier this

year in the Boston area.

Bruegger's also launched its "Behind the Taste" video series in 2015, giving fans an inside look at the people and traditions behind the brand. The first vignette featured a bagel expert, who has been with the company for more than 25 years, demonstrating the 100-year-old traditional New York-style baking method and simple ingredients that Bruegger's Bagels uses to this day.

## #67 Smiling Moose Rocky Mountain Deli

Smiling Moose underwent a brand overhaul last year that included a major menu update and a complete restaurant redesign. The changes are showing significant promise in both new and existing delis. Two of its newest North Dakota delis, in Williston and Watford City, which opened with the new menu and remodel, are seeing significantly higher sales than the system average, and that is definitely something to smile about.

With 18 locations across seven states, the brand is looking to expand to 100 delis by 2020, by continuing the overhaul that began in 2015. In regard to the new menu, this rebranding effort will provide guests a wider variety of lower-calorie, lower-fat, vegetarian and gluten-free options. The new menu is in place in all locations.

In addition, Smiling Moose made infrastructure and technology improvements, including migrating its POS system to PAR Brink's cloud-based architecture, as well as implemented

Ctuit, a back-of-house system to help track costs and improve operations and economic performance for franchisees.

## #68 Smoke's Poutinerie

Founded in 2008 by Ryan Smolkin, Smoke's Poutinerie is the "World's Largest and Original Poutinerie." Representing 1980s Canadian culture and featuring signature red-and-black plaid and glam



rock music, Smoke's Poutinerie serves 30 varieties of its famous poutine, all of which feature top-of-the-line ingredients, including potatoes that are hand-selected from farms in Idaho and cheese curds from producers in Wisconsin.

As a part of the brand's tremendous year of growth, Smoke's Poutinerie is focused on opening nontraditional locations in sports stadiums, theme parks and other similar venues. This strategy is the Canadian-based company's way of introducing the brand to new markets at a cheaper operating cost. This strategy is already proving its worth, as the Smoke's Poutinerie in Tampa's Amalie Arena became the stadium's No. 1 food operator shortly after opening. The focus on nontraditional locations is a

key element in the "Global Domination" growth strategy that the brand is implementing to grow by over 1,300 locations by the year 2020, including 150 locations across the UK, Australia, Western Europe and the Middle East.

## **#69 Spoleto — My Italian Kitchen**

Spoleto — My Italian Kitchen, which has more than 380 locations in Brazil, Mexico and Costa Rica, opened its first two U.S. locations in east Orlando last year. And the Italian fast casual brand is making plans to grow in 2016, by adding at least four U.S. locations.

"The plan is to grow our brand throughout Orlando before expanding nationally through corporate and franchise stores," said John Velasquez, president of Spoleto USA.

The Spoleto concept focuses on delivering the highest level of Italian cuisine in a fun, cool and hip way. Guests can create their personally inspired pasta, flatbreads and salads from more than 30 different farm-fresh and house-prepared ingredients, herbs, dressings and oils.

"The goal at Spoleto is to give our guests the culinary freedom to experiment with amazing Italian culinary," Velasquez said. "We want them to be in control of this open kitchen, working with our chefs to craft their perfect meal."

## **#70 HoneyBaked Ham**

Known mostly as the place to buy a

ham for the holidays, HoneyBaked Ham is all about combining innovation with tradition. The family-owned business centralized management, sourcing and U.S. operations by consolidating three regionalized operating divisions in 2015. It opened 20 stores in 2015, taking its total to more than 400 nationwide. HoneyBaked always has prided itself on delivering quality food, and it holds its own as a dinnertime staple, while staying ahead of the curve when it comes to innovations in fast casual dining. Over the past few years, HoneyBaked has seen significant growth in the arena of unit sales and revenue, and has evolved as a key player in the food and retail landscape.

Combined with industry-leading technology and first-rate service standards, HoneyBaked is satisfying customers' cravings for more convenience in the fast casual experience. It not only provides catering options and serves food in its restaurant cafés, but it also delivers service to customers via in-store kiosks, pop-up stores and mobile trucks.

