

2018 fast casual
TOP 100
MOVERS & SHAKERS

Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment



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Executive Summary

The Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers – for the past 14 years -- has recognized the industry's most innovative brands. As always, making the list is a testament to a company's growth and sales accomplishments but also honors innovation in the use of technology to enhance the customer experience and a willingness to take risks in the name of brand elevation.

Although this year's class features a variety of concepts, from those specializing in pizza and burgers to Mexican food and chicken, "healthful" was the standout theme of 2018. In fact, 20 of the 75 brands fit that category, which was by far the most out of any year. Even this year's No. 1 brand – Freshii – is a concept known for its healthful fare.

It makes sense that these brands are coming on strong, as Americans are demanding transparency when it comes to what they put into their bodies. The fast casuals on our list are not only proof that offering high-quality foods at an affordable price is possible, they're also forcing even the world's largest quick service restaurant brands to provide healthier options to stay competitive.

Choosing the Top 100

Hundreds of brands nominated themselves by taking part in a survey about their business practices and also nominated executives whom they believed best represented the industry. A panel of judges weighed each nomination carefully before deciding on the final 100, composed of 75 brands and 25 executives.

While each winner offered customers a little something extra to differentiate it from its competitors, the top performers also shared important similarities — a heavy emphasis on employee training, high-quality ingredients, technology upgrades, brand culture and a passion for giving back to their communities.

The list also recognizes brands and leaders for their contributions to the growth of the fast casual segment. When it comes to creativity, progressiveness and hard work, these 100 are leading the restaurant industry as a whole.

Sincerely,

Cherryh Cansler

Director of Editorial, Network World Media Group



Cherryh Cansler
Editorial director,
Network World Media Group

#1 Freshii

Freshii is one of the fastest-growing health and wellness brands in the world, opening its first 200 stores faster than Starbucks, Dominos Pizza and even Subway. By making superfoods such as kale and quinoa convenient and affordable, while continuing to introduce the latest culinary healthy trends, Freshii has become a household name for guests looking to fuel on the go.

Never settling for the status quo, the brand is constantly innovating — from introducing new menu items every 90 days to finding new ways to make its packaging more sustainable.

In 2017, Freshii reported same-store sales growth of 5.5 percent over 2016, went public, increased its staff count at headquarters by 85 percent, grew to 370 restaurants around the world, opened inside sports arenas and hospitals, and began serving food on Air Canada flights.

The company, founded by CEO Matthew Corrin in Canada, plans to have between 730 and 760 stores by the end of 2019, and is projecting an annual same-store sales growth outlook of between 3 and 4 percent for fiscal years 2017 through 2019. Systemwide sales should grow between \$275 million and \$285 million by the end of fiscal 2019.

Technology plays a big part in Freshii's success. From a global intranet platform that connects all franchisees with HQ initiatives to a mobile app that lets customers purchase their meals without cash, the company says it uses tech to build positive relationships with all stakeholders in an authentic, supportive and seamless way.



#2 CaliBurger

The CaliBurger brand has continued to be a leader in innovation, not only in the fast casual restaurant market but also in the technology market. Its parent company, Cali Group, partnered with Miso Robotics to develop Flippy, a cost-effective robot designed to cook burgers and fulfill a variety of other cooking tasks.

“The deployment of Flippy in CaliBurger restaurants represents a major milestone in helping our staff produce mouthwatering burgers more consistently and in a timely manner,” John Miller, chairman of Cali Group, said in a news release. “The ease of integration into our existing kitchen lines will also allow us to quickly install Flippy in more locations nationwide.”

Cali Group eventually expects to sell the technology to other brands.

CaliBurger, in 2017, hit \$6 million in same-store sales, implemented self-ordering kiosks and launched a global



e-mobile gaming competition to generate traffic in store. It also offers facial-recognition loyalty programs, which have a pay-by-face component.

The chain is adding even more kitchen robotics and is expanding into Mexico and Latin America in the coming year, as well as continuing expansion in the U.S. and Canada.



#3 Moe's Southwest Grill

Moe's Southwest Grill continues to be at the forefront of the fast casual Mexican segment, and its marketing efforts always emphasize that. The backbone of the 2017 efforts came from Moe's "Best Customer" segmentation research, which drove the brand's digital strategy. This research allowed the brand to home in on specific core demographics that were vital in taking one big step forward in the digital space — allocating all systemwide media dollars from TV in 2016 to digital in 2017.



Best customer research not only drove digital decisions and enhanced sales and traffic, but also uncovered insights that guided strategic campaigns, according to the company.

Essential to the success of all strategic campaigns is the strong

and unique social engagement the brand activates. When competitor Chipotle launched a product in an attempt to rival Moe's queso that has been served for 18 years, the brand leveraged its irreverent brand personality, informing customers that they should be aware of “queso imposters” and that the best-tasting queso can be found only at Moe's. The public relations and social campaigns garnered attention across national outlets, including USA Today, CNBC and various food and restaurant outlets.

To keep up with customer demand and expectations, Moe's uses a mobile app for loyalty rewards and online ordering and has its online ordering platform. To continue to deliver high-quality service, Moe's also employs e-learning for training purposes and provides operators with tablet-based temperature checks, assessments and digital recipes.

Moe's uses digital menu boards in restaurants, touchscreen digital drive-thru menu boards, self-ordering kiosks and augmented reality enhanced restaurant artwork that guests can interact with using the brand's Rockin' Rewards app.



#4 Wow Bao

Wow Bao, an early adopter of self-serve kiosks, [made headlines](#) in 2017, when it launched what promises to be the next generation of self-serve restaurant technology — a fully automated dining experience. In addition to allowing guests to place orders via kiosks or mobile app, the test unit in Chicago provides the added convenience of letting guests pick up their

orders from cubbies that alert them on the status of their orders, an innovation that Wow Bao offers as the first licensee of Eatsa's automated technology.



Wow Bao has also created a proprietary mobile order app, a key component of the streamlined order experience that it tapped from Eatsa. The app, in combination with cubby order pickup, allows customers to order and eat even faster than before. By replacing the servers with pickup cubbies, the new technology cut the front-of-store staff from four to two.

CEO Geoff Alexander plans to use the Eatsa technology in all of his new stores, as he plans to double the existing six Chicago stores over the next 12 months. Existing stores could be retrofitted with the new technology in the future.



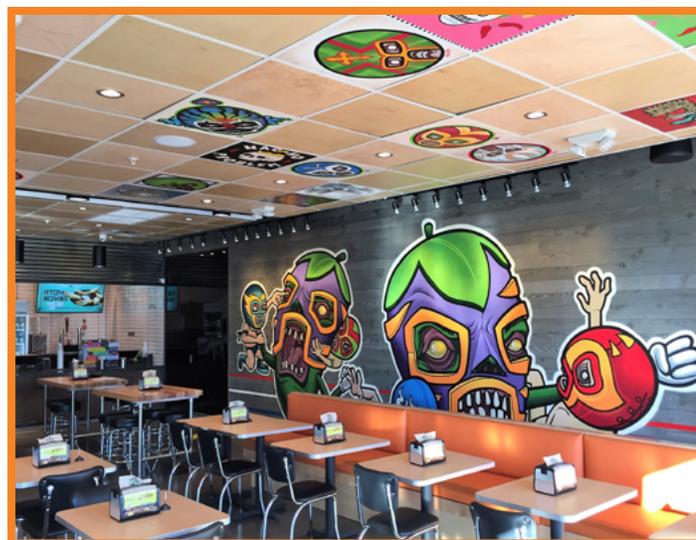
#5 Balance Pan-Asian Grille

Prakash Karamchandani and HoChan Jang pooled their savings, borrowed from family and also got a credit line from Home Depot, in 2010, to open the first Balance Pan-Asian Grille. It's safe to call the business a good investment, considering that the men have grown the brand to three units and reported more than \$5 million of store sales in 2017.

Karamchandani and Jang, who have built a modern Asian-inspired menu that changes seasonally, don't follow typical business practices. They have vowed to always pay employees above minimum wage and embrace technology.

zin 2017, for example, they designed a ["managerless" form of restaurant operation](#) and came up with a kitchen design for maximum efficiency. Because the menu changes often, work stations are adaptable to maintain efficiency.

The men are building an 8,600-square-foot aquaponics facility visible to customers to provide organic local produce year-round for its restaurants, as well as to supply other local restaurants and grocery stores.



#6 Farmstand

Founded in January 2016, Farmstand is a healthy food company with sustainability at its roots. Taking its inspiration from the roadside stalls of the American Midwest, the London-based concept offers breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, coffee, wine and always free filtered water. Every good idea starts with a problem, and Farmstand is no different. When founder Steven Novick struggled to find, “properly healthy food” he set out to solve change that.



The core values behind Farmstand are to keep the menu simple; to treat all customers, team members and the environment fairly; and to be honest and optimistic about the

future. Within the last two years, the brand has grown to 21 units in London, using its unique strategic approach of setting up a central kitchen hub first, then setting up physical stores.

With nothing artificial on its menu, Farmstand’s menu is 80 percent vegan, 5 percent fish and 15 percent meat. In addition, it is free from gluten, dairy and added sugar, and the brand aims to use only compostable material for all packaging, creating zero landfill waste.

In the coming year, Farmstand is looking to double or triple the sales of its business and is using technology to help do that. Innovations include the new in-house mobile app launched in March, as well as a digital POS stock and schedule management system.

FARMSTAND

#7 Dickey’s Barbecue Pit

At Dickey’s, 2017 was the year of convenience as it focused heavily on seamlessly implementing delivery to guests across the nation. The brand accomplished this goal by creating more than 50 partnerships with third-party vendors, such as Grubhub and DoorDash. These relationships yielded a year-over-year sales growth for delivery of about 300 percent, according to the company. That success has fueled the brand to beta test direct delivery in a few markets with hopes of making it a systemwide initiative by the end of 2018.

Dickey’s growth plans for 2018 incorporate national and international growth; it is making its international debut in the Middle East and also will break into the Hawaiian market.



To make the guest experience quick, easy and convenient, the chain implemented a mobile app, which gives guests the option to order directly from the app for in-store pickup, curbside delivery or delivery through third-party vendors. The app includes a review-based loyalty program for Dickey’s guests.

The brand, which is nearing 600 units, also is working to create and implement a proprietary point-of-sale (POS) system created by restaurateurs for restaurateurs.

#8 &pizza

&pizza describes itself as an “anti-establishment establishment built on the renown of its creative pies and craft beverages, localized shop design and the strength, unity and vibe of its living-wage-paid, ampersand-tattooed employees,” which it calls its Tribe.

Founded in 2012 in Washington, D.C., &pizza has grown to 26 locations in D.C., Maryland, Virginia, Philadelphia and New York City, with continued growth in existing markets and expansion into new markets Boston and Miami planned for 2018. The brand has raised more than \$60 million in expansion capital since 2012.

With each shop, &pizza cultivates a sense of conscious community by partnering with local artists and purveyors, supporting local charities, and encouraging guests and Tribe members alike to celebrate the uniqueness of each shop and neighborhood.

It also strives to be an important part of its customers' lives, going so far as to host weddings in its restaurants every March 14, known as Pi Day. It transforms select shops into pop-up wedding chapels and offers free ceremonies with pizza, champagne, celebratory décor, flowers and wedding officiation.



&pizza

#9 CoreLife Eatery

CoreLife Eatery may be only 3 years old, but the 32-unit chain is expanding quickly, with plans to have more than 300 units in operation over the next five years.

Offering a wide variety of fresh ingredients that are transformed into custom-created dishes, all menu items are free of trans fats, artificial colors, sweeteners, other artificial additives and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The chain took its focus on a healthy lifestyle a step further, however, by launching the CoreLife Challenge, a 21-day process that helps customers recharge and get on a path toward living a healthier lifestyle. It involves customers replacing sugars, fast food, gluten/wheat, trans fats, hydrogenated oils, dairy and so on with whole foods that are colorful. It also recommends intermittent fasting and exercise.

Challenge champs are featured on the Core website, which — of course — directs challengers to eat at CoreLife as a way to ensure they stick to the program.



CORELIFE
EATERY

#10 Panera Bread



Panera Bread Co. — which has more than 2,000 units, about \$5 billion in systemwide sales and more than 100,000 associates — got a lot of attention in 2017, when it went from public to private-owned in a sale to JAB Holding Co. for \$315 per share in cash. And it sold at such a high price for good reason.

The company, in June 2017, surpassed \$1 billion on an annualized basis and could double in 2019. Since the inception of its Panera 2.0 program in 2014, the company has emerged as an industry-leading restaurant e-tailer. Panera's end-to-end digital pathways — including Rapid Pick-Up, Fast Lane Kiosks, catering and delivery — enable a better guest experience for people to eat the way they want.

As of the end of Q1 2017, systemwide digital sales made up 26 percent of total company sales — the highest rate in the restaurant industry outside of the pizza segment. Approximately 1.2 million digital orders are placed per week.

