

*2017 fast casual*  
**TOP 100**  
**MOVERS & SHAKERS**

Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment



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A close-up photograph of two young women with dark hair, smiling and laughing while eating ice cream. The woman on the left is holding a green ice cream stick with pink ice cream. The woman on the right is holding a white cup of ice cream topped with raspberries and a green ice cream stick with pink ice cream. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

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## ***Executive Summary***

Although the past year has been a bit of a struggle for the restaurant sector overall, with several reports showing a downgrade in growth projections for the year, many fast casual concepts have continued to thrive by embracing innovation to improve the customer experience.

This year's list of Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers recognizes 76 brands and 24 industry executives who continue to push their teams and the segment forward despite setbacks.

This year's list not only recognizes growth and sales accomplishments, but also honors innovation in the use of technology to enhance the customer experience, and willingness to take risks in the name of brand elevation.

### **Choosing the Top 100**

Hundreds of brands nominated themselves by taking part in a survey about their business practices. They nominated executives by completing a second survey that asked them to identify individuals whom they believe best represent the industry.

Normally, the Top 100 is comprised of 75 brands and 25 executives. However, this year was especially challenging when it came to whittling down the list. The judges ultimately came to agreement on a selection of 76 brands and 24 executives.

A variety of food genres and service styles were represented on this year's list. Of the 76 brands, 12 fell into the "healthful" category; 11 specialized in pizza; nine focused on Tex Mex or Hispanic cuisine; six represented the better-burger category; and five featured chicken on the menu. The remainder comprised a variety of concepts covering everything from coffee to global flavors.

Each winner was clearly differentiated from the other competitors. But all had important similarities, as well. For example, most invested heavily in employee training, sourced high-quality ingredients, embraced technology upgrades, strived to live their brand culture and demonstrated a passion for giving back to their communities.

Our list specifically recognizes brands and leaders for their contributions to the fast casual segment of the restaurant industry, but when it comes to creativity, progressiveness and sheer grit, these 100 are leading the restaurant industry as a whole.

Sincerely,

Cherryh Cansler

Director of Editorial, Networld Media Group

Editor, FastCasual



**Cherryh Cansler**

Editorial director,  
Networld Media Group

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## #1 Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza

In the crowded fast casual pizza space, it can be hard to stand out, but Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza makes it look easy. The chain, founded five years ago by Rick Wetzel, has grown from two units doing \$3 million in systemwide sales to 175 locations reporting \$185 million in 2016. The chain, which signed a multiyear endorsement deal last year with global icon and NBA All-Star LeBron James, opened 70 units in 2016 and is on target to open 80 in 2017.

CEO and President Jim Mizes predicts that the chain will exceed \$292 million by the end of the year and in another five years will surpass the \$1 billion milestone.

"We spent our first five years in business refining our restaurant model and building out the infrastructure and franchise network to support our rapid growth," Mizes said recently about the chain's success. "We now have the people, processes and systems in place to achieve our goal of becoming a billion-dollar brand by our 10th birthday."

Other highlights helping Team Blaze take our top spot this year include the following:

- The launch of a mobile app in 2016, featuring online ordering, mobile pay and loyalty rewards.
- Menu innovations, including Aguas Frescas, two dessert items and new salads.

- Addition of "brand-building" locations at Walt Disney World in Florida, Universal Studios in Hollywood and Staples Center in Los Angeles, home of the NBA's Lakers and Clippers and the NHL's Kings.

- Removal of artificial colors and flavors, preservatives and high-fructose corn syrup from all ingredients for pizzas and salads.
- Change to a plant-based straw so that all packaging is now 100 percent eco-friendly (recyclable, compostable or made from post-consumer content).
- Growth in overall guest satisfaction, including a systemwide average 4.3 rating across online consumer review sites.

Blaze has big plans for the future, projecting systemwide sales of \$417 million in 2018, with a total of 375 restaurants open at the end of 2018 and 855 restaurants open at the end of 2022.



Photo: Blaze Pizza



## #2 Eatsa

From its menu specializing in quirky ways to serve quinoa to its tech-savvy operations model, Eatsa has innovation covered.

The menu, for example, consists of a variety of quinoa bowls for \$6.95 that include Japanese, Mexican, Mediterranean and other international themes.

Because of its total reliance on technology for ordering and payment, the California-based concept received a lot of attention when it opened its first units two years ago in San Francisco's financial district. It quickly added units in Los Angeles and Berkeley, California.

Instead of hiring employees to take orders, the chain has customers use in-store kiosks and mobile apps for ordering and paying. A few employees are on hand, however, to answer any questions. They also make the food, hidden behind the wall of electronic cubbies, where diners pick up their meals.

On a mission to prove that it's not just a gimmick or a California trend, the chain opened last year in Washington, D.C., and Manhattan. Co-owner Scott Drummond, who one day hopes to bring the bowls down to \$5 each, said plans are in full swing for other units openings in those areas.



Always innovating, the chain recently

upgraded its Bay Area menus to include a few non-quinoa dishes, such as noodle bowls, and a new way to order.

Customers start their orders online by entering their flavor preferences, for example, or "what they are in the mood for."

Eatsa also has added an automatic discount to customer orders — the more they visit, the higher the discount.

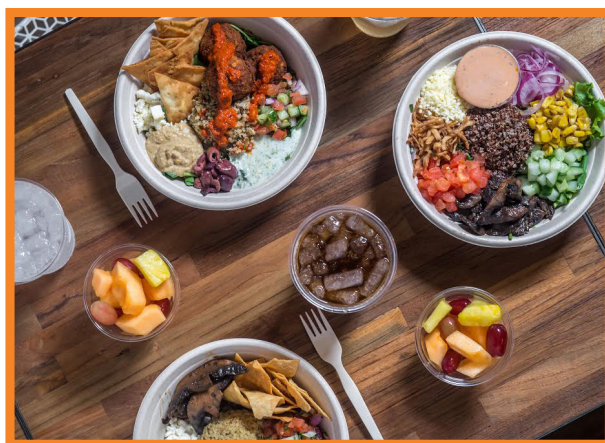


Photo: Eatsa

## #3 Slapfish

Although chef Andrew Gruel first launched Slapfish as a food-truck concept in 2012 in Los Angeles, the concept now is driving sales across the world. Gruel, who is well on his way to

accomplishing his goal of making seafood sexy, has opened eight brick-and-mortar units with plans to hit 15 by the end of the year. Signed deals are in place to develop units in Utah, Idaho, Colorado and Arizona, as well as South Korea. Also, the chain will begin serving its lobster fries and lobster grilled cheese this year to Londoners, with plans for 25 units there over the next 10

years. That agreement also grants the franchisee rights to develop Slapfish in the United Arab Emirates and Ireland.

Gruel, who calls himself an "eco-seafood" chef, has a goal of making sustainable seafood approachable in all the biggest food cities outside of southern California.

"With our menu of seasonally rotating, gourmet dishes in a fast casual setting, guests experience the quality of fine dining with the cost and convenience of fast food," Gruel recently said in an interview with FastCasual. "Also setting us apart is the fact that we only serve the freshest fish and shellfish sourced from well-managed, responsible suppliers of sustainable seafood."



Photo: Slapfish

## #4 BurgerFi

In just five years, BurgerFi has gone from a single-unit restaurant in south Florida to opening nearly 100 restaurants domestically and internationally. The chain, known for its commitment to sustainable practices and technology enhancements, serves all-natural, hormone-, steroid- and antibiotic-free beef.



Photo: BurgerFi

The chain, which implemented self-order kiosks and digital menu boards in 2016, has built an innovative menu with specialty items, such as the VegeFi Burger (made of quinoa) and a Breakfast All Day Burger topped with syrup. It also

has a variety of special toppings, including a candied bacon-tomato jam, a truffle aioli and its own BurgerFi sauce.

BurgerFi, which plans to open 35 restaurants in 2017, including its first airport location and its first locations in Panama and Kuwait, relies on environmentally sustainable best practices for build-outs. It boasts earth-friendly elements, such as chairs made from recycled Coke bottles; tables made out of compressed, recycled wood; energy-efficient lighting; wood panels made from renewable timber sources; and fans that use 66 percent less electricity. Its restaurants also maintain a low carbon footprint with strict recycling programs for oil, cardboard, bottles and cans.

Another differentiator that sets BurgerFi apart from its competitors is its commitment to upward mobility. To encourage and fuel long-term employment with the company, BurgerFi has established a Steps of Success program, in which hourly employees learn additional skills, earn higher wages and gain access to a proven path of promotions and management positions.



## #5 Luna Grill

The 30-unit chain grew by 45 percent last year, opening nine units in 2016 and securing nearly \$30 million in financing from CapitalSpring. Luna Grill will use that funding to open 15 units over the next 12 months.

The brand with California and Texas locations reported a 19 percent increase in same-store sales, recently introduced “Luna 3.0,” a redesign that is a mix of vintage and modern elements combined with organic elements to create an overall look that is European or Scandinavian design, said Nicole Abraham, vice president of marketing for Luna Grill. Specific elements include bold patterns, modern pendant lamps paired with vintage light bulbs and live edge wood tables representing the look of a tree trunk.

“It features gentle contours and playful accent colors,” Abraham said. “Much like the entire Luna Grill experience, the new interior design honors the elements of nature and the needs of our customers through form and function.”



Photo: Luna Grill

While the brand has continued to evolve since its 2004 inception, it hasn't lost sight of its culture and commitment to the community. Luna Grill, for example, has participated in hundreds of donations and events in its communities.

**Luna Grill**  
fresh mediterranean



## #6 Shake Shack

The novelty of Shake Shack doesn't seem to be waning. The brand, known for its snaking lines of people happily waiting to order, has seen steady growth over the last year. It opened 36 units in 2016, bringing its total to 72 domestic and 45 international shacks. For the year, the chain reported total revenue increased

40.9 percent to \$268.5 million and shack sales increased 41.6 percent to \$259.4 million.