## **#71 Super Chix Chicken & Custard**

Super Chix, which is looking to open three locations in 2016, quickly is earning a



name for itself as a "classed-up chicken joint and anti-chain chain." The brand, which was developed under Yum! Brands in 2014, has spent the past few months preparing to grow.

"We operated the brand for one year and went through a serious learning curve," said Nick Ouimet, founder and CEO of Super Chix. "It's during that time that we really began to understand the soul of Super Chix and its place in the market. We refined the food and operations to a point where we were happy and eagerly awaited the chance to do the same to our restaurant design."

In 2015, the brand launched new menu items, including new salads, a breakfast sandwich, Nashville hot chicken sandwich, craft beer, wine and craft soda. It is kicking off 2016 with innovative store designs that would cater to a kid-friendly yet upscale demographic. The new stores contain a "chicken coop" play fort and chalk areas for kids, as well as a large, hand-drawn mural featuring illustrated words that relate the Super Chix brand story.

## **#72 Blue Lemon**

Blue Lemon — which specializes in artisan sandwiches, salads and bakery items made from local sources — opened its fifth location in 2015 and is planning to open one or two more in 2016. It sprouted from an eco-fresh, urban-hip design concept and is continuing to gain momentum.

Last year, the brand created new



marketing strategies and initiated a new training program. The Utah-based company's motto of "pure clean food, with a twist," is continuing to define quality when it comes to fast casual food. The use of fresh ingredients, funky flavor combinations and fun presentation continue to set Blue Lemon apart. Because Blue Lemon is known for clean food prepared in a way that maximizes nutrients, its customer base can expect food that is never weighed down with artificial ingredients.

## **#73 Billy Sims Barbecue**

Billy Sims has developed a reputation as a man of bold action. After earning college football's top accolade during his years at the University of Oklahoma, and then making NFL history where he was nicknamed "Kung Fu Billy Sims," he is bringing that same energy to Billy Sims BBQ.

This past year has been full of innovation for the brand, which has 45 units across five states. By taking a measured approach, the company refined its menu by going back to its core product line. After testing new menu items, it came to the conclusion that expanding beyond traditional barbecue offerings was not necessary.

The extensive menu features nine meats, including favorites such as ribs, brisket, pulled pork, chicken, turkey and even bologna. Traditional sides with a twist complete the lineup. All Billy Sims BBQ



restaurants showcase the smoker in the front of the restaurant with a strategically placed cutting station, which shows guests that meats are pulled right off the smoker and freshly sliced prior to serving. Named by USA Today as one of the top athlete-based restaurant chains, Billy Sims BBQ is planning to open 10 units in 2016.

## **#74 The Mixx**

The Mixx continued its Kansas City expansion in 2015, opening its third Missouri location and its first on the Kansas side in June. The first location opened in 2005, and the second has been going strong since 2009. Known for its house-made soups, sandwiches, wraps and pasta, The Mixx added breakfast to its menu this year, featuring grab-and-go breakfast sandwiches, wraps, granola parfaits and create-your-own egg scrambles.

Its newest location features a coffee and fresh-pressed juice bar, which offers seven handcrafted pressed juice drinks and five signature smoothies. For those customers who are looking to "mix" up their daily coffee, they can choose from handcrafted syrups, including caramel, chocolate, cinnamon-caramel and

rosemary sauces. The brand also features an in-house bakery that serves cupcakes, muffins, granola bars, cookies, breakfast breads and even some gluten-free choices.

## **#75 Giraffas Brazilian Grill**

For those looking for Brazilian and Latin American flavors in the United States, Giraffas has just the thing to satisfy the palate. Entering the U.S. in 2011, Giraffas did more than \$6 million in sales in 2015, and it isn't looking to slow down. Featuring healthy options for family-style dishes, the chain is best known for its Picanha, a special cut of meat resulting in more flavor-rich burgers and steaks. To keep customers excited, the company decided to expand the technique to pork, Giraffas CEO and President Rene Prats said.

"Up until now, the Picanha has only been known in the U.S. as a beef item," he said. "The Picanha has never been seen or tasted in pork in the U.S. before. What we've discovered is exactly what we predicted. Customers love it."