Although Panera CEO Ron Shaich stepped down last year, the brand is still in digital-savvy hands with CEO Blaine Hurst, who was a main driver of Panera 2.0.

The CEO switch wasn't the only exciting news in 2017. The brand also announced that it was buying Au Bon Pain, a Boston-based bakery-cafe chain with 304 units worldwide. It will be part of Panera's initiative to intensify growth in new real estate channels, including hospitals, universities, transportation centers and urban locations.



#11 Slapfish

Slapfish has created a niche in the marketplace, offering high-quality, chef-driven seafood dishes in a fast casual setting. Although it started out as a food truck, CEO chef Andrew Gruel has grown the brand to 13 locations with plans to hit 20 by the end of the year. The brand has even caught attention around the world, with locations opening in the U.K. and South Korea.

Slapfish — which boasts unique menu items, including Clobster Grilled Cheese,



Lobster Grinder, Baja Mahi Sandwich, Chowder Fries, Surf N' Turf Lobster Burger and a menu of seasonally and daily rotating salads and bowls — has more than 100 locations in development.

The chain reported \$1.5 million in same-store sales in 2017, which it called a "consistent increase from 2016," and plans to expand the brand throughout the Southwest and East Coast in the next year.

#12 The Halal Guys

As the self-described leader of the American halal fast casual segment, The Halal Guys — which serves chicken and beef gyros, falafel sandwiches and platters — reported that its systemwide

company revenue for the 2017 calendar year was up more than 660 percent over the previous year. The menu also includes house-made hummus, baba ganoush, tahini, falafel, fries and baklava.

The chain, which was founded as a food cart in 1990 on 53rd Street and Sixth Avenue in New York City, nearly doubled its locations last year, opening 37 to hit a total of 65 by the end of 2017.

The Halal Guys will end 2018 by adding 47 units, and part of that quick growth is fueled by the brand's use of technology. Last year, for example, it introduced a revised online ordering service in cooperation with Olo that led to an 8 percent increase in same-store sales. It also introduced a food-safety check program in collaboration with Steritech.

#13 Fatburger

Fatburger claims the title “America’s Last Great Hamburger Stand” and was established in 1947, but that doesn’t mean it’s not an innovator in the industry. While continuing to offer its classic burgers, fries and shakes, it was among the first to adopt industry trends, such as the vegan Impossible Burger and delivery, for example.

Third-party delivery in 2017, in fact, resulted in double-digit positive same-store-sales increases in California and a 5 percent same-store-sales increase domestically.

The brand’s success is evident through its recent worldwide expansion in the Middle East, Europe and Asia and its systemwide sales, which in 2017 totaled more than \$109 million. Systemwide, same-store sales were up 1.5 percent over the previous year, according to the brand’s parent company, FAT Brands, which purchased Ponderosa Steakhouse and Bonanza Steakhouse brands in 2017 for \$10.5 million. FAT Brands operates more than 300 restaurants around the globe, with systemwide sales exceeding \$300 million, according to a news release.

The company is on a mission to grow the Fatburger brand, which it took public last year. It has 21 stores, two trailers and one food truck, but plans call for the opening of 30 more brick-and-mortar units, three food trucks and one trailer by the end of 2018.



#14 Shake Shack

Shake Shack came to play in 2017, reporting that it ended the fiscal year with a revenue increase of 33.6 percent to \$358.8 million. It also increased sales 33.6 percent to \$346.4 million and opened 45 units, including 26 domestic company-operated Shacks and 19 licensed Shacks.

The year also marked a milestone of digital innovation for Shake Shack, according to CEO Randy Garutti, who said the company launched a mobile app, added self-serve kiosks at select locations and tested delivery pilots designed to further enhance the guest digital experience.

The iOS app had 350,000 downloads and following intro promotions, contributed to 3 percent of total sales.

Looking ahead, 2018 is shaping up to be another year of growth, with the opening of 32 to 35 domestic company-operated Shacks. Garutti said he expects 16 to 18 licensed Shacks for the year, with a significant portion of international growth targeted in Asia, including the first Shack in Hong Kong.

“We’re also focused on further strengthening our infrastructure to deliver against the significant long-term opportunity we have in our sights,” he said. “By the end of 2020, we plan to have more than doubled our 2017 systemwide Shack count and increased our revenue to over \$700 million.”

#15 Chronic Tacos

Chronic Tacos is spreading “The Taco Life” — encouraging individuality, being true to oneself and embracing others

for who they are — from coast to coast and abroad. Last year, it opened its 50th location in North America and recently opened its first in Japan.

Sales numbers for all stores open were nearly \$30 million in 2017. The year also brought 16 openings, the launch of a new mobile app and the first annual franchisee conference.

To help spread the word about The Taco Life, the chain launched new branding initiatives with MomentFeed and held the seventh annual Gringo Bandito Chronic Tacos Eating Challenge at the Sabroso Craft Beer, Taco & Music Festival, where the professional competitive eater Takeru Kobayashi ate 144 tacos in 10 minutes.

Chronic Tacos plans to add 20 units by the end of 2018.

#16 Chaia

Suzanne Simon and Bettina Stern founded Chaia, a seasonal vegetable taco shop, in 2013 in Washington, D.C., in hopes of helping people eat more plants. The duo focuses on sourcing produce from farms that use sustainable practices to create a menu that rotates with the seasons and is solely based on vegetables.

So far, the women have sold more than 1 million tacos, reported \$1.5 million in same-store sales for 2017, turned tens of thousands of customers on to eating meatless meals on a regular basis, educated customers on the impacts of eating more plants and earned mention by Bon Appetit and Zagat as a reason why the district is a top food city.

Although it has only one location, Chaia will open two others by the end of the year.

“Many of the mega-trends in food show that more and more consumers are looking for ways to eat more sustainably,” Stern told FastCasual. “When we first had the idea to start Chaia in 2013, we did not truly recognize the impact we would have on our customers and on the restaurant industry. We ourselves were simply looking for a way to eat more seasonal and local vegetables for our health and for the environment. We knew that eating plants was healthy and we knew that eating local was important to support a better food system. What we did not realize was that we would become leaders in the fast casual restaurant space for our sourcing practices, minimal food waste and female leadership.”

Stern believes Chaia is a roadmap to the future of food and the way humans must learn to eat.

“If everyone went vegetarian for just one day in the United States, we could save 100 gallons of water, 1.5 billion pounds of food otherwise fed to livestock, 3 million acres of land and 33 tons of antibiotics,” she said.

#17 Blaze Fast Fire'd Pizza

A leader in the build-your-own pizza segment since it opened in 2011, Blaze Pizza has nearly 250 units and will add about 90 by the end of 2018. It also is taking on the Middle East — opening in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia — with a partnership with M.H. Alshaya Co., a multinational retail franchise operator headquartered in Kuwait that operates more than 90 consumer retail brands

across the Middle East and North Africa, Russia, Turkey and Europe.

Blaze had a successful 2017, reporting a 3.7 percent increase in same-store sales and adding new salads and agua fresca drinks. It also launched delivery and donated \$50,000 to Project RED, an AIDS research foundation.

The brand grabbed national attention in June 2017, when it figured out some offbeat ways to sponsor the Vans Warped Tour, a 41-stop traveling music festival. About 500,000 concert-goers attended the festival, and many took advantage of the Blaze photo op that put them on a skateboard ramp, posed on a bolted-down skateboard for pictures for Instagram or Twitter that could win them a free pizza.

Also, during many of the evenings, the Jule Vera tour band performed at Blaze restaurants in select cities, with Blaze fans being the first to know where the acoustic sets were taking place and first to get access to a free download of the band's song “Lifeline.”

#18 McAlister's Deli

McAlister's Deli continues to be a leader in the fast casual space in offering real, handcrafted food, a diverse menu and a community-focused environment.

In 2017, the brand redesigned its mobile app to optimize digital ordering and create a better customer experience. A call center is another avenue available to guests for placing on-the-go orders.

In May 2017, McAlister's launched a



promotion to draw awareness to mobile ordering through the app, which led to a 100 percent increase in downloads over a four-day period, according to the company. It quickly followed up the app-focused promotion in June with a redesigned website, focusing on the user experience and optimizing online ordering. This move ensured that, whether accessing the site via mobile or desktop, a customer would have the same seamless and intuitive experience. Both efforts combined saw a significant rise in digital sales.

In the second half of the year, McAlister's executed a strong push for integration with third-party delivery companies. By the end of the year, 35 percent of the system was using some form of third-party delivery, an increase from less than 5 percent at the beginning of the year.

When it comes to ensuring ease of operations for franchisees, McAlister's migrated all restaurants onto the same POS platform, which provided increased data visibility and integrity to help the brand make informed decisions and provide elevated system benchmarking. McAlister's also launched a back-office system that enables the brand to continue to bring forward tools and enhancements focused on driving unit-level economics and efficiencies.

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#19 Holler & Dash Biscuit House

Holler & Dash Biscuit House, owned by Cracker Barrel, has accomplished a lot since it opened less than two years ago, including opening its sixth unit with plans to open at least one more in 2018.

Although the menu began by focusing on biscuits, it since has introduced toasts, sandwiches, salads and beverages and now offers a catering program.

Holler is all about the customer experience and supporting its communities. It hires local artisans, for example, to hand-build tables, stools, décor and signage based on the history and culture in whatever city it is opening. A hospitality crew member stands at the door to greet each guest, explain the menu, introduce artisan food partners and answer questions.

The chain, however, realizes that some guests simply need convenience, so it also offers online ordering, and in-store guests can use a kiosk to order or an employee can take orders with a mobile device. The chain also partnered with UberEats to meet customer demand for delivery.



#20 Tender Greens

Tender Greens, which has nearly 30 units, proved again that it was an industry leader by being one of the first brands to go cashless in early 2017.

“To continue paying our team members a living wage, partnering with incredible farmers and ranchers who grow with integrity, and using high-quality ingredients we need to once again look at how we can innovate and think differently towards the future,” the company leaders wrote on its website.

The chain also launched a digital gift card feature on its mobile app, which allows customers to pay in-store and online using gift cards on the app, buy gift cards or share their balances with friends and family.

Tender Greens also is gearing up for expansion, hiring Paul Asher as VP of real estate and national expansion, and Denyelle Bruno, who was previously president of retail operations at Drybar, as president. They’ll work to meet the company’s goal of at least doubling the restaurant count by 2020.

Tender Greens is using big data technology to guide its East Coast expansion.

To pinpoint potential locations in the Northeast that best reach what the brand calls its “psychographic” — the college-educated diner who cares about health and locally produced food — starts with data from a customer analytics firm that specializes in site selection.

Even amid rapid growth, following the California model, the East Coast locations will rely on a local network of growers and suppliers who deliver fresh ingredients to

Tender Greens customers within 24 to 48 hours of picking.



#21 BurgerFi

BurgerFi, which ended 2017 with 101 units and reported a 1.1 percent increase in same-store sales, believes in the importance of delivering high-quality ingredients and customer experience.

Recognizing that consumers were seeking various meatless offerings and that there was a mainstream demand for a plant-based option, BurgerFi became one of the first national burger chains to carry the Beyond Burger, which offers 20 grams of plant-based protein.

In another effort to meet customer demand, the chain partnered with Uber Eats for delivery orders and added a call center that routes the guest to the appropriate BurgerFi for takeout order processing.

The chain also is committed to finding cutting-edge technologies that fulfill the needs of both its employees and customers. According to the company, its implementation of several systems, including kiosks, social media and online reputation management software, takeout order processing and call center, online ordering and safety and compliance software, has increased efficiency, streamlined processes, improved communication across the brand’s system of franchisees and executives,

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and opened additional incremental streams of revenue for its franchisees.

BurgerFi plans to open about 25 units in 2018, primarily through partnerships with experienced multi-unit restaurant operators.

#22 Chicken Salad Chick

Chicken Salad Chick, which just celebrated its 10th anniversary, has successfully carved out a niche in the fast casual segment by offering guests a “custom fit” chicken salad experience.

The chain, which features more than a dozen original chicken salad flavors, has more than 81 units across 11 states and has achieved \$163 million in sales over the past three years. It reported an 8 percent increase in comparable-store sales in 2017, rolled out an integrated menu and implemented a systemwide technology update, which simplified restaurant operations and enhanced guest experience. Some of the changes included, upgrading its POS to NCR Silver, which enables integration with Olo, Syrus and Craving Credits loyalty program; introducing SMG receipt-based customer service surveying, which measures guest satisfaction across all key aspects of the guest experience, including food quality, speed of service, friendliness,



cleanliness and value; rolling out revised menu pricing and updated menu boards and launching an online ordering program.

In 2018, the brand will add 30 restaurants and expand into new territories, such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee and Texas.