"I'm especially pleased given the challenging industry backdrop in retail and restaurants," CEO Randy Garutti

said recently about the chain's financial performance. "We achieved all of this while furthering our commitment to growing in

premier locations, and building an even better team member and guest experience that fosters the long-term strength of the Shake Shack brand for years to come."

The year also saw the launch of the Chick'n Shack, an all-natural and antibiotic-free chicken sandwich, the beginning stages of the Shack App and the deployment of analytics software to boost supply chain efficiency and decision-making.

To help spread Shake Shack to even more people, Garutti and Mark Rosati, culinary director of Shake Shack, have created a cookbook, "Shake Shack: Recipes & Stories," which will be out May 16, 2017.



Photo: iStock.com

## #7 &pizza

Making great pizza is just one of the many goals at &pizza. CEO Michael Lastoria launched the Washington, D.C.-based brand in 2012, with the following ethos: to celebrate oneness, make it personal, keep it fresh and elevate everything.

That's exactly what he did.

True to its core values, &pizza is part of the urban fabric of the community. From the way it refers to employees as tribe members to its charitable arm, &CHARITY, and the localized design of the stores, the brand embodies the communities in which it serves.

The chain, which landed a \$25 million investment a few months ago from Avalt, has grown to 20 units with a presence in Baltimore and Philadelphia and soon will open in New York City.

The chain also is focused on being a leader in the movement for a fair wage. To &pizza, fair pay is a vital ingredient to the company's success and culture and the well-being of its 490 tribe members.

As a member of Business for a Fair Minimum Wage, the company has played a significant role in the fight to raise the minimum

wage in Washington, D.C. For example, last year it raised wages in D.C. to \$11.75 an hour to surpass the District of Columbia's minimum wage. In Maryland and Pennsylvania, &pizza opened its first Baltimore and Philadelphia locations by opting for a starting hourly pay of \$10.50, above Maryland's \$8.25 minimum and Pennsylvania's \$7.25 minimum.

Also, the chain's Columbia Heights shop was where D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser signed the Fair Shot Minimum Wage Amendment Act of 2016. The bill would increase the hourly wages of more than 100,000 D.C. workers. In November 2016, at its Chinatown shop, &pizza hosted a roundtable with U.S. Secretary of Labor Tom Perez and U.S. Deputy Secretary of Labor Chris Lu to discuss the benefits and necessity of raising the minimum wage to a fair wage both in D.C. and nationwide.



Photo: FastCasual.com

## #8 Dickey's Barbecue Pit

It was a busy but good year for Dickey's Barbecue Pit. In 2016, it not only opened 87 units but also launched a new menu and formed Dickey's Capital Group to facilitate future growth. Roland Dickey Jr., who had been serving as the restaurant's CEO, is now running Dickey's Capital Group, and the brand's former CIO, [Laura Rea Dickey](#), took over the CEO title. Renee Roozen, former vice president of operations, was appointed as the first brand president.

The chain also implemented its "No B.S." (Bad Stuff) campaign in 2016, after execs took a hard look at its proteins and made the move to source ethically and responsibly. Beef brisket is humanely handled and sustainably raised with no additives. Chicken is raised without antibiotics, is cage free and vegetarian fed, and contains no added hormones. There are no nitrates or nitrites in



Dickey's sausages and no artificial colors or flavors in any of the brand's pork products, for example.

While Dickey's enhanced menu kept many of the brand's classics, it also now incorporates tacos, sliders and Smoke Stacks, a combination of a side and a meat in one easy-to-carry container.

The new menu, however, wasn't a strain on owner/operators, Laura Rea Dickey said. It required them to add only one item to food orders.

Dickey's, known in the industry as a [leader in tech](#), is experimenting with sensor and beaconing technology to help stores operate more efficiently by reducing waste and ensuring operational standards. Beacon technology will enable curbside pickup of to-go orders without the guests ever leaving their vehicles, Laura Rea Dickey said.



Photo: Dickey's Barbecue Pit

## #9 Which Wich Superior Sandwiches



Dallas-based Which Wich Superior Sandwiches has created a strategy to achieve tremendous growth both in terms of locations and revenue in upcoming years. With a recent opening in London,

the 511-unit brand, which opened 54 locations in 2016, plans to open 50 domestic and 20 international locations by the end of the year.

Proving that it's not just "another sandwich concept", Which Wich differentiates itself, CEO Jeff Sinelli said, by providing customizable

sandwiches, a creative ordering system and personalized sandwich bags to enhance customer experience and satisfaction.

The chain isn't focused only on feeding the bottom line, however. Sinelli, who is passionate about feeding the homeless, created the chain's systemwide community outreach program, Project PB&J. Under the program, for every PB&J sold in a Which Wich, one PB&J is donated to a local charity and another is banked for a global fund in case of natural disasters or any large need. The chain also operates "Spreading Parties," where people sign up to make as many PB&J sandwiches as possible in one hour. Attendees of the 2017 [Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit](#), for example, [made 10,201 sandwiches and donated them to homeless people in Dallas](#).



Photo: FastCasual.com



## #10 By Chloe

—  
**by CHLOE.**

By Chloe may be only two years old, but the plant-based concept already has opened five units and reported \$5.9 million in same-store sales in 2016. Samantha Wasser opened the flagship location in 2015, in the West Village in New York City, where it quickly became a local favorite.

Since then, Wasser has opened two additional New York City locations and has expanded to Los Angeles and Boston, with six to 10 units planned for 2017. Wasser also opened a stand-alone bakery concept — Sweets by Chloe — as a brand extension that sells the restaurant's baked goods.

The restaurant not only is a destination for the thriving vegan customer base but also has drawn in non-vegans by offering items that satisfy picky eaters, Wasser said.

A millennial favorite, By Chloe is focused not only on its in-store experience but also on delivery. It has developed a relationship with online delivery services, including Postmates, and created its own app using Brandibbble to implement an order-ahead system that guests can use to place and pay for orders before picking them up at the restaurant or having them delivered.



Photo: ByCHLOE

## #11 Mooyah

While Mooyah burst into the better-burger scene in 2007, 2016 marked a year of strategic changes for the brand, including an array of technology enhancements to better serve guests and franchisees.

Externally, it launched an app-based rewards program allowing guests to earn reward points with every purchase. It also created a mobile-responsive consumer website to better reflect the brand's personality.

Internally, the chain converted its entire system to one point-of-sale solution and one back-end analytics reporting tool, streamlining data to allow for advanced analytics and improved restaurant economics and franchisee profitability.

Mooyah, which has 97 locations after opening 19 units in 2016, also made enhancements to its internal communications hub, the Partner Site,

and debuted an internal texting program to communicate better with restaurant employees across the country.

Lastly, the chain, which plans to open 20 to 25 units this year, updated its menu, adding 100 percent certified Angus beef, all-natural grilled and crispy chicken, a line of premium toppings and a section of prebuilt burger, sandwich and hot dog options.

## #12 Mod Pizza

Saying 2016 was a year of growth for Mod Pizza is an understatement. The 200-unit fast casual pizza chain, which launched in 2008, opened half of its existing units in the last year. It also expanded to the U.K., signed nine multiunit franchise partners and hit \$150 million in funding from Perella Weinberg Partners, Fidelity Investments and other private investors.

When it comes to the menu, Mod is also all about growth, adding two in-house roasted seasonal vegetables each quarter. The chain strives to source only high-quality ingredients without unnecessary additives and is just as passionate about helping its communities. It has donated more than \$650,000 to community-based, nonprofit groups focused on at-risk youth and families.

CEO Scott Svenson said his business is powered by its people-first culture — Mod makes pizza so it can serve people. The company is committed to using pizza as a platform to do good for its people and communities, and is proof that a company can succeed while providing top wages and benefits, employee empowerment and plenty of first and second chances to its people, he said.

As one Mod Squad member shared in an anonymous employee survey, "My employees and I come here and forget

our problems at home, the news where everyone is disregarding human life over very small differences, the outside world who can ridicule and judge our lives. I come to work and sling pizzas with my best friends every day, I have the best job in the world.”



Photo: Starbucks

## #13 Starbucks

It has always been an industry leader, but Starbucks has brewed up a lot of buzz this year, from its frontman Howard Schultz trading in his CEO title to concentrate on growing the retail side of the business to the chain announcing a goal of creating more than 240,000 jobs.

The coffee giant, which has averaged a growth rate of 23 percent over the past five years and delivered record revenues of \$21.3 billion in 2016, not only is dedicated to job creation, but also is passionate about innovating the customer experience via its digital flywheel around the globe.

Starbucks, for example, offers the largest and most robust mobile ecosystem of any retailer in the world, with more than 13 million Starbucks Rewards members and about 9 million mobile paying customers, with one out of three now using Mobile Order & Pay and more than \$6 billion loaded onto prepaid Starbucks Cards in North America during 2016.

The chain is planning this year to expand its Mobile Order & Pay platform to give customers more ordering options by leveraging its skill for Amazon Alexa announced in 2016. Now, with the planned integration of Amazon Alexa and Ford vehicles later this year, Starbucks customers with a Ford car equipped with

SYNC 3 will be able to order on the go by saying, “Alexa, ask Starbucks to start my order.”

Starbucks also is focused on delivering personalized offers to customers via the mobile app, including the rollout of suggested selling and recommendations. Total Starbucks Rewards member spend, for example, was up over 20 percent in 2016 versus 2015, driven by member growth and higher spend per member.

## #14 Pieology Pizzeria

Ending 2016 with \$1.5 million in same-store sales is just one reason Pieology Pizzeria made this year's Top 25. Although Carl Chang founded the brand in 2011, this year he finalized a strategic minority investment from Panda Restaurant Group to facilitate expansion of the brand. Pieology also acquired one of its competitors, Project Pie.

While Chang said Pieology never wants to grow too fast, he admitted that PRG's unlimited resources are making it easier to expand. From real estate and vendor relations to huge buying power, Pieology has grown to be even stronger and more efficient as an organization, Chang said.