Another thing customers loved this year is the new pricing structure being used. Giraffas changed the positioning of its menu to keep all items under \$9.99, as well as added doorstep delivery. The new pricing structure didn't lessen quality or menu choices. Giraffas added organic quinoa and fresh-made sides and sauces to accompany its variety of grilled-to-order protein options.

# Top 25 Executives



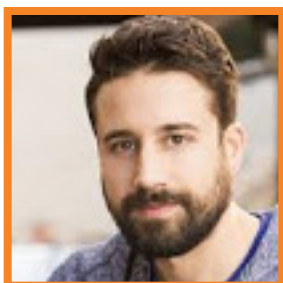
## **Michael Lastoria, co-founder of &pizza**

Michael Lastoria may look more like a rock star than a businessman, but the self-described "serial entrepreneur" is the brains behind &pizza, a Washington, D.C.-based fast casual pizza brand known for embracing the communities in which it resides.

Lastoria built his business, which has nearly 15 units, on three core principles: design driven, brand led and morally sound.

"We wanted to create a company that was built to serve and reflect the communities where we would set up shop," Lastoria said. "That's why we designed each store differently and why we do things as a company that's very right for us and follows our four core values, which we talk about day in and day out."

The Washington Post credits Lastoria with "designing the pizza shop of the 21st century," and he continues to be seen as a thought leader in the fast casual movement, sharing industry insights on panels and speaking platforms, including the Fast Casual Executive Summit, at NASDAQ and the Washington Post's inGENuitY Summit.



## **Andrew Gruel, CEO and founder of Slapfish Restaurant Group**

Andrew Gruel, CEO and founder of Slapfish Restaurant Group, the food truck turned international brick-and-mortar brand, has appeared on multiple television series, including as a judge on the show "Food Truck Face Off" and host of FYI's "Say It To My Face." Gruel, who recently keynoted the Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit, also has made appearances on the "Today" show, PBS and the Cooking Channel and has been featured in numerous publications, including FastCasual.com, The Wall Street Journal, Men's Health, Food & Wine magazine, Entrepreneur and Restaurant Business Magazine.

Gruel's six-unit chain not only is signing franchise deals but also is growing via corporate-owned units. Slapfish, which reported \$1.3 million in sales last year, is planning to add 10 locations before the year's end.



## **Carin Stutz, EVP and chief operating officer of Red Robin Gourmet Burgers**

Carin Stutz's first job in foodservice began at the front counter of McDonald's, and she since has accumulated more than 40 years of experience in the restaurant industry. She has worked her way through the ranks for a variety of brands and just this month traded her CEO title at McAlister's Deli to become EVP and chief operating officer at Red Robin Gourmet Burgers.

A champion for gender equality in the workplace, Stutz is a past chair of the Women's Foodservice Forum and was pivotal in launching the Women's Leadership Network at FOCUS Brands, parent company of McAlister's Deli.



# Top 25 Executives



## ***Bobby Shaw, president and COO of Freebirds World Burrito***

No one on our list got as many nominations as Bobby Shaw, Freebirds president and chief operating officer, whose employees were impressed with his leadership skills and happy to work for him.

One wrote: "Bobby truly has a passion for people development and continues to inspire people on a daily basis."

Another wrote: "Bobby is an amazing passionate leader, who I am proud to work for. His passion for doing what is right for the development of people is awesome. He looks to lift people around him and

manages to everyone's strengths."

Shaw, who began his career with McDonald's in 1984 as a crew member, eventually became a multiunit manager before joining Chipotle in 2002 as an executive regional director, responsible for 228 restaurants in 10 states. He joined Freebirds in 2013; he has helped it grow to 90 locations and has plans to open five additional locations across the southern United States in 2016.



## ***Carl Howard, CEO of Fazoli's***

Over the past few years, Carl Howard has re-engineered Fazoli's from a struggling QSR concept to a thriving fast casual brand with staying power. Under his leadership, the brand has reported 33 straight months of same-store sales increases and has broken the \$1 million mark in average unit volume, and franchise operators' sales have been up in 66 of the previous 69 months.