#23 Fazoli's

For Fazoli's, 2017 was an incredibly successful year. The Italian concept set 57 franchise sales records, and its franchise-owned locations closed out the year with a 5.1 percent increase in same-store sales and a 2.5 percent increase in guest traffic in December, according to the company. On top of that, the brand signed 15 restaurant agreements and opened five units.

Part of those successes stemmed from an enhanced menu with more customizable options that made all pastas and pasta sauces free from artificial ingredients. For customers on the go, it launched “Breadstick Snacks” in Indianapolis, created a loyalty app featuring mobile ordering and is testing third-party delivery.

Finally, in 2017, the brand started remodeling restaurants with a contemporary look, featuring areas for mobile pickup orders, as well as Wi-Fi bars and communal dining tables. The nine locations that underwent remodels last year experienced an average 10 percent sales growth, according to the company.

In 2018, the brand has eight restaurant openings slated for the first two quarters and plans to open several additional locations throughout the remainder of 2018.



#24 Muscle Maker Grill

Committed to providing healthier fuel for its customers' active lifestyles, Muscle Maker Grill's menu features grass-fed steak and all-natural chicken, as well as options that target a variety of dietary preferences, including low carb, gluten-free and vegetarian.

The chain, which has nearly 60 units, also offers its menu via a meal plan program that allows customers to pre-order meals via phone, online or in store, available for pickup or delivery. In 2017, Muscle Maker Grill introduced breakfast and fresh market bars to its menu and also launched grab 'n' go meals in store and at off-site locations such as gyms, office buildings and corporations.

Additionally, Muscle Maker Grill opened its first international location in Kuwait and plans to open nine more restaurants in the Middle East. Negotiations are taking place for large multiunit development plans in South Africa, India and Australia, with plans to enter other international markets in the future.

#25 Cava Grill

Cava Grill is a fast casual Mediterranean brand that features customizable salads, grain bowls and pitas. In 2017, a series of openings took the number of locations

nationwide to over 40, ranging from suburban to city center restaurants. CEO Brett Schulman said each location is designed with the neighborhood in mind.

“We believe that food should not be a flat routine; rather a bold lifestyle,” he said.

Started by three childhood friends in Washington, D.C., seven years ago, Cava brings the families’ traditions of Greek and Mediterranean cooking to the fast casual setting. Cava keeps its menu fresh with seasonal additions, such as a white bean salad, spicy apricot dressing and a variety of house-made juices. While continuing to enhance the menu with seasonal favorites, the brand also has continued to innovate with technology.

The chain recently launched its next-generation digital ordering platform, which is available for download on iOS at the Apple App Store and Android at the Google Play store.

In addition to its success in the fast casual industry, Cava dips and spreads are featured in Whole Foods locations across the country.

#26 Leon

Leon, a London-based Mediterranean chain with 50 units, is focused on serving healthy, affordable, fast food while doing good throughout the world. CEO John Vincent’s approach is a simple business plan based on six ideas, taken in large part from his understanding of the 2,500-year-old teachings of the Eastern philosopher, Lao-tzu, known collectively as Taoism.

With a limited menu featuring wraps, sandwiches, salads and falafels, Leon offers a variety of options for customers without creating large amounts of waste.

“In starting and growing Leon, I have learned so much about the dos and don’ts of creating a new category — naturally fast food,” said Vincent, who opened the first location in 2004 in London. “And more broadly I have learned a few things about how to replace traditionally aggressive approaches to business with values that are a little more holistic.”

Leon has more than 70 locations across Europe and plans to soon enter the U.S. market.

Vincent is keynoting the [Fast Casual Executive Summit](#), Oct. 7-9 in Seattle.

#27 Great Harvest Bread Co.

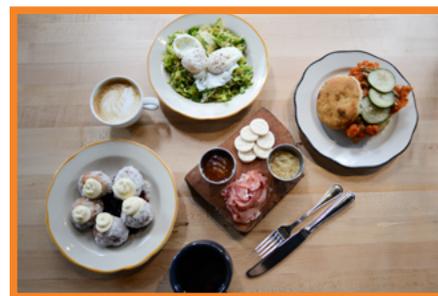
Although Great Harvest kicks it old school when making its bread, choosing to stick to its five-hour bread-baking process, there’s nothing old fashioned about its operations.

The brand, for example, relies on Chef Metrics, a pricing software developed for the brand to compare prices between multiple vendors and determine the retail price of products while maintaining a specific ingredient percentage for each item sold. This gives franchisees the flexibility to offer popular, unique products while balancing the profitability of their overall product line.

Great Harvest also uses NCR Silver, which allows the brand to look at how products are performing in the short and long term. This understanding gives franchisees the option to shake up their menus, scrap underperforming products and introduce the “next big thing.”

Great Harvest, last year, also introduced a new franchise model, dubbed Hub and Spoke. The new business model allows franchisees to purchase a large territory that includes a single Great Harvest Bread Co. bakery operation and as many café-only units as they desire in surrounding towns. The bakery locations are equipped with ovens and enough space to produce and deliver the hand-milled breads to the nearby café-only locations throughout the day. This separates Great Harvest from many other larger bakery-cafe brands, which have one big-box location every 10 or 15 miles and do not bake from scratch.

The brand has nearly 200 units with plans to open 18-20 by the end of 2018.



#28 Biscuit Love

Biscuit Love was one of the first breakfast/brunch concepts to enter the fast casual segment. Beginning as a food truck owned by husband-and-wife team Karl and Sarah Worley, the brand has evolved into three brick-and-mortar locations that take a fun approach to Southern brunch, including bonuts (fried biscuit dough) and biscuits with chocolate gravy (yum!). Karl has combined his culinary degree and his grandfather’s Southern cooking skills to create a variety of made-from-scratch breakfast and lunch choices.

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The Worleys are focused not only on growing their own brand but also on revolutionizing the entire segment by bringing attention to sustainable agriculture and farm-to-table restaurants.

Offering a fun atmosphere, delicious menu options and a variety of souvenirs available for purchase, [Biscuit Love](#) strives to be an experience for its customers, while also valuing its employees. Every Biscuit Love employee, for example, makes a living wage, and all full-time employees receive paid vacation, health insurance and free financial counseling.

#29 *la Madeleine French Bakery & Cafe*

2017 was a year of transformation for la Madeleine. The year kicked off with the announcement of an aggressive growth strategy and re-franchising program.

Historically, la Madeleine growth from 1983-2014 had been corporate; despite an abundance of interest, the brand had avoided franchising. By the end of 2017, though, it had re-franchised four markets seamlessly and achieved its 10th year of overall guest satisfaction improvement. The re-franchising program has positioned the brand to double in size within the next five years, according to the company.

The la Madeleine culture celebrates “Doing What’s Right, Not What’s Easy,” and 2017 was a year that challenged its teams to live up to that mantra in every sense.

Still a small, family brand with just over 80 bakeries, the re-franchising announcement and initiative could have been a distraction. Instead, the

leadership team tackled it head on.

In 2018, the brand is committed to open seven new franchise bakeries.



#30 *Which Wich Superior Sandwiches*

Which Wich has grown into a simple yet sophisticated franchise, where customers receive their sandwiches via a unique ordering system that includes doodle-worthy bags to ensure a customizable and fun experience. Which Wich continued to open new locations in 2017, opening nearly 50 across the U.S.

The company, led by founder, CEO and Chief Vibe Officer Jeff Sinelli, pivoted in 2017, by introducing more “composed” sandwiches — a first for the brand that was on the forefront of the customizable trend more than a decade before. However, seeing a shift in consumer behavior, Which Wich introduced a line of “Favorites” in 2017 that has been incredibly successful. Since launching the Favorites menu, the company has seen options on the line account for 30 percent of product mix. Additionally, sales of Favorites options are being sold at a 3:1 ratio compared to the brand’s most successful limited-time offer (LTO) products.

In February, it entered the [European market](#) by opening its first location in

London and plans to open 10 locations throughout the United Kingdom over the next four years.

By the end of [2018](#), Which Wich will have more than 500 locations in 40 states and 11 countries.

#31 *Mooyah Burgers, Fries and Shakes*

Mooyah — which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary by hosting nationwide parties featuring free T-shirts, cake pops, 10-patty-cheeseburger-eating events and donation of 10 percent of all sales to No Kid Hungry — has implemented several business initiatives to improve customer satisfaction.

It enhanced the previous year’s MOO2 menu initiative by replacing some of its pre-built burger options with better-performing recipes from its “Taste to Try” marketing program, streamlining its burgers to one patty size to simplify operations and improve ticket times. Scaling back to one burger size resulted in a faster ordering process and faster ticket times for guests and also helped the brand to negotiate lower beef pricing this year, according to the company.

It also made a bold move by reducing menu prices by nearly 10 percent to provide a better overall value.

The brand is now better positioned to support its existing franchise partners and to recruit the next generation of Mooyah family that will help it continue to grow.

Its 2018 goal is to open at least 20 restaurants by focusing on growth strategies.

#32 Tropical Smoothie Cafe

Since opening its first location in Tallahassee, Florida, Tropical Smoothie Cafe has continued to grow exponentially year after year. Its 20th anniversary year in 2017, however, was one of its most successful to date. The brand experienced a significant surge in franchise development as it opened 101 cafes, which brings its total of open restaurants to 633 nationwide.

The company signed 187 franchise agreements in 2017, with plans to open 120 locations in 2018, by focusing on expanding portfolios from within. More than half of the agreements signed in 2017, for example, are with existing franchisees.

In addition to its accelerated franchise development, Tropical Smoothie maintains its focus on elevating convenience for consumers through its evolving digital and cafe dining experience. During 2017, it continued to develop its technology and digital platforms, including the website, mobile app and loyalty program, enabling the company to better hone in on consumer



targeting, make smarter data-influenced business decisions, enhance sales through mobile ordering and grow its social media presence. By investing in and incorporating technologies such as LevelUp, Tropical Smoothie has been able to increase user frequency and spend through targeted campaigns and a distinct loyalty program, according to the company.

#33 Pieology Pizzeria

Pieology Pizzeria specializes in “handmade personal pizzas”; with more than 78 billion pizza possibilities, customers can have a new experience each time they visit. The vision behind Pieology is one that is filled with love and purpose. Pieology was created by CEO Carl Chang, who believes that pizza can bring out the best in people and that the only thing more important than quality food is having quality people to share it with.

With more than 25 locations in California, Pieology Pizzeria took customer feedback to a new level in 2017 by launching Pieology Pizzeria R&D in Aliso Viejo. It features a rotating menu that gives diners exclusive first bites of Pieology items that are being considered for the menu. The brand’s decision-makers view customers’ feedback, which has shown them that customization has always been important for customers and is making way for even more creative menu ideas.

Over the next year, Chang said this idea may evolve to even more locations. “During that time, I hope that we’ve solidified operations, garnered some fresh and creative ideas, and even

implemented a few at Pieology locations across the country,” he said. “We have a lot of momentum behind us, and I’m excited to see just how much we can accomplish in the next 12 months.”



#34 1000 Degrees

Originating in Galloway, New Jersey, 1000 Degrees is renowned for its classic Neapolitan pizzas, baked in two minutes at 1,000 degrees in a custom, handmade, revolving Neapolitan brick oven. With the option to limitlessly top each pie with more than 50 fresh ingredients, guests can completely customize each pizza to satisfy their cravings.

Its menu features a variety of options, such as the White Out (with extra-virgin olive oil, shredded mozzarella, parmesan, fresh mushrooms and garlic), the Smokey Pollo (featuring Sweet and Smoky Bourbon Barbecue Sauce, roasted chicken, bacon, red onion, red peppers, pineapple, shredded mozzarella and blue cheese) and the Meatza (with marinara, mozzarella, pepperoni, bacon, Italian sausage and crumbled meatballs). Additionally, the brand offers

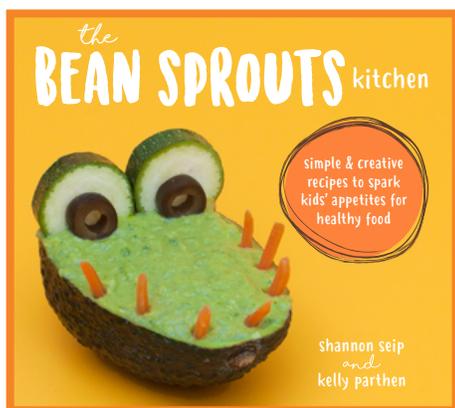
two signature crust options: classic, thin-crust Neapolitan; and The Roman, which is twice the thickness of traditional Neapolitan and oval in shape.

Since launching in 2014, 1000 Degrees has ignited significant growth across the country, with more than 80 locations open, signed or in development. The brand could potentially double in 2018, hitting 50-plus units by year's end.

The brand redesigned its logo to show that it offers more than just pizza, which led to an uptick in salad and wing sales.