The chain, which has 133 units, opened 53 stores in 2016 and has commitments

to open 100 to 120 locations each year for the next three to four years.

Lastly, Chang said the brand is dedicated to maintaining 30 percent of the chain as corporate locations to solidify the brand's long-term growth.

## #15 PizzaRev

While most restaurants' growth rates remained flat, the opposite is true for many of the brands on our Top 100 list. PizzaRev was no exception. The brand opened its first international location in Mexico and added a total of 15 units in 2016, compared with 10 in 2015.

The chain didn't focus solely on expansions, however. It also spent 2016 building out its training, development and technology infrastructures to support the growing franchise system. The year also saw a substantial investment in technology to make the PizzaRev dining experience more seamless and convenient.

Those technological advances included mobile and online ordering apps: Rosnet, a fully integrated solution for tracking food inventory, labor and budgets; Reputology, which aggregates online restaurant reviews to track customer sentiment per region and per store; SendGrid, an email marketing platform; and Smartsheet, a cloud-based project management software to collaborate across the corporate staff and franchise system. The chain also uses Aloha POS, ADP for payroll and Snagajob's recruitment platform.

In keeping with the brand's commitment to innovation and customization, PizzaRev launched a thick dough last year called Double Dough. It now accounts for 20 percent of pizza sales.



## #16 Burger 21

Variety is a key component to Burger 21's success. The chain not only offers 21 chef-inspired burger-and-shake pairings but also embraced change this year by spicing up its service model and decor. In May 2016, for example, the chain opened a Florida restaurant with a patio and full-service bar. Several months later, it launched a redesign of all 22 existing stores and also refreshed its logo.

"Burger 21's previous interior, while originally modern, was more subdued, it was not speaking to our guests," said Arlene Johnston, co-founder and VP of concept development. "We knew we wanted something that would emphasize our high-quality ingredients and the hand-crafted preparation of our food, because those are the stars of the show. By offering design options to fit a variety of urban and suburban settings, we can continue expanding into new markets and deliver on our unique brand promise with a design to match. ... This new look gives us an opportunity to tell our brand story in a more modern and fun way."

Of course, with variety being so important to Burger 21, franchisees may choose among four models. Options include:

- The original 3,000-square-foot model
- A 2,000-square-foot space



Photo: Burger 21

- A hybrid version with a full bar and up to 4,000 square feet
- An airport footprint

The chain has restaurants under development in Arizona, New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland. Target markets for franchise opportunities currently include Dallas, Houston, Miami, Philadelphia and Raleigh, North Carolina.

## #17 Newk's Eatery

Newk's continues to be a leader and innovator in the next generation of fast casual, having opened its 100th restaurant in 2016 and reporting a 48 percent growth rate. It opened 36 restaurants last year and entered 10 markets.

The brand's commitment to made-from-scratch menu offerings, open kitchens and fresh ingredients aligns with consumers' increasing demands for transparency and quality.

Growing the brand isn't the only passion of CEO Chris Newcomb, however. His organization — Newk's Cares — raises money for the [Ovarian Cancer Research Fund Alliance](#). In 2016, Newcomb rallied his restaurants to raise more than \$110,000 for the cause in honor of the brand's 100th restaurant opening and his wife, Lori Newcomb, who was diagnosed with the disease in 2013.

During Newk's third annual Ovarian Cycle Jackson spin celebration in September 2016, Newk's Cares united riders to raise \$159,395 for OCRFA. These efforts work in concert with Newk's Cares' year-round, in-restaurant campaign, which donates 10 cents from each water bottle sold to

ovarian cancer research, ultimately helping Newk's Eatery reach its \$500,000 mark in only two years.

Newcomb is also passionate about technology, which is evident by the brand's introduction of the Newk's Eatery Apple and Android ordering apps as well as Newk's Online Academy, an e-learning platform that educates both hourly employees and area directors about the culture, standards and core processes that drive the brand.

Through their computers or mobile devices, Newk's employees receive easy access to interactive and digital learning content, including training, coursework, tests and videos that nurture professional development.

## #18 Muscle Maker Grill

Muscle Maker Grill, which operates more than 50 restaurants in a variety of locations — including on military bases, in stadiums and at universities — differentiates itself by catering to consumers who want to eat healthy foods. That includes fitness enthusiasts, those starting the journey to a healthier lifestyle and people trying to eat better while on the go.

To make healthy eating even easier, Muscle Maker Grill offers its nutritionally focused menu items to guests through a meal plan program, which allows pre-orders of meals via phone, online or in store, available for pickup or delivered right to their doors.

The company, which has 200 deals in development, is expanding rapidly in

new and existing markets domestically as well as internationally, lining up partners in Kuwait and throughout Middle East and Asia.

The chain, which plans to have 300 units open by 2020, also is taking every chance it can to encourage people to eat better and live healthier lifestyles. It was featured on the CBS series “Undercover Boss,” where it communicated that message to a national viewing audience and rewarded some of its employees for their hard work and dedication.

Founder Rod Silva even ran for president of the United States as an independent candidate with the goal to “Make America Healthy Again.” His platform was focused on the biggest problem that Americans are ignoring — their health — and the havoc it has caused on the health care system. He used the opportunity to educate people on simple substitutions that are better choices without sacrificing flavor. His candidacy was widely covered in the media and his campaign received support from thousands of people nationwide — in addition to officially making the ballot as a presidential candidate in Colorado.

## #19 Wahlburgers

Created by several members of the Wahlberg family — including actors Donny and Mark and chef Paul — Wahlburgers went from six units to 13 over the past year and has more than 300 development agreements to cover over half the world. Brand buzz has remained high, in part due to the chain’s reality show “Wahlburgers” on the A&E network, which has helped demonstrate success and fan appeal of the brand.



Photo: Nicoletta Amato Photography

Each opening, for example, has been accompanied by significant press and large crowds, which could be less about the burgers and more about fans hoping to catch a glimpse of their favorite Wahlberg brother. Regardless of the reasoning, consumers are keeping each location packed, inspiring executives to open 20 to 25 units in 2017.

To keep up with that growth, the chain has upgraded its operations. It recently implemented HotSchedules scheduling software, POSitouch POS and web-based video training, for example, and is evaluating mobile apps/digital ordering and other technologies for 2017.

## #20 Chronic Tacos

Chronic Tacos finished 2016 with 40 units, a 50 percent growth rate in store counts. The California-based chain, which is on target to open 30 additional units by the end of 2017, also reported a 13 percent increase in same-store sales, and the average unit volume of its top 10 locations totaled \$998,090.40.

While the brand continues to grow, it is committed to staying true to its roots and won’t sacrifice quality in order to grow, said Michael Mohammed, Chronic Tacos CEO and president. Its menu relies on third-generation recipes made

with high-quality ingredients, and the atmosphere and customer experience are built around custom artwork on the walls, the music playing in all restaurants and the employees’ involvement in local communities.

Baseball is one of the communities that Chronic Tacos takes seriously. It is returning for its fifth season as a vendor at the Angel Stadium of Anaheim, for example.

“This five-year milestone is coming at an exciting time for us,” Mohammed said. “We’re gearing up for a variety of events, both active and philanthropic. We saw major turnouts last year at our new first-base location; so, we’re excited to continue to offer our authentic food on game days.”

Chronic Tacos, founded in 2002 in Newport Beach, is opening additional units in California in 2017, as well as in North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Washington, Hawaii, Florida and Alberta, Canada.

## #21 Penn Station East Coast Subs

Penn Station East Coast Subs passed the 300-restaurant milestone in early 2016, opening 12 restaurants and closing zero. The 30-year-old brand has grown at a slow and steady pace, choosing to focus on helping its existing restaurants succeed. It has only one company-owned location, for example, doesn’t take rebates from suppliers as income and grows in concentric circles from its home base of Cincinnati, said President Craig Dunaway. Always striving to keep controllable costs down, it decreased food costs by more



than a percentage point to less than 23 percent in 2016.

The chain, last year, also launched a mobile app and a new level of franchisee support with a regional franchise consultant program.

Penn Station has continued to use technology to improve systems for franchisees and provide a better experience for customers, Dunaway said. This includes creating a training and career path initiative called My Penn Path that integrates into the company's POS system.

My Penn Path gives employees a clearly defined career path to show them how they can take an entry-level job and make it a career by outlining which personality traits and skills are needed to be promoted for each step. It provides greater clarity and strategy for the employee and franchisee and has helped franchisees significantly with hiring and retention. Because a restaurant's employees are its greatest asset, this has made a positive impact on all parts of the business, Dunaway said.

## #22 McAlister's Deli

McAlister's Deli, known as the place to go for sweet tea and hospitality, upgraded both in 2016. It deployed Green Tea, for example, as an accompaniment to



Photo: FastCasual.com

its Famous Tea, providing guests with another noncarbonated beverage option. The chain's Free Tea Day in 2016 was a massive success, serving more than 435,000 cups of tea, setting a brand record and also becoming the biggest sales day of the year.

In an effort to boost its customer experience, McAlister's, which has 387 units, upgraded its loyalty and online ordering apps, converting its former visits-based loyalty app to a points-based program. It now rewards guests who not only frequent the brand with high regularity, but also spend more. The ability for guests to track their purchases and accumulate points to receive a designated reward has helped increase usage, according to the company.

Late in 2016, the brand finalized above-store payment within the ordering app that enables guests to pay via the app prior to arriving at the restaurant.

The chain's deployment of menu boards in late Q3 had a massive impact on the total guest experience and subsequently comparable sales performance for the remainder of the year, according to the chain. The menu board is a significant aesthetic improvement and infuses the brand with character and personality. Additionally, the categorization of key products to improve the ease of ordering paired with some pricing adjustments improved wait times, overall satisfaction scores and profitability.

McAlister's, which opened more than 30 units last year, will continue the growth trend in 2017, targeting the upper Midwest, Florida and Georgia, as well as expansion in core markets from the mid-Atlantic, through the Southeast and the Gulf Coast, and into Texas.