While other concepts are borrowing from his playbook to revitalize their own operations, Howard still has big plans for Fazoli's future. New and existing franchisees are opening restaurants, and sales are soaring with franchisees experiencing more than four years of continuous same-store traffic growth.

"We've had a turnaround," Howard told attendees at Fazoli's annual conference in September 2015. "Now, let's make a breakthrough."

Howard's leadership extends beyond Fazoli's walls into the communities it serves. Since 2012, the chain has partnered with Feed the Children, raising nearly \$200,000 in cash and donating 12 tons of food. Howard and other Fazoli's associates often participate in the food distributions because, as Howard said, "Associates see the money in action. They touch the distribution boxes, and they feel the emotional response from the recipients."



## ***Michael Mabry, COO of MOOYAH Burgers, Fries & Shakes***

Michael Mabry started in the restaurant industry as a busboy and worked his way up the ladder in a variety of positions, including executive chef, franchisee and vice president of franchising, before landing in his current position as MOOYAH's chief operating officer.

The self-described line-cook-turned-COO's leadership style can be summed up in one word: socks. Every new franchisee and team member receives a pair of custom-made burger-and-fry socks upon joining. In Mabry's weekly letter to franchisees, in which he shares what has been on his mind and solicits feedback and dialogue from his readers, a new pair of crazy socks is featured in the sign-off.

It opens the lines of communication with franchisees and team members, who not only share their feedback with their COO, but also have begun sending photos of their wacky socks, which he now features in his letters.

The socks remind Mabry to metaphorically walk in the socks of his franchisees when he makes decisions for the brand and franchisees. That thought process must be working, as MOOYAH has 78 restaurants in 21 states, and 14 international restaurants in seven countries. It's looking to build on that momentum by adding 30 locations by the end of the year.

# Top 25 Executives



**Geoff Alexander,**  
*EVP and managing partner of Lettuce Entertain You  
and CEO of Wow Bao*

Geoff Alexander, known as a pioneer in emerging technologies, joined Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises only nine days after graduating college. He has spent the last 20 years working on a variety of concepts in the company's international portfolio, including Shaw's Crab House, Mity Nice Bar & Grill, Big Bowl, Vong's, Vong's Thai Kitchen, Tucci Bennuch and Frankie's Pizza & Scaloppine.

One of Alexander's top priorities, however, is serving as president of Wow Bao, one of LEYE's top brands. In that role, he has implemented mobile and desktop online ordering, added bicycle delivery and domestic shipping, installed self-ordering kiosks and pioneered a mobile gift card and loyalty platform. He also has overseen Wow Bao's inclusion into NFL stadiums, MLB stadiums, university campuses, airports and more than 55 grocers selling Wow Bao's frozen retail product line.

Alexander is a friend to the industry, sharing his advice and experiences about social media and restaurant technologies at events, including Foodservice Technology, Conference and Showcase; Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management; the University of Chicago's Gleacher Center, the Fast Casual Executive Summit and at the annual National Restaurant Association Show in Chicago.



**Tim Taft, CEO of Fiesta Restaurant Group**

Tim Taft has a proven track record of driving success at leading restaurant brands, including in his current role as CEO of Fiesta Restaurant Group, parent company of Pollo Tropical and Taco Cabana.

Last year, Taft ignited the rapid expansion of Pollo Tropical, which has seen 25 consecutive quarters with positive same-store sales. The chain, based in Florida, opened 23 locations in Texas, 11 in Georgia and four in Tennessee via a re-imagined restaurant prototype, all while maintaining industry-leading AUVs (\$2.7 million for Pollo and \$1.9 million for Taco Cabana in 2014).

Taft's vision of the "Pollo Tropical Express" has become a reality this year with the first two in development to open in South Florida. He also has led by finding synergies and economies of scale for distribution, media and supply chain that have propelled the company to stronger financial results. By the end of 2016, Taft will have more than doubled Pollo Tropical's domestic footprint from 89 to 200.