#35 Bean Sprouts

Bean Sprouts is a nationally recognized, hip and healthy cafe that designs its menus with kids and families in mind. Its children's menu is featured on a low counter, empowering kids to make their own healthy choices, and relieving moms and dads of the guilt of taking their families out to eat. The menu offers a variety of choices for families with picky eaters, allergies and other dietary challenges. Bean Sprouts adheres to clean ingredient guidelines and features organic and sustainable foods, compostable packaging and eco-friendly design.



From its inception, Bean Sprouts has led the way in the restaurant industry, offering a healthy menu that delights kids and parents alike. With 11 current locations, Bean Sprouts is planning to open six locations in 2018, including its first location at a tourist attraction, Garden of the Gods park in Colorado Springs.

In addition to growing its number of locations by over 50 percent, Bean Sprouts co-founders Shannon Seip and Kelly Parthen will debut their second cookbook, "The Bean Sprouts Kitchen," in late 2018. A national media tour focused not only on current markets, but also new markets around the United States where Bean Sprouts is planning expansion, will support the book launch. With "The Bean Sprouts Kitchen" book as a centerpiece, Bean Sprouts also will drive new revenue through adding retail offerings in each café.

#36 Burger 21

Honoring the comfort and great taste of an American classic — the hamburger — Burger 21 not only recognizes this iconic staple of American cuisine, but also kicks it up a notch. The brand behind a menu known for featuring 21 unique burger options using seven different proteins and regularly offering something new, Burger 21 has reinvented the way consumers think about burgers.

By using a recently upgraded mobile app, Burger 21 is able to cater to its fans with perks and special offers. Additionally, the brand rolled out some fresh updates in 2017, including a delivery and catering test that has contributed to an increase in sales and customer satisfaction. Most notably, it introduced a refreshed menu



as it asked loyal fans and guests, "What's Your Number?" and created a unique connection between its guests and its menu. Carrying over its nontraditional approach to the menu, each of the brand's 21 unique burger options was designated with a specific number that reflects the flavor, tradition or fun of that menu item, according to the company.

The brand also refreshed its logo to provide a modern look to match its creative menu, which tells the brand's story in a more modern and fun way while providing new footprint options to franchisees.

#37 Teriyaki Madness

Teriyaki Madness is one of America's fastest-growing fresh Asian fast casual grills, with locations in 14 states and more planned.

Teriyaki Madness' growth plan for 2018 is to open 26 new units and welcome 32 new franchisees for a total of 92 franchisees. Plans also include expansion into new states and university campuses.

Technology has helped Teriyaki Madness meet its growth goals. A fully digital

company, each location uses the Revel POS iPad-based system that integrates into all other systems. The company also uses Chatmeter as its reputation-management dashboard, and franchisees manage profits and losses via ProfitKeeper.

The company has incorporated FranConnect into its franchise system as a digital launch platform, support center and digital library for franchisees to access anywhere at any time.

In addition to business technologies, Teriyaki Madness has begun enhancing technology for the consumer. The corporate team recently launched a fully remodeled website and is in the process of developing an online ordering mobile app with Olo and Punchh.



#38 Curry Up Now

Curry Up Now made some big moves in 2017, in the direction of growth and expansion. It acquired competing Indian fast casual brand Tava Kitchen, positioning itself as the leader in the fast casual Indian food market. Additionally, Curry Up Now opened two brick-and-mortar units in 2017, completed a renovation of all stores and partnered with Fransmart to help it expand more quickly.

The brand also brought on Kitchen Fund as an investor.

During 2017, Curry Up Now saw a 15-20 percent increase in same-store sales. The brand is in the final stages of solidifying several franchise deals in multiple U.S. markets and is seeking franchisees in the top 40 U.S. media markets to expand Curry Up Now nationwide.

#39 Dog Haus

In its hot dogs, sausages and burgers, Dog Haus uses only hormone- and antibiotic-free, humanely raised proteins free of all added nitrates and nitrites.

In another effort to prove it is serious about high-quality menu items, in 2017, the brand partnered with a number of nationally regarded chefs, such as Ilan Hall, Bruce Kalman, Stephanie Izard and Brooke Williamson, for an upcoming series of LTOs.

Beyond the food elements, the brand has begun a number of technology and marketing initiatives to help set it apart as an innovator. From completely new twists on social media marketing to tried-and-true methods of consulting and local marketing, the brand is pushing itself further than ever before. This marketing strategy increased its followers on social media by 170 percent and grew Instagram engagement by 660 percent.

Aside from marketing and technology, Dog Haus has a franchisee support program led by a team of “CSRs” who interact on a weekly basis with the franchisees to make sure they have everything they need in terms of support and ongoing instruction, as well as to serve as a sounding board for franchisee concerns. All of this furthers its brand strategy of being on the cutting edge and out in front of other brands.

#40 Zoup

In a segment known for fickleness, Zoup has remained a leader of the soup-differentiated category it created 20 years ago. The chain, which currently operates more than 100 units, is moving into a new era of culinary standards and menu development with the addition of a full-time corporate chef, who will work with a team of consulting chefs to create high-quality and unique offerings that are as craveable as its soups, according to the company.

The brand already put this approach in motion with the 2017 introduction of a holiday-inspired Cranberry Goat Cheese Salad and Turkey Berry Brie Sandwich and Seasoned Bread Boules, including Sea Salt, Olive Oil, Garlic Parmesan and Italian varieties. An accelerated menu development timetable is its new normal, and guests can expect to see frequent new offerings in its restaurants.

In 2017, Zoup introduced a “Good Food Agenda” to formalize the progress it made toward healthier, cleaner offerings. It kicked it off with the introduction of a “No Good List” of more than 70 ingredients — including artificial flavors, colors and added preservatives. Additionally, for the third year in a row, the company marked National Soup Month with a program that raised almost \$100,000 for U.S.-based No Kid Hungry and the Breakfast Club of Canada.



#41 Nature's Table

Nature's Table has been a family owned business since 1977 and has been franchising since 1987. With more than 75 locations across the United States, the brand is committed to capitalizing on a variety of emerging consumer trends to continue its growth within the industry.

When Dick Larsen founded Vine and Harvest (changed the name to Nature's Table in 1983) more than 40 years ago, he knew that a healthy fast casual concept could be a hit. With the addition of his nephew, Rich Wagner, the company started to take off.

Nature's Table believes the true formula for cafe business is created through a hands-on environment and a dedicated corporate team with consistent support. Wagner said Nature's Table is dedicated to using hormone-free, not processed, fresh, locally sourced produce. To stay current, the company updates its menu every three years and is focusing its growth plan on nontraditional locations.

"We currently attend trade shows for hospitals, colleges, universities and airports," Wagner said. "We will continue to open locations in these venues, as well as grow organically with our franchisees. We are also working on an area development agreement in the Midwest and are targeting Jacksonville as our next market."

#42 Wahlburgers

Wahlburgers is one of the fastest-growing fast casual brands in the country, expanding from just two to 24 units in three years. Featuring a unique fast casual/full-serve/bar hybrid concept

that marries the celebrity value of Mark and Donnie Wahlberg with the culinary expertise of their brother and executive chef, Paul, Wahlburgers features an emphasis on fresh, high-quality yet simple food that highlights some of the family's favorite foods.

Looking to open an additional 15-20 locations in 2018, this family focused company has no plans for slowing down.

This year, Wahlburgers also introduced a meatless burger known as the "Impossible Burger" at its U.S. locations in 2018. Paul Wahlberg partnered with the makers of the plant-based burger substitute last fall when it was added to Boston-area locations.

A&E has followed the Wahlberg family business for eight seasons and brings to life the true family feel the restaurant captures, where staff members like to have fun and aim to make their guests smile.



#43 Capriotti's Sandwich Shop

Capriotti's is a 40-year-old legacy brand that continues to gain loyal customers across the country. At Capriotti's, whole Butterball turkeys are roasted in-house daily along with roast beef, homemade meatballs and many other products.

In 2017, Capriotti's opened four restaurants and signed 50 franchise agreements. Franchise inquiries are up 300 percent from 2016, as a result of strategic initiatives in marketing and

technology investment, according to the company. In 2018, Capriotti's is gearing up to continue its expansion into mature and new markets nationwide, in addition to select international markets.

To keep customers happy, Capriotti's uses CAPAddicts Rewards App, powered by Punchh, to offer freebies and loyalty points. It has more than 100,000 downloads, but that's not the only way the brand embraces technology.

Its operations manual and training materials are all digital, allowing the brand to use the most innovative methods to train new employees.

Capriotti's reported double-digit increases in delivery and catering platforms in 2017, and expects to accelerate that growth over the next couple years.

#44 Saladworks

As the national leader in the salad-centric segment, Saladworks' positioning work not only defined the market but also identified the target consumers. Saladworks has adjusted its strategy and limited-time offerings and updated its menu and store design to better meet the needs of those consumers.

The brand is continuing to build on its technology system to experience growth this year. In 2017, it introduced Gusto, a streamlined POS system, to its stores that served as the foundation of a technology bundle. Between that and Saladworks' remodeled store design, the brand is positioned to roll out other technology-related initiatives in the new year to boost business.

Saladworks is preparing for the launch of enhanced online ordering, catering and delivery programs, local store

marketing tactics, a new website and ordering kiosks. Following one-on-one meetings with every franchise group, the company rolled out a systemwide remodel program that spanned the entire year. Those remodeled stores coupled with a new approach to marketing helped continue the brand's sales growth trend. With all of these positive changes, Saladworks has been able to accomplish nine consecutive quarters of positive same-store sales growth.

Additionally, Saladworks rolled out a food truck to serve guests during store remodels and ahead of new openings, allowing customers to still enjoy Saladworks without sacrificing sales.

#45 Newk's Eatery

Newk's Eatery prides itself on its chef-driven, made-from-scratch menu offerings; its open kitchen design to let guests see, hear and smell the artistry of cooking; and its high-quality ingredients — including petite tenderloin steak, sushi-grade ahi tuna, Atlantic salmon, scratch-made sauces and dressings and dozen-layer cakes.

Newk's newest restaurants feature a "Generation 2" design, which offers a fresh look for the brand while maintaining an open-view kitchen. It provides a contemporary guest experience that aligns with customers' desires for transparency and authenticity, and is easily retrofitted into existing units, making the concept appealing to prospective and existing franchise partners, according to the company. In the past three years, Newk's restaurant count has grown by 67 percent; in 2017, store count grew by 12

percent as it opened in five new markets. Newk's Eatery also revamped and relaunched its e-club, growing membership by more than 400 percent in a single year.



#46 Ono Hawaiian BBQ

Ono Hawaiian BBQ celebrated 2017 with a targeted formula for multiunit business in the fast casual space. Ono currently has 67 stores and is continuing to see opening after opening. The brand is able to maintain successful units within proximity to each other because of its dedication to quality, excellent customer service and a product that resonates with the masses, according to the company. Ono plans to open 10-12 more units in California and Arizona throughout 2018, expanding into central California for the first time.

Ono uses Asana — a tool that grants access to shared workspaces for collaboration — which has allowed the brand to create and join multiple workspaces and organizations to collaborate with various groups within the platform to streamline projects, deadlines, etc.

Another way the brand relies on tech is in its use of digital menu boards, making it easy and quick to update menu items, while also easily marketing its promotions.

It further streamlined its menu this year and removed low-volume items. This improved speed of preparation, which

in turn increased efficiency and quality/freshness of the food. In addition, it migrated a good amount of the marketing budget and efforts from print marketing to focus on digital marketing, along with customer engagement, according to the company.

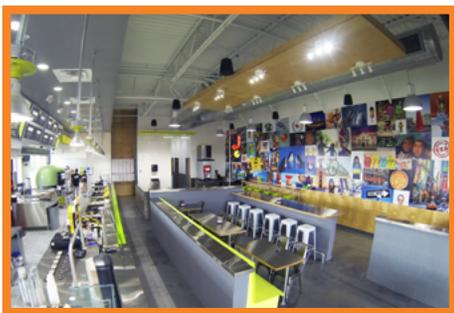
#47 Zoes Kitchen

When guests come to Zoes, they experience the Mediterranean without having to travel there. The menu includes flavors from the 21 countries in the region and recently added new bowls, pitas, snack boxes, proteins and four sauces, with several of them already making the brand's top 10 best-selling items on the menu.

The brand has established itself as a lifestyle brand with an enhanced website, app, loyalty program and blog, which give guests content that will add value to their lives even when they aren't dining with Zoes. The website, for example, has an updated location finder, an easily accessible menu and quick online ordering for individual and catering orders.

Planning to open 25 restaurants in 2018, Zoes believes the reduced growth rate in 2018 will allow it to better manage its cash flows, focus on its sales-driving initiatives and continue to explore new ways to strengthen business over the long term to increase shareholder value.