Photo: iStock.com

## #23 Panera Bread Company

Panera Bread Company made headlines this year not only for its solid growth rate but also when it changed its status from public to privately owned after selling to JAB Holding Company for \$7.5 billion.

"In more than 25 years as a publicly traded company, Panera has created significant shareholder value," CEO Ron Shaich said. "Indeed, Panera has been the best-performing restaurant stock of the past 20 years — up over 8,000 percent. Today's transaction is a direct reflection of those efforts and delivers substantial additional value for our shareholders."

Bakery-café sales were up 3 percent at company-owned restaurants for fiscal Q4 2016 and increased 6.6 percent on a two-year basis.

The chain's latest focuses are on completing the rollout of delivery and its 2.0 digital initiative.

Although delivery is available in 15 percent of stores, the chain is looking to increase that to 30 to 40 percent of systemwide bakery stores in 2017. Digital sales are up 24 percent, due in part to the success of the MyPanera customer loyalty program, which reached 25 million users this year.

Clean eating is another initiative important to the brand as evidenced by the launch of its 100 percent clean menu. Panera's

products are now free from flavors, preservatives, sweeteners and colors from artificial sources as defined by the company's "No No List."

"We are proud of accomplishing this feat, but we are even more proud of the potential impact we can have on the broader food industry," said Sara Burnett, director of wellness. "We continue to challenge our peers to make a comprehensive commitment to 100 percent clean ingredients."

## #24 Slim Chickens

With unique menu options, including Chicken & Waffles and seasonal jar desserts, Arkansas-based Slim Chickens has created a strategy to achieve tremendous growth both in terms of locations and revenue in upcoming years. The brand has seen rapid growth with 18 openings in 2016 and plans for international expansion to Kuwait in 2017. This year, the brand is projected to open 31 stores, surpassing the 50-store milestone.

In an effort to become synonymous with "Life Changing Chicken," the chain has implemented a stronger messaging of its "Better life" platform to enrich the lives of those touched by its restaurants in 2016. The brand, for example, recognizes "Life Changers" within its communities who enrich, protect or save lives by offering them free dining events. This includes first responders, firefighters/EMTs, police and active duty military.

## #25 Fazoli's

Growth was the theme of 2016 for Fazoli's. It signed 11 franchise agreements

to open 25 units, doubling the number of franchise agreements made the previous year. Also, Fazoli's marked a record-breaking 15 consecutive quarters of same-store sales growth, with franchisees experiencing nearly three times the industry average growth rate and new franchised restaurants continually setting new systemwide records.

This year, the company will carry over the momentum with the unveiling of a modern interior redesign of its restaurants featuring a Wi-Fi bar and a warm, friendly environment for its guests. Fazoli's plans to redesign 15 restaurants by year's end.

The chain also has committed to ditching all artificial ingredients by June 2017 and is rolling out an enhanced menu with premium ingredients and offerings, including table-side grated Parmesan, as well as several new dishes. They include Create Your Own Lasagna, Spicy Sausage Rigatoni and Brownie Gelato Sundae.

## #26 Raising Cane's

Founded by Todd Graves in 1996 in Baton Rouge, Raising Cane's now has more than 300 restaurants in 23 states. Graves still has big plans for the brand, however, including the goal of operating 600 units producing \$1.5 billion in annual sales by the end of 2020.

Along with serving quality chicken finger meals, the chain is known for its commitment to community involvement — it has an entire website dedicated to organizing charitable causes. The chain is gearing up to help host the second annual Fried Chicken Festival, which will take up 520,000 square feet of space and host

nearly 100,000 chicken lovers Sept. 23-24 in New Orleans.

The festival, which brings food, music, family and festivities together, donates a portion of proceeds to local charities.

Graves also co-founded Lemonade Day in 2010, as a way to introduce children to entrepreneurship through the experience of running their own small business: a lemonade stand. The free communitywide effort is now in nearly two dozen states.

Participants are given free backpacks with detailed workbooks that include marketing tips and advice to help them get started, and they gain valuable experience by setting goals and solving problems.

The goal is to inspire kids to spend a little, save a little and share a little, the last part by encouraging them to donate some of their earnings to charity.



Photo: FastCasual.com

## #27 Mad Greens

Mad Greens has been on the cutting edge of the better-for-you category for the past five years, almost doubling in size in 2016 from 15 to 27 restaurants and opening in two new markets: Austin, Texas; and Salt Lake City, Utah. The chain focuses on high-quality ingredients, scratch kitchens, freshly prepared fruits and vegetables, salad dressings, marinades and all meats and proteins grilled fresh daily.

Another Mad Greens focus is speed of service. It strives to get customers



through the line in 30 seconds and relies on technology to meet that goal. Digital menu displays, for example, help guests quickly choose their orders and also keep them updated on all the happenings at Mad Greens from vendor highlights to team member photos. To make an already quick experience even quicker, the chain recently opened its first unit with a drive-thru.

Other technologies Mad Greens uses to offer speedy and accurate service include catering software; Brink POS's online ordering platform to allow guests to order from their mobile devices, skip the line and pick up at the register; and PlayerLync, which incorporates iPads for training and streamlining recipes and operational procedures.

The chain, which has 31 units, is on track to open 12 to 14 units by the end of the year.

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## #28 Chipotle

While Chipotle has seen better years — after dealing with reports of E. coli outbreaks and a drug scandal involving its chief development officer — it has become a mover and a shaker when it comes to food safety.

Choosing to learn from its food-safety issues, the heavily brand-damaged Chipotle announced a few months ago that it was installing “breakthrough technology” throughout its 2,200 stores that would “literally take pathogen sources out of the air, off surfaces and out of ice before any food comes into contact with any of those three potential sources of contamination in its restaurants,” according to a news release.

The technology also is being introduced to numerous Chipotle suppliers.

“In late 2015, I made a promise to all of our customers that we would become an industry leader in food safety,” said Steve Ells, founder, chairman and co-CEO of Chipotle. “In keeping with that promise, we’ve made advancements that have reinvented the way we manage our entire supply chain and care for our customers in our restaurants, while remaining true to our commitment to serve fresh, delicious food made from ingredients raised with care.”

Although sales haven’t bounced back — comparable restaurant sales in 2016 decreased 20.4 percent — the chain is gearing up for a comeback.

“Returning to our roots of what originally made Chipotle great has helped refocus all of our strategies toward the guest experience,” Ells said.

The chain will succeed, he said, by continuing to simplify and improve restaurant operations, use creative marketing to rebuild the brand and further the rollout of digital sales efforts.

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## #29 Chi'Lantro

Although Chi'Lantro opened seven years ago as a food truck with one employee, the Austin, Texas-based brand since has grown to five brick-and-mortar locations with a full-service catering department and a homemade kimchi facility.

Part of that growth stems from founder Jae Kim's 2016 appearance on ABC's “Shark Tank,” when he shared his vision of inspiring the way people eat and think about Korean barbecue. That appearance also garnered a \$600,000 investment from Barbara Corcoran, a business expert and one of the show's sharks.

Chi'Lantro opened two locations in 2016, along with an additional opening in early January 2017, marking the fifth location overall. In addition to its expansion, the brand saw same-store sales increase by 25 percent from 2015 to 2016.

In April 2016, Chi'Lantro made the move to go completely cashless in all locations after observing that most transactions are made by card and also in consideration of safeguarding against theft and other safety issues.

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## #30 sweetgreen

Although sweetgreen was one of the first fast casual bands to launch a mobile app, it kicked off 2016 with an upgraded version featuring seamless integration and single sign-on for mobile ordering, mobile payment and a rewards program.

“When we started sweetgreen, it was all about bridging the gap between healthy eating and convenience,” sweetgreen co-founder Jonathan Neman said. “This new app brings us one step closer by reducing wait times.”

The app focuses on innovation, sustainability and impact. Online ordering increased 80 percent in one year, and the system increased accuracy and flow of the ordering process. The loyalty program allows users to earn a \$9 credit for every \$99 they spend. There are three loyalty levels — green, gold and black — with different degrees of swag and perks, including sweetlife festival tickets and exclusive dinners.

Proving again that it's ready to take risks to improve operations, the 64-unit brand recently announced that it is going cashless in states where the option is legal.

The benefits of going cash-free are obvious; the chance of robbery goes

down, and it also helps with hygiene issues since employees aren't handling cash and then touching food.

## #31 Chicken Salad Chick

Since launching in 2008, Chicken Salad Chick has grown from a single-unit takeout restaurant to a 65-unit fast casual concept with locations across the Southeast and 147 in development.

Founded by Stacy Brown, the company puts an edgy twist on a Southern classic, offering guests a "custom fit" chicken salad experience with more than 12 flavors. It also serves gourmet soups, flavorful side salads and freshly baked desserts.

Over the past three years, the company has reported \$90 million in sales, an increase of more than 6,000 percent. Most recently, Chicken Salad Chick ranked 37 on the Inc. 5000 List of America's Fastest-Growing Companies, making it the fastest-growing franchise brand in the country.

The Auburn-based brand plans to open 23 restaurants in 2017, bringing the total number of locations to 88. It will expand its presence throughout Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Texas and Alabama.



Photo: Chicken Salad Chick

Additionally, the company has created a community marketing program that provides its franchise owners with the tools needed to create strong connections in the community to further build their businesses. This activity has driven strong guest loyalty and community outreach in many markets.

## #32 Holler & Dash Biscuit House

Holler & Dash Biscuit House takes the humble biscuit and uses it as a platform for new kinds of flavors and combinations. While the Cracker Barrel-backed brand strives to deliver high-quality food, it also is focused on speedy service, blending old-fashioned hospitality with technological innovations for a modern take on Southern traditions.

Apple iPads, for example, are key to the brand's operations. Using the PlayerLync system, iPads provide an ever-growing library of training materials and restaurant standards. If the line is too long at the counter, an employee can pick up an iPad and take orders from guests waiting in line. A technology fan favorite is its digital jukebox system, called Rockbot, which allows guests to select the music being played in the restaurant from their mobile devices.