Taft also leads investor group engagement, presenting to investors around the country throughout the year. Both brands have reported record gains under his leadership, and FRGI has been featured on TV programs including Jim Cramer's "Mad Money" on multiple occasions. "Fiesta's what I like to call a great regional to national story," Cramer said. "The concept is fast-growing and terrific."



# Top 25 Executives



## **Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks**

No stranger to our Top Exec list is Howard Schultz, who oversees the most successful coffee chain in the world but is just as well known for supporting the American dream and advocating health care for employees. Under his direction, Starbucks invested \$284 million in health care benefits last year. Schultz has spoken up about how companies should use their scale to spread good throughout the world; he also has co-authored books about veterans and citizenship.

He's not afraid to take a stand on hot-button issues that most CEOs would avoid out of fear of turning off customers. Schultz, who said last year that he would not be running for U.S. president despite many requests, has asked customers not to bring guns into his stores, recently called for a boycott of campaign contributions when politicians couldn't reach a debt solution and told an investor who objected to his support for same-sex marriage that he was free to take his money elsewhere.

Showing no signs of giving up his causes, Schultz ended a March meeting with shareholders by saying:

"I ask you today to share your blanket with others, regardless of the color of their skin, regardless of their religion, regardless of their gender, regardless of their sexual orientation, regardless of their station in life or their politics," Schultz said. "Let's fill our reservoir back up with the true promise of our country and once again embrace what it means to be Americans."



## **Vince Burchianti, CFO of Firehouse Subs**

Vince Burchianti has redefined the modern-day CFO image. While most CFOs concentrate on overseeing finance and information technology, that's not enough for this 25-year industry. Burchianti, who joined Firehouse Subs in 1991 as a controller, worked his way up to vice president of finance took over as CFO four years ago.

The company credits his 2001 financial pro forma in helping not only to determine it to embrace franchising but also to keep company-owned stores to drive growth. The chain, which has over 1,000 units, is obviously happy with the decision and with Burchianti, who oversees the brand's six departments charged with generating and saving revenue.

Working side-by-side with CEO Don Fox, Burchianti has been able to successfully forecast Firehouse's financial future. That skill not only has led to increases in productivity across all departments but also protects its core financial model.



## **Jeff Jackson, president of Legendary Q Brands and Billy Sims Barbecue**

Partnering with former NFL pro Billy Sims in 2004, Jeff Jackson opened the chain's first restaurant in Tulsa. The Kansas City native since has helped expand the brand to nearly 50 units across five states.

Jackson, who leads the Billy Sims Barbecue management team, juggles a variety of challenges, including the intense competition along with an ever-changing cost in the supply chain, according to one nomination form.

"Jeff Jackson has successfully led his franchise through many industry changes while maintaining the core values of his brand," it said.

# Top 25 Executives



## ***Jeff Sinelli, founder and CEO of Which Wich***

Jeff Sinelli has bled yellow and black since launching Which Wich nearly a dozen years ago. His innovative ideas — including the brand's unique brown bag and Sharpie ordering system, Bag 8 LTO program and strides toward offering new healthy and diet- and allergen-specific menu options — have helped to grow the chain to nearly 400 units. In fact, it opened 55 units in 2015, more than one each week.

Sinelli, also known as the brand's chief vibe officer, is enhancing his Project PB&J program, in which for every PB&J sandwich purchased in-store, one is donated to a local organization and one is banked for the global fund. Thousands of sandwiches were donated in local markets across the Which Wich system, feeding those who otherwise might not have had meals.



## ***Craig Dunaway, president of Penn Station East Coast Subs***

Craig Dunaway has been a big part of Penn Station's growth and success since 1999, when he joined the company when it had 63 stores. It now has more than 300, but Dunaway isn't ready to kick up his feet. In 2014, he decided to blow up Penn Station's marketing program, replacing it with an aggressive new strategy that has paid off big time. The chain's comparative sales numbers are up 7 percent, for example. The chain also has been able to maintain its food and paper costs at 26 percent without sacrificing the quality of product.

Dunaway has a unique perspective on franchising, which comes from having walked many miles in a fast casual franchisee's shoes. He previously owned 17 Penn Station restaurants and has been an 11-unit Papa John's franchisee. His accounting background also helps — he's a CPA who always views the business from an ROI perspective.