#48 Urban Bricks

Urban Bricks is a trendy, edgy fast casual restaurant concept that's changing the way customers eat. It serves authentic, customizable Neapolitan pizza with an all-American attitude. Although "Bad \$\$\$" Pizza is the core item on the menu, customers can build a pizza, panini or salad with unlimited toppings for one price.

Urban Bricks restaurants feature a modern, industrial interior and provide a customer experience unlike any other by cutting down on wait time in any way possible, according to the company. The hand-washing station takes away the need to visit the bathroom to wash hands, the bottoms-up beer dispenser fills up beers at an extremely fast rate while freeing up employees to complete other tasks, and the rotating oven creates a consistent product in just two minutes.

Urban Bricks expects to open 12 locations in 2018, doubling its size since its first year in business in 2015. Additionally, Urban Bricks will be the first build-your-own fast casual American restaurant in Central America, as it sets to open its second international location in 2018 in Panama City, Panama.

In 2017, Urban Bricks places a large emphasis on giving back to its communities. Following Hurricane Harvey,

it opened to the public for a free meal and a place to relax and de-stress from the aftermath of the storm as well as delivered pizzas to first responders. In total, Urban Bricks donated roughly 700 free pizzas to local residents and first responders in Corpus Christi and 1,500 in Houston.

#49 B. Good

Founded in 2004, B.Good has more than 60 units spanning four countries — the United States, Canada, Switzerland and Germany — with plans to add 20 units this year in new markets, including Houston, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

While the industry suffered a difficult year in 2017, with same-store sales down across the board, B.Good maintained a slightly positive same-store-sales number and has maintained average unit volumes (AUVs) of \$1.35 million for its locations.

To ensure those numbers keep going up, brand leaders have implemented a digital learning management system, in which employees train with digital content pushed out from HQ. The data already are showing a strong correlation in training module completion with customer satisfaction.



#50 Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh

Colorado-based Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh, which has 25 locations nationwide, partnered last year with Eco-Products to offer dinnerware that helps guests and the environment at the same time. Using plates made from sugarcane and to-go lids composed of 100 percent post-consumer recycled plastic, customers can feel good about the containers' effect on the environment.

"Among many other reasons, our commitment to our guests and our environment is primarily why we strongly believe in using bio-based materials," said Devin Handler, director of marketing for Garbanzo. "Using these products saves natural resources and doesn't contribute to the deterioration of our planet by generating materials that are destined for the landfill after just one use."

The past year also brought a new digital customer experience to Garbanzo. The brand partnered with two vendors, Paytronix and Olo, to streamline its digital customer experience. It allows guests to place orders and earn and redeem awards via a single sign-on capability as Garbanzo has integrated its Paytronix-powered V.I.B. Rewards Club with the Olo online order platform.

#51 Uncle Maddio's Pizza

Even in a sector of fast casual that has a sometimes challenging climate, Uncle Maddio's is continuing to stay focused on increasing AUVs and maximizing

profitability. The brand rolled out an innovative prototype that it hopes to be industry-leading. When customers enter an Uncle Maddio's location, they will find a fun atmosphere, where pizza artists prepare pizzas in less than 30 seconds, with three dough options, seven sauce options and over 41 cheese, meat and veggie toppings.

With more than 50 locations in 15 states, Uncle Maddio's is expanding quickly. The brand has more than 100 stores in development, 18 of which are projected to open in 2018, including its first nontraditional site in the ATL airport.

Last year, the chain partnered with HotSchedules to help control labor and RTIconnect to help control cost of goods sold (COGS). It also is using OrderParrot to give customers a way to order through Facebook Messenger.

In addition to delivering delicious pizzas each and every time, Uncle Maddio's long-term goal is to build a national brand in key markets across the country. It is awarding franchises to partners nationwide, including franchisees looking to sign multiunit deals.

#52 Firehouse Subs

With a passion for hearty and flavorful food, heartfelt service and public safety, Firehouse Subs continues to blaze ahead as a leading fast casual restaurant brand, igniting tremendous growth within both the traditional and nontraditional marketplace.

The brand operates more than 1,100 restaurants in 44 states, Puerto Rico, Canada and Mexico and is consistently



recognized as a top brand among consumers for its commitment to generously serving food and community, quality product and overall experience.

In quarter four, it launched the Meatball Combo Promotion to rev up sales. During this promo, the Firehouse Subs team created a special promotion around a fan favorite — the Meatball Sub.

To address the growing trend of guests ordering their subs to go, the team strategically presented the sub in a to-go box in all marketing images. The combination of price, great food and being in step with consumer cravings helped boost traffic and sales among a number of key audiences — including the coveted Gen Zers and women.

#53 Starbird

In 2018, Starbird is planning to reinvent fast food through technology, design and culinary perspectives. With three locations, the San Francisco-based brand is looking to more than double in size with five locations throughout the Bay Area.

Technology is at the core of what makes this next-generation drive-thru unique.

“At Starbird, we have transformed the traditional fast-food landscape to offer ‘super premium fast food’ that uses high-quality ingredients and evolves the traditional drive-thru experience with

mobile ordering and a car-side delivery app,” co-founder Aaron Noveshen said. “The response from the community has been extremely positive.”

Instead of a traditional drive-thru experience, at Starbird customers order and pay through an app. When they arrive at a restaurant, they pull into a numbered slot, where their food is delivered within five minutes of their arrival — no more waiting in lines.

“Our lives and our expectations have changed dramatically since the advent of the original drive-thru,” Noveshen said. “With Starbird, we’re adapting to the new needs of our tech-savvy and culinary-conscious community. We’re changing the traditional fast-food landscape with new expectations, new standards and new ideals for quick-service dining. ... We tested over 100 different chicken preparations before we found this perfect crispy chicken recipe.”



#54 Wing Zone

Every decision at Wing Zone is based on the brand's core values and guest promise. In 2017, it rolled out its “pivot,” which included scaling down the size of restaurants and number of menu items. This was based on extensive customer research and has simplified and enhanced operations, while also reducing costs. The pivot also included refocusing on its three core products: wings, boneless wings and hand-breaded tenders.

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Beyond the pivot, Wing Zone implemented a digital platform that focused on improved customer service through online reputation management.

Wing Zone opened units in 2017, in the United States and is looking to grow the brand in the Southeast, including locations in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Mississippi and Kentucky. It also is looking to continue growth internationally in South and Central America and Asia.



#55 Pincho Factory

With 10 stores, Pincho Factory is a leading Latin street food concept in the United States. The brand has grown 500 percent in the last 24 months and has recently added several industry veterans to its board and management team.

Poised to grow to 100 units over the next five years, the brand's leaders believe that they are defining a new category of fast casual, focusing on experience, food quality and high-touch service. Pincho Factory has built a proprietary online portal (Pincho Net), where managers can take hold of day-to-day operations, and is relaunching its online ordering with Olo.

Using the philosophy of "team first, and the rest will sort itself out," co-founder Nedal Ahmad and his cousin, Otto Othman, are franchising their twist on

traditional street food. When looking for franchising partners for Pincho Factory, Othman said personality plays a huge role in their decisions.

"We look for partners who share our values and passion for hospitality," he said. "Going forward we are strictly sticking to multiunit operators, who will add value to our company and brand."

Ahmad said investment in the team culture by far has been the best return on investment this past year. The cousins are staying true to the "Pincho Movement" of wanting to leave behind a legacy as a company that strives to do things right.

#56 Lemonade

Celebrating its 10th year in 2018, Lemonade has evolved from a beverage company to a concept serving chef-curated bowls, plates and an expanded selection of beverage offerings, like its namesake cold-pressed lemonade, FROZades and lemonade-infused smoothies. Last June, Lemonade debuted its second-generation store, which included a new ordering system, curated food plates and new decor. It also features state-of-the-art LED menu monitors and new entrée food stations as well as convenient grab-and-go meals and a new lineup of fresh, cold-pressed lemonades.

CEO Larry Kurzweil said Lemonade has grown steadily since its debut in 2008, and now has 28 locations.

"The company is focused on further expansion and has invested in this next-generation experience to capitalize on one of the most talked about fast casual brands," he said.

In hopes of further improving restaurant operations, talent development



and expansion, Kurzweil said, last year Lemonade named Ame Hull as COO and Michael Nishi as CFO.

#57 Hot Head Burritos

Hot Head Burritos, founded in 2007, has 72 stores and has great momentum now that original co-founder Ray Wiley is back at the helm. In 2017, Hot Head Burritos rolled out its Queso Creations menu, which allows customers to have not only their choice of cheeses, but also the ability to add meat or veggies to their custom orders.

Hot Head Burritos will continue to grow by using an area developer model, looking to add an additional 10 in 2018. Corporately, the focus is on an excellent product and exceptional customer service to keep customers coming back, according to the company.

Online ordering and loyalty features have allowed Hot Head Burritos to reach more customers, track data and reward its loyal customers. The brand, for example, saw a 4.1 percent increase in online orders in 2017. Continuing tech upgrades into 2018, Hot Head Burritos recently rolled out a cloud-based Brink POS system from ParTech Inc.

"With Brink fully implemented, we can now add online ordering for our



customers, which has created a whole new revenue stream for our restaurants,” Wiley said. “The ability to pull more accurate live data has also allowed us to better monitor the business and plan for the future.”

This year, the chain will add beer and margaritas to many Hot Head Burritos stores and is testing a new Hot Head Cantina concept.

#58 Your Pie

Your Pie’s mission is to be a globally admired brand by creating a culture that improves the lives of its employees and customers, according to the company. The leadership’s goal is to create a brand that people believe in, so that every person in the company gets up each day with the desire to make Your Pie better than it was yesterday. In an industry that is saturated with fast casual pizza chains, the brand strives to stand out by investing in its employees, inspiring culinary creativity and achieving success by doing right by its partners, franchisees, team members and employees.

In spring 2017, Your Pie rolled out a catering program, which allowed each Your Pie location to increase visibility to new customers, while offering a new type of convenience to existing, loyal customers.

Mobilizing Your Pie has allowed the brand to become not only more accessible,

but also stronger leaders in the pizza segment. With 53 current locations, it plans to open 20 locations across the nation in 2018 and already has signed an additional 30 for 2019.

#59 Melt Shop

Melt Shop, which started in 2011 as a walk-up counter at the Citigroup Center in New York City’s Midtown, has grown to nine restaurants across three states and overseas. Since launching its domestic and international franchise program last year with the goal of growing the brand to 100 locations over the next five years, Melt Shop has signed a domestic franchise agreement on Staten Island and an 18-unit deal spanning Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware.

Melt Shop opened its first international location in Kuwait in January 2018, and the brand will open four of seven others planned for the region by mid-2018.

The brand continues to seek well-capitalized partners, both domestically and internationally, who are entrepreneurial and have a strong knowledge of their markets. Melt Shop shifted its focus in 2017 to strengthening and streamlining its operations in preparation for the launch of its franchise and international licensing program.



#60 Squisito Pizza & Pasta

Squisito Pizza & Pasta has spent the past year focused on growth via franchising. The brand opened two restaurants in the past four months and has four more in the works for the first half of 2018. With an authentic Italian kitchen paired with fast casual atmosphere, Squisito is partnering with Franchise Dynamics to open up to 60 franchises by year four, which would take it to 100 locations by 2022. The brand hired Kevin Trump in December to combine his strong franchising knowledge and years of success along with Squisito’s authentic Italian foundation in the restaurant industry.

Squisito Franchise Enterprise Inc. is also the principal franchiser of sister concept Meatballs, Etc., a fast casual build-your-own, fresh Italian kitchen built around the famous Italian meatball.

#61 Mod Pizza

Mod Pizza has shown steady growth over the years, and 2017 wasn’t any different. The made-to-order pizza brand finished the year with 5.2 percent growth in same-store sales and reported that systemwide sales grew 81 percent to \$275 million.

“2017 was an amazing year for Mod as we added 110 stores to our systemwide store base, making it the second year in a row during which we grew by 100 stores or more,” co-founder and CEO Scott Svenson said. “We continued our aggressive geographic expansion entering seven new states, giving us a presence in 27 states at year end. We accomplished this during a difficult period for the broader restaurant industry, and we believe our remarkable

growth was enabled, in significant part, by our continued commitment to make a positive social impact. In 2017 alone, Mod contributed over \$1 million to support our local communities and Squad members in need.”

Mod expanded into Indiana, Montana, Utah, Delaware, Florida, Nevada and Georgia, while also adding to its leadership team, hiring COO Paul Twohig, CMO Tracy Cioffi, Vice President of Culinary Robin Hamm and Vice President of Technology Robert Notte.

Mod also continued its mission of giving back by donating more than \$364,000 to Generosity Feeds to help create a half-million meals for kids struggling with hunger.

#62 Brown Bag Seafood Co.

Brown Bag Seafood Co., based in Chicago, is committed to providing its guests with an experience they simply cannot get anywhere else: “sustainably sourced seafood, flown in daily, customized and made-to-order, and in an approachable, fun fast casual environment.”