While people and technology allow guests to have a fun experience, the food consistently proves to be a "mover and shaker" in the fast casual industry. Culinary director Brandon Frohne places a premium on partnering with small, artisan vendors to develop sophisticated dishes at each location.

## #33 Balance Pan-Asian Grille

Balance Pan-Asian Grille offers a clean and modern Asian-inspired menu that includes build-a-bowls, customized Asian tacos and vegan and gluten-free options. If that's not enough to get the tastebuds excited, it has bubble tea, too.

Technology is at the forefront in all aspects of the Ohio-based brand's day-to-day operations. It uses social media marketing with in-store display boards to encourage user content posts, and the store runs entirely on iPads with no receipt printers (except for customer requests).

Balance relies on a cloud-based POS system with custom data reporting as well as operating software to manage employee productivity, and it has built an online training platform that it keeps updated via a training manager and in-house videographer.

The brand recently launched a mobile app via LoyaltyPlant, which acts as a kiosk in customers' pockets. The custom modules it has planned in the roadmap will use Bluetooth low energy and geofencing to calculate customer flow and dwell time, as well as enable offering of digital curbside pickup to replace drive-thru in future growth.

## #34 Bean Sprouts

Bean Sprouts, based in Seattle, is dedicated to giving kids and families a playful eating experience. Designed with young visitors in mind, the menu includes Crocamole and Flutter Bites. The menu is set up on a low counter, empowering kids





Photo: Bean Sprouts

to make their own healthy choices. Adults also have a variety of choices, including organic coffee and sustainable foods served in compostable packaging.

The six-unit chain, which will double its locations in 2017, also has plenty of choices for people with dietary challenges, adhering to strict “always” and “never” ingredient guidelines.

In an effort to bring its kid-friendly menus to families across the country, Bean Sprouts has entered into concept licensing agreements with several partners, including Service Systems Associates and Palace Entertainment to open in zoos, amusement parks and water parks.

## #35 California Tortilla

California Tortilla focused on improving operations in 2016. The brand’s loyalty mobile app, for example, made it easier for customers to locate nearby restaurants, earn and redeem loyalty points, find their account balances and place online orders at their favorite Cal Tort locations. In May, it launched an instant-win promotion, giving guests 10 points when they downloaded the app. The brand saw more than a 100 percent increase in app downloads, and average monthly check-ins more than doubled.

Perhaps the greatest menu innovation in 2016, however, was the chain’s offering of five new street tacos. To coincide with the launch of the tacos, Cal Tort rolled out an online ordering platform with [OLO](#) to provide a better, more streamlined online ordering experience for guests.

## #36 The Halal Guys

Having grown from a street cart traveling from midtown to Manhattan just a couple years ago, The Halal Guys is now an international restaurant brand with more than 350 locations either open or in development.

The brand, best known for its platter of chicken and gyro meat with rice, opened 21 new units in 2016, and is looking to innovate technology in 2017.

The creation of a mobile app and mobile ordering are in the works, which will build on the success of the loyalty program called The Halal Guys Rewards that began late last year. In the last seven weeks of the year, more than 17,000 guests joined the loyalty program and conducted nearly 50,000 rewards transactions.

## #37 Starbird

[Starbird](#), which centers around chicken from a California organic, free-range chicken farm called Petaluma, relies solely on technology for ordering. Its mobile ordering app ditches the often-hated drive-thru line, allowing customers to place their orders whenever and wherever they choose via smartphones or tablets.



Photo: Starbird

Upon their arrival, guests hit “I’m here” on the app and their food is delivered within five minutes to the table or a numbered parking spot in the lot.

Starbird, launched by Aaron Noveshen, will open three units by the end of 2017.

“[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.”

## #38 Rockfire Grill

[Rockfire Grill](#) has had a great year. Named one of Yelp’s Top 100 places to eat, the burger brand also won the Perfect Pitch contest at last year’s [Fast Casual Executive Summit](#). During last year’s annual hour-long session, three relatively new restaurant entrepreneurs took the stage to make their best five-minute “pitch.” Rockfire’s father-and-son team of Raj and Neil Syal won over the crowd, however.

“Nothing compares to hot, fresh bread right out of the oven,” the elder Syal told the audience. “In India, we have a term for this that means ‘hot and fresh, straight from the fire.’”

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Built around the idea that fresh-baked bread straight out of the oven is hard to beat, the 2-year-old brand has two locations — Mission Viejo and Santa Ana, California — but already is planning for two more California locations.

Rockfire recently added craft beers on tap.

“It’s a great addition to our business model, and all future locations will be designed to have a gastropub environment with an open kitchen floor plan as we had discussed in the Perfect Pitch presentation,” Raj Syal said.

## #39 *la Madeleine*

La Madeleine has been committed for more than 30 years to menu innovation in the fast casual French bakery-café segment.

Its made-from-scratch breakfast menu expanded in 2016 with the introduction of customizable breakfast crepes and a new mimosa experience. Additionally, the brand introduced a take-and-bake country French brunch for the 2016 holiday season and launched a loyalty app with mobile pay, order-ahead and digital gift card features.

From a brand growth perspective, *la Madeleine* has seen continued sales growth for six consecutive years and is poised for significant development through corporate and franchising expansion in 2017. It has announced an extensive franchise growth initiative to increase its U.S. presence by more than 50 cafés in the next few years.

Also, its focus on community is stronger than ever. With its mission to help end childhood hunger, *la Madeleine* continued

its partnership with Children’s Hunger Fund in 2016, raising \$341,380 last year, which resulted in providing 1.37 million meals to children in need.



Photo: Moe's Southwest Grill

## #40 *Moe's Southwest Grill*

Moe’s Southwest Grill continues to be a leader in providing a more engaging and personal customer experience. In June 2016, *Moe's Southwest Grill* was named the Best Mexican Fast Casual Restaurant Brand by the 2016 Harris Poll, showing the largest equity increase (13 percent) among all restaurants measured.

Known for its out-of-the-box digital strategy, the brand last year launched a virtual Thanksgiving on Facebook Live, augmented reality-enabled art in restaurants and participated in the Burrito Man-nequin Challenge. It also received a ton of press after creating the “Rebound Burrito” campaign in February 2016. On the day before Chipotle closed for food-safety training, the campaign launched a New York media tour, a full-page ad in *USA Today* and targeted outreach to key media touting that, although Chipotle was closed, Moe’s was open all day long and offering a BOGO deal.

Other highlights of 2016 included the rollout of the brand’s Rockin’ Rewards loyalty app with an online-ordering feature and a store redesign featuring artwork

crafted from fresh ingredients celebrating pioneers in rock history.

With nearly 700 total units, 65 of which opened in 2016, Moe’s plans to continue in 2017 with a brisk pace of expansion — into mature markets to strengthen its competitive advantage, and into emerging markets to improve density — and will introduce the brand to select new markets.

## #41 *Naf Naf Grill*

Naf Naf Grill is on a mission to share fresh Middle Eastern food with the nation through a fast casual setting. Taking the Midwest and East Coast by storm, it has built a loyal fan base via cutting-edge technology. Its secret weapon: training its team members to become the brand’s biggest ambassadors.

The brand’s culture is centered around the idea of *Naf Love*, a term used to describe the love and passion employees pour into the food and commitment to making guests happy. Naf Naf’s design allows guests to experience Middle Eastern cuisine on their own terms and in an open environment.

The centerpiece of every Naf Naf Grill is its open kitchen and bakery. Guests are able to watch chefs bake fresh pitas and prepare the shawarmas spinning over an open flame. In addition to preparing all of the food in full view, team members assemble guests’ bowls and pita sandwiches directly in front of them.

In 2017, Naf Naf will open 12 units and expand into several markets, including Ohio.



## #42 Verts Mediterranean Grill

Verts Mediterranean Grill is a \$26 million-backed startup launched by two University of Texas students: Michael Heyne and Dominik Stein. Two days after graduating from UT, the millennials opened their first unit with the simple idea of recreating the food they grew up enjoying in Europe.

In 2015, Verts expanded to over 20 restaurants across Texas and made the monumental decision to expand to the East Coast in 2016. The founders are determined to change the way people eat by providing higher-quality food — made from fresh, all-natural ingredients — that is both affordable and accessible.

Heyne and Stein incorporate chef-driven dishes, a seasonally changing menu and local sourcing.

Verts' approach to PR and marketing is highly unique. The leaders decided to forego traditional advertising and invested heavily in field marketing and influencer/ blogger programs. Verts gives away complimentary entrées at every Verts opening, knowing the flavorful food will keep guests coming back.

It must be working: The brand is projecting 16 openings this year and will plant flags in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.



Photo: Vert's Mediterranean

## #43 Vitality Bowls

Since franchising in 2014, Vitality Bowls has seen exceptional growth, hitting 66 units open or in development. The company plans to open an additional 24 locations and will secure 50 additional territories over the next year.

Tara Gilad launched Vitality Bowls with her husband, Roy Gilad, after learning of their daughter's severe food allergies a few years ago. They wanted to offer the healthiest superfoods on the planet, while striving for a safe kitchen environment to minimize the risk of cross contamination with common food allergens.

The Gilads opened the restaurant with 30-plus superfood menu items that are free of preservatives, artificial ingredients, added sugars and chemicals, and after much success, started franchising in 2014.

"Two thousand sixteen has been a milestone year for us," Tara Gilad said. "As we celebrated Vitality Bowls' five-year anniversary this year, we had so many successes to be thankful for — but even more to look forward to. 2017 will be our year to utilize the momentum we've built to continue redefining the fast casual healthy food restaurant sector."

## #44 Wingstop

Wingstop had one of the most successful restaurant initial public offerings of the last two years, and 2016 marked the company's 13th consecutive year of positive domestic same-store sales growth.