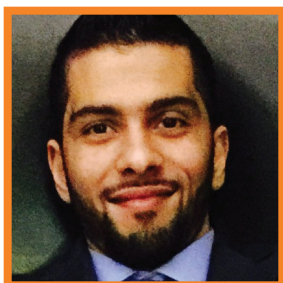
## ***Kelly Roddy, CEO of Schlotzsky's Deli***

Kelly Roddy has been instrumental in the turnaround of the Schlotzsky's brand since it declared bankruptcy in 2007. With his leadership and determination, Roddy has grown the average AUV from roughly \$600,000 to nearly \$1 million, transforming the brand from a struggling QSR into a fast casual chain that continues to evolve. Since being named president, he has built a strong management team, introduced new programs and launched a systemwide rebranding effort, all of which have helped lead to nine years of consecutive sales growth.

Roddy, a member of the International Franchise Association, also serves on several boards of directors, including Baylor's Marketing Board, Hankamer School of Business Board and the Caritas Board, among others.



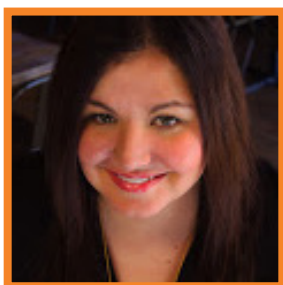
# Top 25 Executives



## **Ahmed Abouelenein, CEO of The Halal Guys**

Ahmed Abouelenein came to America from Egypt in 1995, five years after his father founded The Halal Guys in NYC. He worked his way up from managing Halal's corporate units, which were street carts in those early days, to CEO in 2014, after studying aeronautical engineering.

Under his leadership, The Halal Guys partnered with Fransmart to begin franchising and now has seven street carts, two NYC corporate stores and six brick-and-mortar franchise locations, with more than 300 signed deals and stores in development.

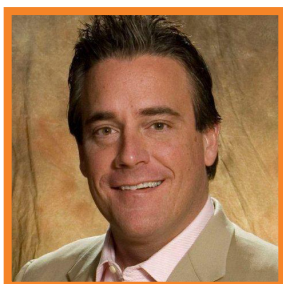


## **Laura Rea Dickey, CIO of Dickey's Barbecue Pit**

As chief information officer of her family-owned business, Laura Rea Dickey has pioneered new technology and partnerships that have evolved the brand into a fast, big data-crunching technological machine. In addition to all things tech, she oversees the nationwide marketing for the brand. Dickey initiated a partnership with iOLAP, a business intelligence and data warehouse solutions provider, to develop new internal systems that allow Dickey's franchisees access to big data in real time.

As a result, Dickey's has developed customer and market profiles that aid in every business process, from identifying hot markets for new stores to marketing to Dickey's core audience to tailoring offers to guests to ensure maximum return.

Last fall, Dickey was honored along with a small group of Dallas women with the 2015 Women in Technology award from Dallas Business Journal. The barbecue brand has more than 540 stores, but internally it behaves like a nimble tech startup, thanks to Dickey's innovative advances.



## **Scott Crane, president and CEO of Smashburger**

Scott Crane has helped grow Smashburger to over 350 units across the country since joining the brand in 2007 when it had only 40 employees. Today, the chain has nearly 7,500 employees, quite an accomplishment for the exec who got his start in the restaurant industry at the age of 12 as a dishwasher in Kansas City.

Crane's goal is to help his employees see similar success; the chain's promote-from-within rate has grown from 40 to 65 percent since he took over. His ultimate goal is a rate as high as 75 percent. To ensure that happens, he implemented several training programs in 2015 that allow Smashburger to hire and retain quality employees to grow with the brand. One program, known internally as TRIP, guides Smashburger internal leaders in learning and practicing key leadership competencies. Another one, Leadership Hospitality and Results, is a quarterly training provided to all district managers as a train-the-trainer model for multiunit leaders to train their general managers and assistant managers.

Lastly, to improve internal communications, Crane launched the Smash Connection, which allows him to meet with employees to talk about professional development and available internal opportunities.