With four locations, further Chicago penetration is on the agenda for 2018, with out-of-market expansion coming in 2019. This expansion is going to have Brown Bag making waves in a big way over the coming years.

The brand’s newest location, which opened in April in a thriving office and residential pocket in downtown Chicago, for example, is its highest-revenue location to date. Brown Bag is sourcing further deals with the potential to open one to two additional locations in 2018.



In 2017, the company employed technology to improve the overall customer experience. Its website offers a native online ordering channel that is custom-built to mimic the in-store experience. This channel more than doubled in sales in 2017 and now represents 8 percent of all sales.

Operationally, Brown Bag has integrated a native online ordering channel as well as all third-delivery channels into its POS, making orders flow through seamlessly, reducing ticket times and improving reporting. Additionally, it redesigned the kitchen flow to reduce ticket times by 40 percent.

#63 Chi'Lantro BBQ

Fast casual Korean BBQ concept Chi'Lantro's mission is simple: provide new experiences inspired by old memories. From its original food truck to its newest of six locations, the Austin-based brand's mission is to develop exceptional cuisine that fuses Korean and Mexican flavors.

In addition to delivering fresh, delicious food, founder Jae Kim has a passion to give back to the communities in which he serves. To celebrate the opening of its South Shore location last January, Chi'Lantro held a special event and donated proceeds to four charities.

From Jan. 6 to Jan. 7, guests donated whatever they wanted to pay for their Chi'Lantro meal to one of four charities: Children's Tumor Foundation, Austin Animal Center, Mobile Loaves & Fishes and the CareBOX program.

“Our success has led to so many incredible opportunities, and giving back has always been one of the most important ones to us,” Kim said.



#64 Buona

Buona is the last of the Italian beef chains in Chicago that remains 100 percent family owned. It has expanded from humble beginnings financed with a second mortgage on a family home in Berwyn, Illinois, to a rapidly expanding chain with multiple locations. It has reached Official Italian Beef status for the city's two baseball teams (Cubs and White Sox) and sells its sandwiches at Soldier Field, the home stadium of the NFL's Chicago Bears.

In 2017, it opened its own U.S. Department of Agriculture meat-packing facility selling retail products at all major area grocers. In addition, it has a multimillion-dollar catering group and is about to cross the Illinois state line when it opens a unit in Indiana.

With 21 total locations, five of which opened in 2017, the brand isn't slowing down. Innovations in its mobile app — which include preordering, mobile ordering and a loyalty program that has more than 100,000 members — have helped Buona continue on its path to success.



#65 Slim Chickens

Slim Chickens more than doubled its size in 2017, ending the year with 70 units and opening its first international location in the Middle East, building momentum for international expansion in 2018.

The brand, which has 250 units under development in the United States and the Middle East, has signed an agreement with Boparan Holdings to lead the brand's growth in London and the British Isles. The restaurant group employs 2,500 people and is one of the U.K.'s fastest-growing companies.

Beyond growth, Slim Chickens also announced the launch of its loyalty app and online ordering platform, anticipating 2 percent of sales will come from the new online ordering platform.

It also rolled out a strategic plan to offer late-night hours, specifically in college town markets.

#66 Heritage Eats

Heritage Eats describes itself as a "globally inspired, fast-fine restaurant concept serving sandwiches, salads,

wraps, rice bowls, tacos and more with a focus on elevated 'daily life' food from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Latin America and beyond."

Ben Koenig IV, who wrote the business plan for the global fusion restaurant in 2014 while he backpacked through the Middle East and Asia, opened the first unit in 2015 in Napa, California.

Heritage Eats' slogan is "Slow Meats Fast," with an emphasis on heritage-breed meats, produced at local farms and served with house-made sauces. Customers can customize their experience by choosing proteins from a variety of options, or they can choose pre-designed, signature offerings, known as "Good Calls." Two popular selections include the Bánh Mi Dutch Crunch — made with grilled lemongrass pork on a Dutch Crunch roll with Asian pickle, garden greens, cilantro and boom sauce — and the Jamaican Bao, which comes with Jamaican jerk chicken on two steamed bao buns with crunchy cabbage slaw, Asian pickle and pineapple-habanero sauce. An assortment of toppings, including roasted corn and edamame, quinoa tabbouleh, Asian pickle and local garden greens are also available.

An additional location will open this summer in Walnut Creek, California.

#67 Nekter Juice Bar

Nekter Juice Bar expanded rapidly in 2017 with 60 percent unit growth. Opening its 100th location last February, Nekter has 52 locations planned for 2018.

In 2017, Nekter Juice Bar introduced Skoop, a handcrafted frozen treat, made

fresh in small batches using cashew milk and clean, plant-based ingredients. It's dairy-free, gluten-free and soy-free, yet full of delicious flavor, which quickly helped to increase evening sales, according to the company.

In addition, Nekter Juice Bar CEO Steve Schulze said his California-based chain is continually changing the menu to address a growing curiosity around new flavors and ingredients with functional health benefits.

"We recently amped up our lineup of cold-pressed bottled juices and juice cleanses with a very curated selection of superfoods, herbs, prebiotics and probiotics," Schulze said. "Even the younger generations ^{Photo: EastCasual.com} teens and young adults — are asking very valid questions around our new ingredients, such as ashwagandha and camu camu, two powerful superfoods that have tremendous health benefits."



#68 Burger Lounge

Burger Lounge, which has been a staple in the Southern California fast casual dining scene for 10 years, is trekking north, opening three units this year in Northern California. Its values, however, remain rooted in a beautifully simple vision: to make the most delicious burger possible using the best ingredients available. In 2017, this was demonstrated by fully professionalizing its grass-fed

beef sourcing process, in addition to revisiting and upgrading specific ingredients on the menu.

Burger Lounge, which has 22 locations, is focused on growth but with an emphasis on being prudent and measured. Leadership is keeping a tight rein on the quality of the brand, from supply chain to the people it hires, according to the company, and is relying on tech to ensure accuracy across operations. In 2017, the brand started using tablets for specific training elements, and it looks to make the move to 100 percent digital training in 2018.

To focus on guest convenience in 2017, Burger Lounge initiated a strategic partnership with a third-party delivery service, which has shown great results. Additionally, it decreased guest transaction times by 40 percent through operational initiatives across all stores.



#69 *Costa Vida Fresh Mexican Grill*

Costa Vida Fresh Mexican Grill launched in Layton, Utah, in 2003 with the idea that fresh, whole food, prepared on site, is best. The national chain has been preparing and serving fresh, made-to-order entrées from the front-of-house since day one, catering to a

customer who values flavor, freshness, wholesomeness and order customization more than price. This approach is resonating with consumers as same-store-sales growth numbers consistently outpace the growth numbers reported for the fast casual industry.

Costa Vida's franchisees saw a 10.8 percent growth in average revenues last year, and the brand accomplished that without sacrificing the guest experience or franchise efficiency by offering an array of convenience and time-saving options for customers — including drive-thru, carryout, in-store dining and online ordering — along with a proprietary system specifically designed to keep restaurant operations cost-efficient and minimize costly food waste. It also debuted a streamlined ordering service, saving guests time and hassle.

Costa Vida has 94 locations, 14 of which opened in 2017, and plans to open 15-20 additional units in 2018.

#70 *Cowboy Chicken*

As Cowboy Chicken expanded its footprint to Kansas, Iowa and Oklahoma in 2017, it remained diligent in its pursuit of consistent brand messaging alongside its promise to exceed guest expectations. At any Cowboy Chicken location, guests can find all-natural, wood-fired rotisserie chicken, signature sour cream tomatillo enchiladas, homestyle sides and a commitment to guests and their community at large.

With plans for a 110-location expansion, including 2018 openings in Georgia, California and South Dakota, the brand

continues to attract guests with great service, convenience and high-quality offerings year to year and store to store. 2017 was marked by the opening of a new store prototype in Oklahoma City, which opened for business in February 2017. The goal of the new format was to reduce steps and increase productivity for employees. The concept features two rotisseries under a single hood, for example, while front-facing ovens serve as the focal point for the dining room.

Cowboy Chicken uncovered operations efficiencies and saved costs with the new model and also received an incredible customer response. Initial guest counts at stores with the new design have increased by more than 30 percent. The new configuration also has increased available bar seats facing the ovens. Efficiency, job reassignments and improved guest experiences are benefits of the new layout.



#71 *Soom Soom*

Soom Soom, which provides upscale Mediterranean food in a fast casual setting, opened its doors in West Hollywood in November 2016. Using high-quality ingredients and no preservatives or additives, leadership believes that food fuels the body and soul. The brand's motto is simple: "Healthy eating, healthy living."

Its [menu](#), based on traditional Mediterranean recipes originating from

the Sea of Galilee region that can be traced back more than 100 years, caters to wholesome eating and addresses a variety of dietary needs, including allergen sensitivities. Each product is made from scratch daily.

The brand, which operates on five pillars — healthy, fresh, vegetarian, clean and kosher — has four locations, three of which opened in 2017.

During the next four years, the brand expects to open more than 20 locations, looking to have 27 by 2022.



#72 Naf Naf Middle Eastern Grill

Naf Naf Middle Eastern Grill is breaking through the clutter by offering a differentiated fast casual dining experience, where guests can enjoy authentic, handmade Middle Eastern dishes. With 38 current locations, the Chicago-based brand is finding success through a customizable and approachable format that guides guests in exploring the best flavors of Middle Eastern food and focuses on three core items made in-house daily: chicken shawarma, falafel and pita.

The centerpiece of every Naf Naf is its open kitchen and bakery where guests watch fresh pitas baking, shawarmas

roasting over an open flame and chefs making falafel.

This year, Naf Naf launched its new logo signifying its commitment to staying true to its founder's roots and to own the Middle Eastern category. The brand recently launched a new mobile app and loyalty program, Naf Perks, which is its way of saying thank you to its most loyal guests and rewarding them. Guests also can easily order Naf from their mobile devices for pick-up.

Led by industry veteran Paul Damico, the company said its next stage of growth includes plans to start franchising in 2018.

#73 Piada Italian Street Food

In 2017, Piada Italian Street Food adapted its menu to meet customer needs in innovative ways, which led to growth in number of restaurants and revenue. The brand opened 10 locations in 2017, taking the total number to 42 units.

Piada still holds its roots in Italian cuisine, but guests now enjoy trending menu items such as the Mediterranean Power Bowl with roasted broccoli, cauliflower and sweet potatoes, glazed chickpeas and pickled red onions on a bed of red quinoa with harissa.

Additionally, Piada stretched its marketing efforts with the launch of the 2017 Taste Tour in October. Piada's culinary team elevated its fall and winter menu to encompass offerings unique to anything guests have seen on the menu previously. This innovative menu led by Matt Harding, Piada's head chef and director of culinary, focused on providing more gluten-free, vegetarian and vegan options,

including the Harvest Grain Salad, Porchetta Sandwich and Blood Orange Pomegranate Tea.

In 2018, Piada's culinary team is continuing to enhance the menu items with healthier options and will implement initiatives to garner greater attention from college campuses.

The brand plans to add 10 new locations in 2018, bringing its total to more than 50 locations.



#74 Vale Food Co

Vale Food Co is a women-first workplace where opportunities and pay are presented to help women rise through the organization. With a mostly female team, the brand has expanded quickly into new markets in Florida and has been able to innovate more quickly than the average fast casual restaurant. From a diverse core offering of technology, staff has kept the foot on the pedal in terms of innovation and growth.

Vale has a "mini food hall" experience where customers can experience Vale's hot food line or cold side that offers quick-service items. This allows staff the capability to pivot when food trends emerge and change its core offerings seasonally, according to the company.

The growth strategy is focused on revenue stream generation through meal plan delivery inside its brick-and-mortar stores.

In addition, the brand has embraced the pop-up culture and is launching Vale pop-ups at farmers' markets and beaches via food trucks and trailers.

#75 Wayback Burgers

Founded in 1991, in Newark, Delaware, Wayback Burgers now operates in 28 states and internationally in Argentina, Brunei, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. It opened 27 units during 2017, bringing the total number of units to 150 locations, and it is not stopping. The brand plans to open 35 to 40 restaurants in 2018.

"2017 was a year defined by unprecedented expansion into new communities all over the world, the development of innovative and appetizing new menu items, the embracing of new technological trends and impressive improvements to all Wayback Burgers online properties," said Bill Chemero, Wayback Burgers executive vice president. "I am proud of our progress and anticipate even greater accomplishments in the future."

Last year, Wayback Burgers upgraded its chicken products to hand-breaded cuts and rebranded its POP material along with a new design of its restaurants rolling out in 2018.

"Wayback Burgers is poised and well positioned, through comprehensive strategies and calculated negotiations, to continue our domestic and international growth," Chemero said. "This serves as a testament to the men and women who have worked hard daily to build Wayback Burgers into one of the world's fastest-growing burger franchises."