With a mission to "deliver the world flavor," Wingstop's dynamic and accelerated growth strategy has led to 1,000 corporate and franchised locations across 40 states

and five countries. The chain, which has a goal of opening 2,500 total locations, recently announced additional international development deals for 100 franchise locations in Saudi Arabia over the next 10 years and 30 locations across Colombia and Panama over the next five years.

Always looking to up its customer experience, Wingstop recently launched voice-activated ordering with menu customization through Amazon Alexa. By speaking simple commands to activate Amazon's cloud-based voice service, customers can place, customize and pay for their orders.

## #45 Boloco

Massachusetts-based Boloco is more than burritos and bowls. Making a choice to be different, the brand strives to give customers the unexpected. The philosophy behind its food is that every ingredient has a purpose.

In addition to its menu, the company is proving it has an even greater purpose. Last year, the brand celebrated one of Boston's greatest baseball heroes, David Ortiz (Big Papi), who announced his retirement following the 2016 season. To honor his career, Boloco partnered with Big Papi's Kitchen and the David Ortiz Children's Fund to present the unique "Big Papi's Kitchen Burrito." Boloco donated \$1 for each burrito sold to the David Ortiz Children's Fund, which provides aid to children needing pediatric care in New England and the Dominican Republic.

"Getting to customize a special burrito for one of our local heroes is a pretty big honor, and to have it go to such a great cause makes it even more special," said John Pepper, CEO and co-founder of Boloco.

With a certified green menu and a commitment to paying a fair wage, the brand is dedicated to using its restaurants to help make the world a better place.



Photo: Schlotzsky's

## #46 Schlotzsky's

After 45 years, Schlotzsky's continues to be one of the most innovative brands in the industry. While it still serves the same The Original sandwich that started it all, the brand continues to evolve and innovate the menu with products that tie back to its Austin roots, such as the addition of smoked brisket as a protein and premium mac 'n' cheese offerings.

For the 10th year in a row, Schlotzsky's finished with positive comps and continues to grow AUVs consistently.

To cap off 2016, the chain opened the first [Schlotzsky's Austin Eatery](#), a prototype that features an innovative culinary menu, digital ordering, beer and wine and a ticketless/ paperless kitchen. The Eatery features mobile ordering kiosks, which the brand is testing to potentially roll out in a larger format.

## #47 Smoothie King

Smoothie King is celebrating its 44th birthday this year and is growing more than ever. The brand opened 100 stores in 2016, with plenty of momentum carrying

into 2017. Aiming to open 125 franchised stores and 11 corporate stores in 2017, the chain ranked first place in the smoothie category on [Entrepreneur's Franchise 500](#) List for the 24th year.

Last year also saw the launch of "The Blend," an online marketing and training tool for all franchisees and corporate team members. It features a communication component and an area where franchisees can share their successes to inspire their peers or simply show others the new, great things they are doing.

Under the leadership of owner and CEO Wan Kim, the company will accelerate growth over the next three years, with plans to surpass 1,000 global units within the next year and a half.

## #48 Jersey Mike's Subs

In 2016, Jersey Mike's celebrated its 60th anniversary, and the brand still is committed to being "A Sub Above," serving the freshest, highest-quality sub sandwich on the planet and giving back to local communities.

Jersey Mike's has more than 1,500 locations open or in development throughout the country. That success has allowed the brand to focus on its mission of giving back. Since 2010, Jersey Mike's locations throughout the country have raised nearly \$18 million for local charities and have distributed more than 1.5 million free sub sandwiches to help numerous causes. In 2016, the company's sixth annual [Jersey Mike's Month of Giving in March](#) raised more than \$4 million for 180 local charities throughout the country.

The brand remains at the forefront of technology and was one of the first in the

industry to create a single proprietary, fully integrated technology platform. More tech innovation is on tap for 2017.

## #49 Wow Bao

The Chicago-based Wow Bao is finding its stride with nontraditional spaces — including those in sports arenas, college campuses and universities.

Because of the brand's simple steam method, food can be prepared and held in a steam table, leading to operational ease and delicious food. While Wow Bao's menu focuses on traditional Chinese flavors such as Teriyaki Chicken, Spicy Mongolian Beef and Coconut Custard as a sweet bao, it also is experimenting with more American flavors — chocolate and seasonal pumpkin.

In 2016, the brand continued to expand and innovate. In addition to opening locations, it began using mobile app, self-ordering kiosks with facial recognition. While it sounds futuristic, this innovation is a system designed by Nextep Systems that asks customers if they would like to save their orders and, if so, by phone number or by facial recognition. Their orders are saved in this system, and the next time the customers visit the store, they will be asked if they would like their last orders.



Photo: Wow Bao



## #50 Tijuana Flats

Tijuana Flats continues to push the envelope with its “Anything Goes Approach to Hot Sauce and Life in General.” The brand is not afraid to take chances — whether it is through its unusual limited-time offers, such as the Cheeseburger Taco; bold messaging, as seen in the “Give You the Bird” ground turkey campaign; or with its design of a Tijuana “Turnt Up” Millenia location in Florida, featuring:

- A variety of new craft beers and sodas.
- Seasonal flavored lemonade (such as Habanero Lemonade).
- Grab-n-go items, such as salsa, guacamole and queso.
- And a focus on energy-efficient equipment and environmentally friendly processes.

Over the next few months, Tijuana Flats will open similar locations in Champions Gate, Celebration and St. Augustine, Florida.

In an effort to create two new revenue streams, Tijuana Flats tested delivery and catering last year. After seeing successful sales results, the chain will roll out both services to all units.

For delivery, the chain relies on UberEATS, saying that operationally the ordering process and implementation were easy. Its operators requested to add delivery to their mix, according to the company.

## #51 Cowboy Chicken

Cowboy Chicken has experienced significant growth over the last several years. With the recent introduction of a new restaurant prototype and branding,

the 24-unit company has development agreements in place that will result in 110 restaurants across the United States.

Late last year, Cowboy Chicken announced its largest franchise agreement to date, a 30-store agreement to expand to California, and also launched the [Cowboy Chicken app](#). Features include order-ahead, loyalty and payment components. Customers can track their purchases and receive a \$5 credit for every \$50 spent, as well as receive a free birthday treat and other offers year-round.

## #52 Firehouse Subs

Firehouse Subs continues to bring the heat to the fast casual world. This year, the Florida-based chain is looking to surpass 1,100 locations.

With a menu mixed with hot and cold subs, the brand’s commitment to excellent customer service in addition to food excellence is proving to be a successful recipe. But don’t think for one minute that Firehouse Subs is planning to slow down. It is looking for owners in markets across the country and offers an aggressive development incentive in select markets.

In addition to traditional locations, the brand is ready to expand into airports, military bases and college campuses. Look for 2017 to be another red-hot year for Firehouse Subs.



Photo: iStock.com

## #53 Charleys Philly Steaks

The Charleys Philly Steaks brand has consistently grown 10 to 20 percent over the past decade and opened 41 stores in 2016. The chain, which is expecting to grow total revenue in 2017 by at least 10 percent, is focused on opening locations inside shopping centers as well as freestanding locations.

In an effort to boost sales, Charleys added menu boards featuring new product quality messaging, updated food photography and a streamlined menu, in seven of its Army and Air Force Exchange System locations. Each saw an increase in check average, customer traffic, total sales and speed of service, while customer complaints dropped significantly.

Although Charleys’ bread and butter is its cheesesteaks, it branched out this year into chicken fingers with its “Charleys Chicken Fingers & Cheesesteaks” brand, serving hand-battered chicken fingers alongside the brand’s famous cheesesteaks, gourmet fries and signature lemonades. The first two locations opened in the area of Columbus, Ohio, but the chain will have 16 units open by the end of the year.

## #54 Tropical Smoothie Cafe

Over the past several years, Tropical Smoothie Cafe has evolved from an emerging fast casual brand to an industry leader. Celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2017, the brand recently achieved its fifth consecutive year of positive comp sales and signed 160 franchise agreements in

2016, positioning it for further growth in the coming years.

Last year, the brand achieved significant growth nationwide, opening its 500th cafe and expanding its presence in markets throughout the country, including Charleston, Albuquerque, Dallas, Houston and southern California.

During 2016, Tropical Smoothie Cafe kicked off a prominent brand refresh, announcing a new logo and new restaurant design in an effort to reflect the company's evolution since its founding in 1997. The new design exudes a relaxed coastal atmosphere and was designed to enhance the consumer experience and better align the dining environment with the brand's culture.

Design elements reinforce transparency in regard to food preparation, with an open concept kitchen as well as a smoothie bar where customers can watch the creation of their smoothies.

## #55 Rosati's Pizza

Rosati's Pizza is all about winning.

With its mantra of "Win Every Day," the pizza brand is growing faster than ever. Known for its vast menu of sandwiches, salads, wings and appetizers, the chain has sold more than 80 franchises in the



Photo: Rosati's Pizza

past 18 months, expanding into Iowa, Indiana, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Arizona, North Carolina and Texas.

The 200-unit chain, which offers sit-down and fast casual service models, opened 11 stores in 2016 and has 20 on the 2017 agenda.

A big reason behind this growth is Daniel Perillo III, the president of franchising. Since joining the brand in April 2015, he has sold more than 100 franchises with \$0 spent on advertising for new franchises. Perillo has implemented new systems and structures for new and existing stores while rebranding the 50-year-old Rosati's logo and store design.

## #56 Rubio's Coastal Grill

Over the past year, Rubio's Coastal Grill has continued its expansion journey, opening 15 restaurants in 2016, including the company's first locations on the East Coast.

In addition, the company redesigned nearly 35 of its current restaurants to reflect the brand's evolution beyond its Original Fish Taco and represent its vast coastal cuisine menu. Following its commitment to serve food that not only tastes great, but that guests also feel great about eating, in spring 2016, the company began serving only all-natural chicken raised without antibiotics and natural bacon without nitrates.

In an effort to stay ahead of evolving consumer expectations for simple ingredients and transparency on menus, Rubio's also announced plans to remove artificial flavors and caramel coloring from

its food, as well as introduce all-natural steak in 2017.