# Top 25 Executives



## ***Peter Cancro, CEO of Jersey Mike's Subs***

When Peter Cancro bought his first sub shop at the Jersey Shore at age 17, he not only wanted to make customers happy but also wanted to make a difference in his community. Today, with more than 1,000 locations from coast to coast, that focus continues. Each year, Cancro travels thousands of miles to meet with franchisees and team members to share his passion and remind them that the Jersey Mike's concept is simple: bring customers "A Sub Above" experience while giving back to their local communities.

That commitment has spurred community outreach throughout the Jersey Mike's organization. Since 2010, the chain has raised more than \$14 million for local charities and distributed more than 1.5 million free sub sandwiches to help numerous causes. The brand raised more than \$3.5 million this year in March, during its annual Month of Giving.

"It's gratifying to know that each new location brings more opportunities to make a difference in people's lives," Cancro said.



## ***Steve Ells, chairman and co-CEO of Chipotle Mexican Grill***

Although Chipotle has had a rough year with multiple E coli outbreaks, Steve Ells has found a way to use the crisis to continue to be a leader in the industry. This year, that leadership comes in the form of implementing stricter food-safety protocols.

"This was a very unfortunate incident and I'm deeply sorry this happened, but the procedures we're putting in place today are so above industry norms that we are going to be the safest place to eat," Ells said during an interview earlier this year on NBC's "Today" show.

Those procedures are a product of the chain's comprehensive reassessment of its food-safety practices conducted with a laboratory that included a farm-to-fork assessment of each ingredient Chipotle uses, with an eye toward establishing the highest standards for safety.

"When I opened the first Chipotle 22 years ago, I offered a focused menu of just a few things made with fresh ingredients and prepared using classic cooking techniques," Ells said. "We do the same thing today, even with nearly 2,000 restaurants, and we are working harder than ever to ensure that our food is safe and delicious."

If anyone can bring his company back from such a high-profile crisis, it's Ells.



## ***Patty Scheibmeir, VP of R&D and product innovation for Pie Five Pizza Co.***

As vice president of research and development for Pie Five, Patty Scheibmeir leads the charge on implementing fresh, clean ingredients, menu innovation and dough technologies. Scheibmeir, who was the inventor of the stuffed-crust pizza for Pizza Hut in the '90s, stretches her culinary imagination to create at least 10 limited-time signature pizzas and desserts for Pie Five each year. She also has been instrumental in ensuring that the chain meets a variety of dietary needs, including providing gluten-free crusts, dairy-free cheese and vegan options.

"Pie Five Pizza believes in unlimited possibilities for our customers," she said.

Oven technology is a huge part of Scheibmeir's role, as one of her first projects at Pie Five was figuring out how to get the pizzas hotter, especially for those guests who want a loaded pie. She accomplished that goal by designing an aluminum device that is placed in the center of the pie to help it bake.

# Top 25 Executives



## ***Mike Rotondo, CEO of Tropical Smoothie Café***

Mike Rotondo has completely turned around Tropical Smoothie Café since becoming CEO in 2012, when the brand had about 200 franchised locations and was growing by only 20 units per year. Fast forward to today: Rotondo has turned those 200 units into 465 locations across 39 states. Over 100 new locations will open within the next year, and average unit volume is at an all-time high of more than \$578,000, a 44 percent increase over 2010.

Rotondo helped reduce development costs for franchisees, which also has helped accelerate growth.

"The success we are seeing is phenomenal, including strong same-store sales that far outperform our competitors in the smoothie and fast casual industries," he said. "All of this is contributing to our franchise growth as more small-business owners want to be part of Tropical Smoothie Café's success."



## ***Sue Daggett, executive president of Smiling Moose Rocky Mountain Deli***

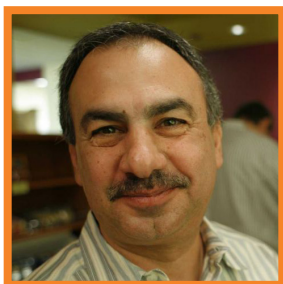
For much of Sue Daggett's 25-year career, she has stood out from the herd by building food and beverage brands through increased efficiency and successful growth strategies. A big-picture thinker, Daggett — who started her career in finance at Ernst & Young and Kenneth Leventhal & Co. — joined Smiling Moose in 2013, to help the concept meet its growth goal of more than 100 delis by 2020.