Take a Glance at the Winners from 2017

1. Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza
2. Eatsa
3. Slapfish
4. BurgerFi
5. Luna Grill
6. Shake Shack
7. &pizza
8. Dickey's Barbecue Pit
9. Which Wich Superior Sandwiches
10. By Chloe
11. Mooyah
12. Mod Pizza
13. Starbucks
14. Pieology Pizzeria
15. PizzaRev
16. Burger 21
17. Newk's Eatery
18. Muscle Maker Grill
19. Wahlburgers
20. Chronic Tacos
21. Penn Station East Coast Subs
22. McAlister's Deli
23. Chipotle
24. Raising Cane's
25. Mad Greens
26. Slim Chickens
27. Fazoli's
28. Panera Bread Company
29. Chi'Lantro
30. sweetgreen
31. Chicken Salad Chick
32. Holler & Dash Biscuit House
33. Balance Pan-Asian Grille
34. Bean Sprouts
35. California Tortilla
36. The Halal Guys
37. Starbird
38. Rockfire Grill
39. la Madeleine
40. Moe's Southwest Grill
41. Naf Naf Grill
42. Verts Mediterranean Grill
43. Vitality Bowls
44. Wingstop
45. Boloco
46. Schlotzsky's
47. Smoothie King
48. Jersey Mike's Subs
49. Wow Bao
50. Tijuana Flats
51. Cowboy Chicken
52. Firehouse Subs
53. Charleys Philly Steaks
54. Tropical Smoothie Cafe
55. Rosati's Pizza
56. Rubio's Coastal Grill
57. Zoup!
58. Rise Biscuits & Donuts
59. The Pie Hole
60. Crushed Red
61. Fuzzy's Taco Shop
62. UFood Grill
63. Fresh To Order
64. Pei Wei
65. Pita Pit
66. Asian Box
67. Uncle Maddio's Pizza
68. Juice It Up!
69. Malawi's Pizza
70. Nando's Peri-Peri Chicken
71. Pincho Factory
72. Potbelly Sandwich Shop
73. Saladworks
74. Costa Vida Fresh Mexican Grill
75. Pokeworks
76. Marco's Pizza

Top 25 Executives



Blaine Hurst, president and CEO, Panera Bread

Although Blaine Hurst has been in the CEO seat at Panera only since November 2017, he has been leading the brand's strategy since he joined the chain in 2011, as SVP of technology and transformation. He was responsible for pioneering and implementing the digital capabilities that would enable Panera 2.0 and the chain's e-commerce platform. Hurst also was named president in December 2016, and his responsibilities were expanded to include Panera's core café business as well as Panera's technology, delivery and catering organizations.

After holding the president's role for about year, he took over as CEO when Ron Shaich stepped down, saying that the previous seven years gave him the opportunity to learn from an industry icon.

"I have been fortunate to lead and be a part of many of the initiatives that are now driving Panera's success," he said. "We've built a great team — in fact, it's the best team I know of in the restaurant industry. I'm looking forward to continue working with them and our partners at JAB [Holding Co.] as we take Panera forward. With exciting new initiatives underway to better serve our customers and improve their dining experience, I believe our opportunity is even brighter. I thank Ron and JAB for their confidence in me."



Howard Schultz, executive chairman, Starbucks

It's hard to find a more popular leader than Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz. Although he handed over the CEO reins to Kevin Johnson last year, he hasn't stopped leading the industry when it comes to employee and minority rights. In January 2017, for example, Schultz promised to hire 10,000 refugees over the next five years and committed to providing coverage to employees as directed by the Affordable Care Act, regardless of government laws.

The chain, which took a lot of heat in April 2017, after a video went viral of employees calling the police on two African American men who were waiting for a colleague before ordering, is closing its more than 8,000 company-owned stores in the United States on May 29 to conduct racial-bias education geared toward preventing discrimination in stores.

"The company's founding values are based on humanity and inclusion," Schultz said. "We will learn from our mistakes and reaffirm our commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment for every customer."

Schultz, who some expect to run for the Oval Office, encouraged the country last year to help one another, writing about what he described as "the emergence of better angels" in an op-ed published in the Financial Times.

"We need belief and faith in the country and the American people," he wrote. "It is hard in the midst of such a storm to maintain an optimistic view. But I raise my hand, and I say I am optimistic about our country and the true promise of America."

Top 25 Executives



Andy Wiederhorn, CEO and founder, FAT Brands

Andy Wiederhorn must not have much free time on his hands. In 2017, he took his company, FAT Brands, public and spent \$10.5 million to acquire Homestyle Dining — the owner of the Ponderosa Steakhouse and Bonanza Steakhouse brands. He also has signed a definitive agreement to purchase Hurricane Grill & Wings Hurricane .

FAT Brands, the parent company of Fatburger and Buffalo's Express, has more than 200 restaurants in six states and 18 countries and recently signed an agreement for Singapore.

"Trends at our flagship brand, Fatburger, were particularly strong, with adjusted same-store sales growth in core domestic markets up 7.4 percent year-over-year, marking Fatburger's 8th consecutive year of positive, domestic same-store sales growth," Wiederhorn said in a company news release.

Wiederhorn is keynoting the Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit, July 16-18 in London. [Register here.](#)



Anthony Ackil, co-founder and CEO, B.Good

In 2004, Anthony Ackil set out to create a fast-food brand that was affordable but that also kept stringent sourcing guidelines and served only freshly made in-house ingredients. Since launching the brand 14 years ago in Boston, Ackil has built his chain into a thriving global franchise with more than 60 units spanning the U.S., Canada, Switzerland and Germany.

Ackil is just as excited about giving back to the communities in which he does business as he is about growing the brand.

"We involve employees in everything we do to give back to the community," he said in a Forbes interview. "When we donate 800 meals to the community, employees are serving those meals."

The company also partners with Camp Harbor View, a summer camp for at-risk youth, where employees work with volunteers to farm the land. Seventy-five percent of the crop goes back to the community, and Camp Harbor View receives the first harvest.



Prakash Karamchandani, CEO, Balance Pan-Asian Grille

Prakash Karamchandani is anything but a typical leader. The Toledo, Ohio-based entrepreneur has vowed to always pay employees above minimum wage and last year created a "managerless" form of restaurant operation. He's also passionate about sustainability and views technology as one of the most important aspects of his business.

"Quite honestly, we've never felt as if we were building a restaurant," said Karamchandani. "It's more like we're building a tech company than a restaurant."

Karamchandani also has started building Balance Farms, an 8,600-square-foot aquaponics facility in downtown Toledo, which will provide organic local produce year-round for Balance Grille restaurants, as well as other local restaurants and grocery stores. Aquaponics is an efficient system of farming that uses fish to cultivate plants, which, in turn, helps purify the water.

"Our customers know not just where our ingredients are sourced, they can visit the facility and view the production," he said. "Our brand is gaining visibility in multiple channels, including grocery stores, and our brand is differentiated."

Top 25 Executives



Michael Lastoria, CEO and founder, &pizza

Michael Lastoria, CEO and founder of Washington, D.C.-based &pizza, tends to command the attention in any room that he enters. His long hair and hippie style make him look more like the frontman for a band than a CEO who has grown his business to nearly 30 locations and helped to raise \$60 million in expansion capital since 2012.

Lastoria is passionate about growing his brand of company-owned stores, [saying recently](#) at the Fast Casual Executive Summit that he won't franchise. Instead, his goal is to embellish the uniqueness of each restaurant. Each &pizza has its own story that Lastoria works to incorporate into the store's design.

Lastoria also is a leader when it comes to paying employees a living wage, and he isn't stingy with sharing advice with other leaders. He's spoken at the Inc. 5000 Conference, the Fast Company Innovation Festival and the Fast Casual Executive Summit, for example, and was recognized on Washington Business Journal's list of 40 Under 40. The National Retail Federation also has added him to its List of People Shaping Retail's Future.



Jim Mizes, CEO, Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza

While focusing on growing via corporate-owned stores works for &pizza founder Michael Lastoria, his friend and competitor Jim Mizes, CEO of Blaze, takes the opposite approach. Since joining the company as COO in 2012, Mizes has helped grow Blaze from two units to nearly 300 strictly through franchising. Last May, he [took over the CEO reins](#) and oversaw the opening of more than 60 units in 2017. Mizes is planning a 40 percent increase in unit growth for 2018, which includes opening this year in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

As one nominator put it, "He literally redefined franchising by showing everyone that you can grow the right way with the right partners at an unbelievable speed."

"By leveraging the infrastructure we've built over our first five years, we are now well-positioned to become a dominant category leader, with a goal of becoming a billion-dollar brand by 2022," Mizes said in a news release.



Steven Novick, founder, Farmstand

Besides launching Farmstand — a multiformat, healthy and sustainable fast casual brand — three years ago in the U.K., Steven Novick has beat cancer and summited the highest peaks on all seven continents, including Everest, which he did 18 months after his cancer treatments.

As if those accomplishments weren't enough to be proud of, several publications believe his innovative business model behind Farmstand is the future of the restaurant industry. [The Telegraph](#), for example, recently described Farmstand as being "at the vanguard" of a unique capital-light business model, while

[The Guardian](#) said it had a "nimble approach to growth."

While Farmstand sells food to 20 outlets, it has only one kitchen that makes all the food and sends it to the rest of the brand's cafés and pop-up locations.

"I hope we see more of this," Novick told [The Telegraph](#). "It is a capital-light and efficient model. I would like to see more brands doing it — being copied is the highest form of flattery."

Novick, born in Milwaukee, said he sources only from U.K.-based suppliers and nothing is artificial. The entire menu, which is 80 percent vegan, is free from gluten, dairy and added sugar.

Top 25 Executives



Karen Eadon, president and COO, Farmer Boys

Although Karen Eadon has served as president and COO of Farmer Boys since 2015, she cut her Farmer Boys teeth the year before when she joined the team as CMO. It's safe to say that the Los Angeles-based exec has a passion for marketing, considering that, before joining Farmer Boys, she spent her career leading marketing departments at a variety of brands, including McDonald's, El Pollo Loco, Mimi's Cafe, Taco Bell and Applebee's.

Eadon is also passionate about helping to elevate other women to the C-suite in the restaurant industry, recently telling [FastCasual](#) that the success of the restaurant industry will depend on finding innovative leaders that represent diverse ideas and backgrounds.

"I believe that women bring both mental toughness and a high degree of emotional intelligence to leadership roles," she said. "With a changing workforce, this combination will be able to more successfully create organizations with high performing cultures that deliver results by building teams that respect individuals and value their differences."



Benedict Koenig IV, founder, Heritage Eats

Benedict Koenig IV wrote the business plan for Heritage Eats, a Napa, California-based global fusion restaurant, in 2014 while he backpacked through the Middle East and Asia. He opened the first unit less than a year later in Napa and has continued to keep customers interested with his menu of globally inspired sandwiches, salads, wraps, rice bowls and tacos made from heritage-breed meats and produce from local farms. An additional location will open this summer in Walnut Creek, California.

Prior to creating the brand, Koenig worked with hospitality design and concept firm AvroKO after he left a career as a financial analyst at Goldman Sachs in New York City. Although he has a head for business — Koenig graduated magna cum laude with a degree in economics from New York University — he leads with his heart. Koenig describes Heritage Eats as a for-purpose lifestyle brand that also is working toward helping to end children's hunger in America.



John Miller, chairman and CEO, Cali Group

John Miller, chairman and CEO of Cali Group, has established himself as a pioneer of artificial intelligence (AI), facial recognition and robotics in the restaurant industry. With the goal of streamlining restaurant operations, Miller's company, which also includes Miso Robotics and a chain of nearly fast casual burger joints called CaliBurger, has created [Flippy](#), a robotic kitchen assistant that works alongside human workers.

"We really think of ourselves as a technology company that happens to sell cheeseburgers," Miller said.

Miller is testing Flippy in CaliBurger units, which is how he tests all of the technologies that he and his teams develop. The brand, for example, has rolled out e-mobile gaming competitions and AI-enabled self-ordering kiosks using NEC facial recognition technology.

"It's also a key stepping stone toward replacing credit card swipes with face-based payments, which is our goal for 2018," Miller [said](#).

Top 25 Executives



John Vincent, co-founder and CEO, Leon

John Vincent, co-founder and CEO of Leon, a 50-unit brand based in London, asked one question when he set out to open a fast-food brand in 2004: “How would God do fast food?” He came to the conclusion that God probably would do fast food in a manner similar to followers of the Taoist philosophy, which promotes living in harmony. His mission is focused on doing good and being kind to the planet by serving fun, fresh food quickly and at an affordable price.

Under Vincent’s leadership, Leon recently received a \$32 million investment from Spice, a company controlled by GP Investments, to help it expand into the U.S. in the second half of this year.

Vincent also stands out as an industry leader when it comes to speaking out against some of the decisions by the British government that could affect business owners. Regarding Brexit, for example, he predicted that thousands of EU residents who work in the restaurant industry are leaving.