In addition to espousing an innovative food philosophy, Rubio's does its part to preserve waterways and oceans, using sustainable seafood in nearly all of its seafood dishes, as well as utilizing recycled materials and eco-friendly packaging.

## #57 Zoup!

Since 1998, Zoup! has been a leader in the soup category with strong customer engagement and menu development that reflects what customers want — even before they know they want it. That is part of the reason the chain recently passed the 100-unit mark.

The company plans to open an additional 20 units in 2017 in U.S. markets spanning as far west as Oregon, as far east as Massachusetts and as far south as Tennessee.

In another effort to get its soup into the bellies of as many people as possible, the chain has created a line of all-natural broths sold online and at more than 3,000 specialty markets and major grocers, including Kroger, Meijer, Albertsons and Publix.

Growing the brand isn't the only goal at Zoup!, however. It also wants to help feed the hungry, which is why franchise owners celebrate National Soup Month. In 2016, franchise owners participated in a systemwide initiative that raised nearly \$100,000 for Feeding America and the Breakfast Club of Canada. Money raised was donated to individual food banks, pantries and schools in the communities where franchisees do business.





Photo: FastCasual.com

## #58 Rise Biscuits & Donuts

Not only is Rise's combination of biscuits and donuts unique in bringing together sweet and savory offerings, but it also does so in an underserved, rapidly growing corner of the fast casual market.

Rise is innovative but nimble, attentive to trends in both food and technology. A sincerely chef-driven concept, Rise is aligned with fast casual's move toward authenticity and real food. The brand is putting resources into building a culture of love and respect.

By using Lean and Kaizen management practices, for example, it was able to tighten the procedures and also incorporate employee ideas at the store level. Additionally, full implementation of Cuit enterprise software system for restaurants focused managers on variation from theoretical food costs, helped improve food cost margins and allowed the brand to compare margins across all stores in the Rise system.

## #59 The Pie Hole

The Pie Hole is proving to be a unique concept in a high-growth market segment. With four locations opening in 2016 and 10 more planned for 2017, the Los Angeles-based American pie and coffee shop is bringing its made-from-

scratch sweet and savory pies to the East Coast, beginning in North Carolina.

In addition to U.S. expansion, the concept has signed two international franchise deals that will take it to Japan and Qatar.

Its focus on organic ingredients helped it gain national exposure, including being featured on the Cooking Channel's "Unique Eats" and being named "Top 12 Best Pies in America" by Conde Naste Traveler.

The menu includes sweet and savory pie flavors, including Mexican Chocolate Pie, Shepherd's Pie and a Mac 'n' Cheese Pie.

## #60 Crushed Red

Crushed Red crushed 2016. The brand opened its first restaurant in 2012, began franchising in 2014 and launched several development initiatives last year.

Innovations included catering, delivery, online ordering and a completely new menu item — Folded Flats, cold sandwiches made from pizza dough.

In addition to its operational improvements, Crushed Red made a few major business moves. In August, for example, it announced a franchise development agreement to open a minimum of 20 locations in four states. The deal included Crushed Red's first area representatives, who will open locations in Oklahoma, northern Texas, Kansas and Arkansas. The first of 20 locations is expected to open in spring 2017 in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

To help grow customer satisfaction, Crushed Red is launching an #EngagedEating secret rewards program, in which guests who remain off their phones during their lunches could be rewarded with cards for free menu items.



Photo: Fuzzy's Taco Shop

## #61 Fuzzy's Taco Shop

Fuzzy's Taco Shop is expanding its presence both nationally and in local markets. The Fort Worth-based brand was able to partner with 14 franchisees and open 24 locations in 2016. With 113 Fuzzy's Taco Shop locations operating across 14 states, it will open 34 to 36 locations in 2017.

In addition to the new locations, in 2017 the brand will implement online ordering, receipt-based customer surveys and a new website. These new initiatives follow the implementation of digital menu boards in all Fuzzy locations, which was completed in 2016. This innovation not only allowed greater flexibility in pricing, but also returned tremendous results as marketing tools to promote specific menu items, according to the company.

## #62 UFood Grill

A variety of components are at work in helping UFood Grill reach its goal of 100 locations within the next four years. A menu that features all items under 700 calories and the use of new facial-recognition technology are just two of them.

With 18 locations, and 25 more planned for 2017, CEO Salvatore Rincione's innovative vision led to a redesign that is obviously working. UFood Grill's "Good for

U” menu offers customers a healthy and delicious dining option with items such as panini, burgers, wraps, salads and bowls. It also offers breakfast all day and entrees such as steak tips, chicken and shrimp.

To provide customers with speedy and accurate service, UFood Grill uses self-serve kiosks featuring facial recognition. Customers can at one of two kiosks or may place orders at the cashier counter.

“Every quick-serve and fast casual restaurant can benefit from facial recognition,” said Tommy Woycik, president of Nextep, the company that developed the technology.

The brand plans to include kiosks in all new locations, which include two company-owned street locations on Long Island this year.

## #63 Fresh To Order

Fresh To Order continues to solidify and grow its position not just as the pioneer of the “fast-fine” segment, but also as a leader by pushing the boundaries in food, service, technology and facilities.

In 2016, the brand continued to combine the quality of food found in casual and fine-dining with the operating platform and price point of fast casual, while offering significant points of difference, including made-from-scratch cooking and authentic recipes created by its chefs. Chefs fire-grill all of the fresh, raw proteins — salmon, calamari, prime steak, tuna and chicken — only after the guest orders to ensure that all products are as fresh and flavorful as they possibly can be.

In an effort to evolve the menu to accommodate flavor trends and its guests’

palates, Fresh To Order launched more adventurous flavors and smaller portions in 2016. Menu additions included the Grilled Georgia Peaches and Brie Salad, a Slow-Roasted Brown Sugar Pork Panini, a Salmon Burger and a Grilled Salmon Chef Small Plate featuring coconut curry or black bean orange sauce.

While 2016 focused on the menu, 2017 will be about growth. The brand will partner with acclaimed restaurateur Charles Hensley, who plans to open two units in the Indianapolis market in 2017, as part of a 10-store agreement.

During his nine-year stint as CEO of a 19-unit franchise of McAlister’s Deli, Hensley was named the concept’s Franchisee of the Year twice.

## #64 Pei Wei

Pei Wei has made some big changes over the past year, including hiring the former COO of the nation’s seventh-largest restaurant operator, John Hedrick, as CEO. Hedrick helped increase performance at the company’s 1,300 Pizza Hut and Wendy’s restaurants through an employee-first mentality, and he has similar plans for Pei Wei’s 200 locations in 21 states.

Pei Wei began rebranding last year to connect better with customers through a “flavor with purpose” mission focused



Photo: FastCasual.com

on “mindfully sourced” ingredients. It launched a mobile app, deployed digital menu boards and opened its first Asian location in South Korea.

“We are thrilled to open our first Pei Wei restaurant in Asia and are looking forward to serving delicious food to the South Korean consumers in a modern, practical and efficient setting,” said Steve Winters, director of operations for Pei Wei globally. “We believe that our partner ELX will do a fantastic job operating the brand in South Korea.”

In addition to the international expansion, Pei Wei pledged \$10,000 to No Kid Hungry in 2016 and donated 300 meals to the Phoenix-based Boys & Girls Club. It is expanding its efforts this year to also benefit Florida and Dallas, two significant Pei Wei markets.

## #65 Pita Pit

Pita Pit is leading the fast casual industry toward the creation of a healthier alternative to fast food by offering a variety of combinations of meats, toppings, vegetables, sauces and spreads. After celebrating its 600th global store opening, launching a “Fresh Grilled, Flavor Filled” brand positioning and opening more than 50 locations, Pita Pit’s 2016 achievements may seem hard to top. The brand, however, is up for the challenge. It is planning to hit the 1,000-unit mark by 2018.

Pita Pit’s noteworthy growth over the last two decades stems from the brand’s strong partnerships with driven, entrepreneurial franchise owners, including expanded presence in major markets such as Orange County, Kansas City, Atlanta and Houston. More than 23 percent of all Pita Pit franchisees are

classified as multiunit owners, a number that is projected to grow into 2017. This year, the brand plans to reconstruct its digital ecosystem, which will include major modifications to the mobile app, loyalty platform and website.

## #66 Asian Box

With rapid expansion plans on the horizon throughout all of California, Asian Box is on the move. With one unit already open, Asian Box has an additional six new projects scheduled for 2017. The 6-year-old brand has five locations in the San Francisco Bay Area and southern California, offering customizable “boxes” with a base of salad, rice, or noodles, and a variety of toppings.

A leader in staff retention, CEO Frank Klein cares deeply about attracting and retaining top talent and has developed practices that position Asian Box as a leader in the competitive landscape.

For instance, Klein has augmented his staffing model by offering days off to employees who, for whatever reason, just don't think they will be productive on a particular day. The allotment of these days allows them to take that day off as a flex day without losing their jobs.

“We have a fund for this to pay them on those days,” he said during a session at the annual [Fast Casual Executive Summit](#).

## #67 Uncle Maddio's Pizza

After nearly nine years in business, Uncle Maddio's Pizza continues to be a leader in the fast casual pizza segment. Most recently, the brand introduced a [menu](#)



Photo: FastCasual.com

[board](#) featuring four on-trend and classic pizzas, renamed the “Chef Creations,” as well as a selection of featured handcrafted salads and Foldwiches, the brand's trademarked toasted sandwich.

Uncle Maddio's last year also enhanced its loyalty system — Maddio's Rewards — to increase customer awareness and functionality. Featuring a loyalty marketing program, it rewards guests on frequency and spend. This year, Uncle Maddio's began offering online ordering, third-party delivery and full integration of a Brinks POS system.

## #68 Juice It Up!

Juice It Up!, a raw juice bar and handcrafted smoothie franchise, is winning with customers by demonstrating its passion for their health and well-being.