To ensure that happens, Daggett is overseeing a complete brand overhaul, including a major menu update and a complete restaurant redesign.

"That path for growth will include working with current franchisees to expand existing trade areas, adding new franchisees with restaurant experience and a desire to own multiple units and strategically expanding the supply chain to support efficient growth and ensure brand quality and consistency," she said about the brand that now has 20 units.

As Smiling Moose's EVP, the former Burger King director of finance, relies on her training and experience in finance as well as operations, supply-chain management, business development and corporate real estate to lead her franchisees.

"We are a small, emerging brand and, with that, we pride ourselves on the individual attention we pay to each franchisee," Daggett said.



## ***Berge Simonian, CEO of Salata***

When Berge Simonian started his first salad-only restaurant (the precursor to Salata) in the late 1990s in Houston, he was way ahead of the healthy-eating curve. He wasn't reading a crystal ball, however; he was responding to the customers he saw choosing his salad line over the line of hot-food choices at his first restaurant. He shut down the hot-food operation, and Salata "The Next Generation Salad Bar" was born.

Now, with more than 50 locations in Texas, California and Illinois (and 10 locations set to open in 2016), Simonian has poised Salata as one of the leaders in the industry and has his eyes set on national expansion. In 2015, he spearheaded the development of the brand's 35,000-square-foot corporate

headquarters with a production facility and training restaurant; debuted a state-of-the-art prototype that provides a new direction for the brand; revamped the catering offerings (portable salad bar) and process (online ordering) to poise the brand and franchise partners to grow the catering business. He also launched the brand's "Fresh First" clean-ingredient commitment to its guests.



# Top 25 Executives



## ***Scott Svenson, founder of MOD Pizza***

When Scott Svenson founded his fast casual pizza joint, he knew he needed a team of outstanding leaders to help him steer it. He put in place top advisers, including Jim Alling, CEO of TOMS; David Ferguson, partner at Perella Weinberg Partners and co-head of the PWP Growth Equity Fund; Lindsey Schwartz, CEO of Schwartz Brothers Restaurants and Bakery; Howard Behar, former president of Starbucks North America and Starbucks International; and Paul Twohig, president of Dunkin' Donuts.

For international expansion, Svenson forged a joint venture agreement with Sir Charles Dunstone, one of Britain's most-famous entrepreneurs, who founded Carphone Warehouse and brought Five Guys Burgers and Fries to the UK. Svenson also managed to lure John Nelson of Nando's to the position of CEO for the UK MOD division.

Besides having a talent to persuade industry stars to help grow his business, Svenson has built one of the strongest balance sheets in the sector, raising \$100 million in equity and having no debt. He also has a strong commitment to giving back, having donated \$425,000 to local communities in which MOD serves.



## ***Blaine Hurst, EVP and chief transformation and growth officer of Panera***

When it comes to technology, few brands are as adventurous as Panera, which owes much of its success in that arena to Blaine Hurst.

Hurst recognized that the biggest obstacle to Panera's growth was how long customers spent waiting. He set out to fix that "unpleasant experience, and the result was Panera 2.0, a suite of technology updates aimed at improving the customer experience. It seems to be paying off, as 16 percent of total company sales now are ordered, produced and paid for digitally, and the company projected that over 20 percent of its business will be digital by year's end.

Also, more than a third of retail sales come from digital channels in top-performing markets. Systemwide digital sales are equivalent to a half-billion-dollar e-commerce business and could reach \$1 billion in annual sales by 2017.

"From the start, we knew a mobile payment system alone would not be enough to meaningfully improve the guest experience," Hurst said. "We needed to use technology to support a better experience from end-to-end throughout the customer journey and we have done just that. Outside of the big three pizza operators, I don't know of another public restaurant company that has taken this sort of holistic approach, and in turn, experienced the level of digital adoption we are now seeing at Panera."

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