“There’s a danger if we can’t recruit people — and we’ve already seen it in America — that people will be replaced by robots, and that’s not something we want to see,” Vincent told the BBC. “So, that’s not ‘Mad Max fantasy world,’ it’s already happening.”

In another interview, he said the government’s introduction of the National Living Wage in 2016, increases in business rates and devaluation of the pound following Brexit have halved the average restaurant owner’s profit margin.

“The government has killed the restaurant industry ... they haven’t got a clue,” he said.

Vincent who keynoted last year’s Restaurant Franchising & Innovation Summit in London, will share his business strategies during this year’s Fast Casual Executive Summit, Oct. 7-9 in Seattle.



Laura Rea Dickey, CEO, Dickey’s Barbecue Pit

Although Laura Rea Dickey just took over as CEO last year, she’s been part of the Dickey’s family for years — literally. She’s the wife of the chain’s former CEO, Roland Dickey Jr., and granddaughter-in-law of Travis Dickey, who founded the chain in 1941.

She also happens to be a technology guru. In her previous eight-year stint as Dickey’s chief information officer, she helped create “Smoke Stack,” a proprietary big data and enterprise management system that allows the chain’s nearly 600 stores to focus efforts on using data in real time instead of wasting time manually analyzing it.

“Dickey’s needed an easy and cost-effective way to integrate, analyze and act on valuable business data by creating advanced visualizations and performing data analytics with minimal on-site infrastructure and support personnel,” Laura Rea Dickey said.

Under her leadership, this year the chain is opening its first international location as part of a 45-store development agreement in the Middle East.

Top 25 Executives



Michael Mohammed, CEO, Chronic Tacos

Since 2012 when Michael Mohammed and his three brothers took over the Chronic Tacos franchise, the brand has maintained a momentum of expanding into new regions of the country and internationally.

Mohammed is known for developing the brand's culture — The Taco Life — which represents authenticity and high quality, just two of the positive attributes Chronic Tacos embodies. Mohammed encourages all customers and employees to stay true to themselves and to embrace others for who they are.

Under Mohammed's leadership, Chronic Tacos should hit 100 locations in the next two years.



Lorena Cantarovici, CEO, Maria Empanada

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, often finding herself on the verge of homelessness, Lorena Cantarovici worked hard to put herself through college before moving to the U.S. with only \$300. She landed in Denver, where she eventually opened Maria Empanada. That small location has turned into three units. Last year, Cantarovici won the Small Business Person of the year for Colorado and appeared on numerous TV shows, including on the Food Network. She also has been interviewed on NBC by Lester Holt and on CNBC, and she is an advocate for immigration rights for restaurant employees.

Cantarovici believes that charity begins at home, and she gives some of her sales to local schools. She has teamed up with the Denver Active 20-30 Children's Foundation for the Denver Polo Classic, the nation's largest charitable polo tournament. Maria Empanada has donated more than \$8,000 worth of empanadas for children's causes, and all visually imperfect empanadas or those not sold are given to homeless shelters and religious institutions.



Denyelle Bruno, president, Tender Greens

Before taking over as president last year at Tender Greens, Denyelle Bruno spent six years at Peet's Coffee but doesn't consider herself in the restaurant business.

"I'm in and I've always been in the people business," said the Los Angeles native, who has worked with some of the most success brands in the world, including Apple. In fact, she helped Steve Jobs launch the first 25 Apple stores but most recently was at the helm of Drybar, where she oversaw the opening of 55 locations in three years.

Bruno, who holds a master's degree in organizational design from the University of San Francisco, said that although women often must work harder than their male counterparts just to be seen as equal, that is improving with each generation.

"Women are often discouraged from taking leadership roles — sometimes even in the most subtle ways," she said. "By the time a woman makes it to a leadership position, she's probably already slain a few dragons. Women in leadership, by definition, will come to the job with the ability to challenge the status quo which is arguably the most important skill of all."

Top 25 Executives



James Park, CEO, Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh

James Park may hold the CEO title at Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh, but he is also passionate about marketing technology.

Prior to his restaurant career, Park worked with IBM Global Services designing and implementing advanced customer relationship management (CRM) tools for Fortune 500 companies, which came in handy last year when he streamlined Garbanzo's digital customer experience. With close to 10 percent of his customers using online ordering and 28 percent enrolled in the chain's V.I.B. Rewards Club, Park opted to consolidate customer transactions from both systems into a single, easily accessible platform. Customers, for example, can place orders and earn and redeem awards via a single sign-on capability since the chain integrated its Paytronix-powered V.I.B. Rewards Club with the Olo online order platform.

"Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh wants its customers to have the same experience — shop, click and buy — whether they are on the website or the mobile app," he said. "By tightly integrating our Olo online ordering system with the Paytronix Rewards platform, we are assured that our customers have a seamless experience every time they interact with us."



Shannon Seip and Kelly Parthen, co-founders, Bean Sprouts

One needs only to look to Shannon Seip and Kelly Parthen's long list of accomplishments to see that they are movers and shakers in the fast casual industry.

Seip, the creative force behind Bean Sprouts, who created the menu and design for each unit, also oversees the licensing branch of Bean Sprouts' expansion, focusing on building relationships with cultural facilities and the amusement park industry. With years of experience as a morning show television anchor and writer for American Girl magazine, she also has written several books, including two for American Girl, and was a top-ranked contributing editor for Nickelodeon, both online and on the air. She's also the producer of all Bean Sprouts recipes and content, including those that have appeared in national outlets such as Parents magazine, Nickelodeon and PBS Kids Sprout. She has demonstrated recipes on the air in nearly every major market, including New York, Chicago and San Francisco, and was interviewed on Good Morning America and Martha Stewart Living Radio.

Parthen, the yin to Seip's yang, spearheads Bean Sprouts' brand marketing strategies and national partnerships. Her former role as PR director for a Fortune 500 company has given her the expertise needed to land Bean Sprouts in hundreds of media features and mentions, multiple awards in the restaurant industry, an invitation to the White House and numerous national speaking opportunities, including the Association of Children's Museums, major mom conferences and baby and kids' expos. Parthen also secures strategic partnerships, such as Bean Sprouts' role as national spokespeople for Association of Junior Leagues International's "Kids in the Kitchen" campaign.

Top 25 Executives



Jae Kim, CEO, Chi'Lantro

Jae Kim, who founded Chi'Lantro, a food truck and full-service catering company, was born in Seoul, Korea, before moving to the U.S. when he was 12. Using everything he had and maxing out credit cards, he eventually launched Chi'Lantro and landed a spot on the ABC TV show "Shark Tank," where real-estate mogul Barbara Corcoran offered him \$600,000 for 20 percent equity in his Korean barbecue-inspired brand. It was Kim's third time trying out for Shark Tank, where he shared his struggles as the immigrant child of a single mom to open a business. The fact that the brand had 25 percent year-over-year growth sealed the deal.

Giving back is also important to Kim, who held a special event last year to celebrate the brand's opening on the South Shore District of Austin, Texas, with 100 percent of opening-day proceeds benefiting four local charities.

"Our success has led to so many incredible opportunities and giving back has always been one of the most important ones to us," said Kim, who plans to open his seventh unit this year and is looking into licensing and other opportunities to grow the brand.



Matthew Corrin, CEO, Freshii

At 23 years old, Matthew Corrin set out to create a restaurant brand that would help people all over the world live healthier and longer lives with fast food that is convenient and affordable. Enter Freshii: a brand that is growing at a faster pace than Starbucks. Today, Freshii has over 350 locations in countries around the world, and Corrin is well on his way to building a billion-dollar business.

His mission is to help citizens of the world live better by making healthy eating convenient and affordable. He often challenges leading brands in the quick-service industry to do the same. Corrin, for example, has penned open letters to Subway and McDonald's challenging them to either convert some of their existing units into Freshiis or to add mini-Freshii units within locations.

Corrin, who keynoted this year's Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit, is a recipient of the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year award, Canada's Top 40 Under 40, Inc. Magazine's 30 Under 30 and Canadian Association of Foodservice Professionals Restaurateur of the Year. Freshii was awarded Top Franchise of the Year in Canada and is continuing to attract franchise partners worldwide.

Top 25 Executives



Chef José Andrés, founder of Beefsteak & ThinkFoodGroup

Named to Time's "100" most influential list and awarded "Outstanding Chef" by the James Beard Foundation, José Andrés is an internationally recognized culinary innovator, author, educator, television personality and chef/owner of ThinkFoodGroup. While most of his 26 restaurant brands sit in the casual or fine-dining segments, three years ago, Andrés created Beefsteak, a vegetable-driven fast casual brand, in Washington, D.C. His goal with the brand, which has five units, was to bring

"delicious, fresh food" to even more people around the world.

Andrés is also an advocate for food and hunger issues and is known for championing the role of chefs in the national debate on food policy. In 2012, for example, he formed World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit that provides smart solutions to hunger and poverty by using the power of food to empower communities and strengthen economies.

His work has earned awards and distinctions including the 2017 Lifetime Achievement award from the International Association of Culinary Professionals and the 2015 National Humanities Medal, one of 12 distinguished recipients of the award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Andrés also was named EY Master Entrepreneur of the Year in Greater Washington for his leadership and impact on the global business community and was awarded the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute's Chair's Medallion Award.



Andrew Gruel, CEO, Slapfish

Andrew Gruel, who turned a food truck into a thriving fast casual business with Slapfish, is always a few steps ahead of the competition. Last year, for example, he opened two new concepts — Two Birds and Butterleaf— inside Orange County's [Trade Food Hall](#), which he describes as "Upscale market meets food court." Two Birds is a farm-fresh Jidori chicken concept founded on the idea that "simple is better," and Butterleaf is "vegetarian food for non-vegetarians," Gruel said.

A few months later, he opened [Raw Bar by Slapfish](#) in Huntington Beach with the goal of it becoming a local hangout, offering chilled seafood and oysters at affordable prices. A barn door separates the restaurant from the original Slapfish location, offering easy access to the full Slapfish menu for those Lobster Grinder and Clobster Grilled Cheese fans. Imbibers also can choose from 16 taps of local craft beers, ranging from two to five dollars for 12- to 16-ounce pours, as well as sake and wine. With Oyster Sommeliers, slurp-and-sip competitions and oyster classes, Raw Bar promises a fantastic time and go-to destination for locals, Gruel said.



Brett Schulman, CEO, Cava Grill

Brett Schulman's previous experience in the finance field has come in handy, as he's been instrumental in raising more than \$90 million to help fuel the growth of his 45-unit chain.

He's also a guru in the field of technology, a fact proven two years ago by his hiring of data scientists to install customized sensors to collect and assess customer data. His team eventually used the information to uncover new ways to speed up service, increase food quality, prevent spoilage and anticipate how much food to prepare, according to [Fast Company](#). Schulman's data-driven approach led to doubling the brand's footprint in 2017, and a 15 percent increase in profitability over 2016.

"[We] think about technology to enhance the human experience, not replace it," Schulman said in the interview.



Justin Rosenberg, CEO, Honeygrow

After ditching the cubicle world, Justin Rosenberg created Honeygrow in Philadelphia in 2012, with a goal of bringing a plant-based diet to the masses. He came up with the idea for Honeygrow while trying to add more plants into his own diet.

“I was cooking more at home and really enjoying the meals I was crafting for myself and my family,” he said in an interview with [FastCasual](#). “I realized that there weren’t enough vegetable-forward fast casual concepts that catered to everyday eating.”

Rosenberg since has raised more than [\\$70 million to take the concept across the country](#). The capital led to him launching Minigrow, a streamlined version of the brand, in New York City, but he also is using the funding for tech upgrades, building on the success of the brand’s virtual reality onboarding and training program, for example.

“We’re finding that demand for vegan and plant-based offerings continues to rise,” he said.



Geoff Alexander, president of Wow Bao and managing partner at Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises

As one of the first restaurateurs to implement self-service kiosks in 2009, it’s no surprise that Geoff Alexander is taking his passion for innovation to the next level. Last year, he [merged Wow Bao with Eatsa](#), the creators of a “no-human restaurant,” to roll out Wow Bao’s first fully automated dining experience.

In addition to allowing guests to place orders via kiosks or mobile app, the restaurant allows guests to pick up their orders from cubbies that alert them on the status of their orders.

“When you ordered from the kiosk before, you’re still dealing with an employee that’s giving you the food,” Alexander said. “Now you’re getting your food through a cubby. You’re not getting someone who’s frazzled to hand you the food. The hospitality factor has definitely increased.”

Alexander claims the Eatsa technology will allow Wow Bao to expand more quickly than would have been possible otherwise.

“We’re evolving on a scale that no one else is,” Alexander said. “That’s the first thing it does for us. The second thing is that it allows the consumer a new way of experiencing the restaurant industry.”

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