The chain's 2016 launch of custom-made bowls is resonating with customers, who love having the option of transforming any classic smoothie into a meal with nutrient-dense toppings and choosing from well-known superfruits, including acai and pitaya.

With 88 locations open in four states, the company is continuing its pursuit of steady expansion across the nation and is on track to add at least 12 additional stores by the end of 2017.

Conscious eating is a big focus for the brand this year as it plans to add

probiotics to the menu, as well as collagen proteins in boosts and retail supplements. Immunity, gut health and overall guest wellness are huge focal points in 2017.

## #69 Malawi's Pizza

[Malawi's Pizza](#) is truly living up to its tagline of “Pizza with a Purpose.”

In addition to providing fresh, chef-created pizzas, this globally minded fast casual brand simultaneously donates meals to children in the African nation of Malawi. For every meal purchased at a Malawi's Pizza restaurant, a meal is donated to a child in Malawi through its Meal for Meal exchange program. The three Malawi's Pizza restaurants in the U.S. have provided nearly 800,000 meals to needy children throughout the last six years.

“Customers can feel good about their decision to dine with us because it supports the fundamental well-being of others,” CEO and culinary chef Kent Andersen said. “We believe in nurturing not only the people of Malawi, but also within our own community. Pizza with a Purpose is more than a marketing tactic; it is part of who we are as a company.”

The owners of [Malawi's Pizza](#) hope to contribute 1 million meals by early 2017. The brand has multistore development agreements in place for several other regions.

## #70 Nando's Peri-Peri Chicken

Nando's Peri-Peri jumped into the retail business in 2016, expanding its sauces to



more than 10,000 retailers this year. Lovers of Nando's Peri-Peri sauce can purchase the African Bird's Eye Chili Pepper sauce at places such as Safeway, Kroger, Fresh Market, Publix and Wal-Mart.

Nando's "supersauce" is just one of the reasons customers have been flocking to this Portuguese-inspired eatery. When friends Fernando Duarte and Robbie Brozin opened their first restaurant in 1987, they had no idea how popular the rich flavors would become. With more than 1,200 Nando's Peri-Peri restaurants across five continents, the secret super sauce seems to be working.

Although there are only 30 units in the U.S. — all locations in and around Washington, D.C., and Chicago — more cities are in the works.

Specializing in local chicken that is delivered fresh, and never frozen, Nando's marinates its chicken with a variety of flavor and heat combinations so it appeals to all palates. To appeal to the masses, the brand also offers gluten-free, kosher and vegetarian options.

## #71 Pincho Factory

Pincho Factory saw big growth in 2016. The brand, which features a flavorful and unique twist on traditional burgers and street food, started the year with three locations and ended with nine.

Co-founders Nedal and Nizar Ahmad and Otto Othman have added seasoned veterans Jim Mizes from Blaze Pizza and former Wingstop executive Andy Howard to its board of directors to help them grow the brand. However, the founders are focused on the vision that inspired them to



Photo: FastCasual.com

create the brand — providing quality and transparency, while also focusing on fine-dining hospitality and building a company people are passionate about.

Their transparency, along with a few quirky marketing ideas, has created a solid social media following. The brand, for example, used dating app Tinder to connect with its customers. The free campaign resulted in hundreds of customer transactions and thousands of replies on social media, not to mention tons of press and attention for the up-and-coming brand.

Pincho Factory rolled out Restaurant365 to help better manage financials, including real-time food and labor costs. It also launched Jolt to ensure its operations are in sync when it comes to training, recipes and plating specs.

## #72 Potbelly Sandwich Shop

Potbelly Sandwich Shop, which opened 30 locations in 2016, delivered an adjusted net income growth of 38 percent, grew shares by 50 percent and increased total revenues 8.1 percent to \$103.8 million from \$96 million.

This year won't be any slower, with 40 more locations planned to open in 2017, along with a mobile app launch featuring payments, loyalty and order-

ahead functions. The app also enables customers to customize their meals, find their nearest Potbelly location and send digital gift cards.

"We remain focused on executing on the fundamentals of our business to drive sales growth and profitability through targeted investments and disciplined cost management," said Aylwin Lewis, chairman and CEO of Potbelly Corp.



Photo: FastCasual.com

## #73 Saladworks

Saladworks celebrated 30 years in business last year, but the company acts more like a nimble startup with a focus on technology and innovation. Throughout the year, Saladworks saw major changes, including hiring Patrick Sugrue as CEO. He helped inspire other changes, including menu enhancements, interior design upgrades and the implementation of a strengthened loyalty program put in place to reward top fans.

The Saladworks Rewards loyalty app, which provides fans with personalized offers, launched last year. The company also unveiled the Saladworks Life Bar kiosks, which give guests a create-your-own ordering experience from start to finish, allowing them to easily personalize their orders.

The upgrades are already paying off; systemwide sales in 2016 were up nearly 8 percent over 2015.

Under Sugrue's leadership, Saladworks

looked at 2016 with a focus on strategic planning. While only opening two units, the organization set its sights on increasing the frequency of loyal consumers and bringing in a new segment of brand ambassadors.

The brand plans to open 18 units in 2017.

## #74 Costa Vida Fresh Mexican Grill

Costa Vida is proving that high-quality brands can thrive in any economic environment.

Its mantra is “We serve amazing,” and it’s more than just words. The chain strives to deliver fresh, nutritious and delicious food that is made the old-fashioned way ... from scratch. And people love it.

The 85-unit brand has seen consistent sales growth over the past seven years, and 2016 was no exception. Even in an environment where many brands are celebrating near-flat sales, Costa Vida opened 11 units in 2016 and increased sales 4.88 percent.

Over the next few years, Costa Vida plans to open 500 stores and has been putting in the legwork to make that happen. It hired a new CMO and key support staff, for example, and is rolling out a smart scaling strategy, as well as building a new corporate office to open in Q2.

Although it is primarily concentrated in the West, the brand has locations popping up as far east as Florida. With 14 stores already in development, it is quickly gaining momentum throughout the U.S. as well as in Canada.

## #75 Pokeworks

Pokeworks is combining high-quality seafood with traditional Hawaiian ingredients and is on track for major expansion in 2017.

Using ingredients such as furikake, mango and macadamia nuts, Pokeworks is proving that Americans are ready for raw fish salad, said Kevin Hsu, co-founder of the fast casual concept based in California.

“People enjoy culturally diverse foods,” Hsu said. “In addition, poke meets current consumer desires for healthier fast casual options and a greater awareness for well-sourced ingredients.”

Pokeworks is expanding this year to New York City, Seattle, Chicago and Washington, D.C., and is developing both corporate and franchised locations. Hsu said the brand will continue to drive consumer awareness by using a mix of marketing, public relations and other initiatives.

“We’re in a prime position for growth as consumers desire healthier alternatives to traditional fast food with a preference for reduced carbon footprint and naturally sustainable food,” he said.

Marco’s, which is known for its focus on its franchisees and employees, recently established the Slice of Support non-profit organization, designed to provide financial support for Marco’s Pizza team members who are facing personal or family hardship.

Technology has become a driving force behind the chain’s success. It has an internal online training platform, Marco’s University Online, which pulls in data from various sources, including the POS system, guest Intelligence system and an internal voice system. The chain is also developing a mobile app that is optimized for the online training program, allowing its younger generation of hourly employees to complete their training in a way that’s more convenient for them.

Marco’s Pizza is aiming to have 930 locations open by the end of 2017.



Photo: Marco's Pizza

## #76 Marco's Pizza

Marco's Pizza experienced a record-breaking year in 2016, ranking No. 2 on Forbes' Top 10 Franchises to Invest and surpassing more than 775 restaurants. The chain signed 132 franchise agreements, built 120 Marco's Pizza Stores and had fewer than eight closures.



## ***Andrew Gruel, CEO of Slapfish, Two Birds and Butterleaf***

Chef, entrepreneur, CEO, reality TV star: Those are just a few of Andrew Gruel's titles. The founder of Slapfish launched his "sexy seafood" concept as a food truck in 2011, in Los Angeles. He since has turned the business into an eight-unit franchised concept with plans to have 15 locations open by the end of the year.

Just as he used food trucks as a low-cost way to launch his first business, Gruel is on trend with another innovative business practice — food halls. He opened Two Birds — a farm-fresh Jidori chicken concept founded on the idea that "simple is better" — and Butterleaf — a vegetarian concept for nonvegetarians — inside Trade Food Hall in Orange County. Because the hall is in a retail strip and houses seven other fast casual concepts, operational and startup costs are lower, said Gruel, who describes his venture as "upscale market meets food court."

Both concepts are based around high-quality menu items: Two Birds, for example, uses only farm-fresh Jidori chicken raised in southern California. And Butterleaf's veggies come from Melissa's Produce, a U.S. distributor of specialty and organic fresh produce. Although it may sound like an expensive way to operate, Gruel is able to control costs by keeping his menus simple.

"We can be specific with our ingredients and order in bulk," said Gruel, who starred in the TV show "Say It to My Face" on FYI, allowing restaurateurs to respond to online critics. "This helps us save money and also forces us to make eco-conscious decisions about what foods we serve our customers."



## ***Michael Lastoria, CEO of &pizza***

Whether he's on a panel speaking to his peers about business practices or motivating his employees, Michael Lastoria commands attention. His long hair and hippie style help him stand out in a sea of suits and sports jackets, but his mantra and passion inspire people to follow him.

"The idea for &pizza was to create a unique brand that was design-driven, brand-led and — most importantly — morally sound," the CEO of &pizza said. "We wanted to create a company that was built to serve and reflect the communities where we would set up shop. That's why we designed each store differently and why we do things as a company that's very right for us and follows our four core values, which we talk about day in and day out."

Lastoria launched &pizza in 2012 in Washington, D.C., with the following ethos: to celebrate oneness, make it personal, keep it fresh and elevate everything.

It's working.

The chain, which landed a \$25 million investment a few months ago from Avalt, has grown to 20 units with a presence in Baltimore and Philadelphia and soon will open in New York City.

Lastoria, a member of Business for a Fair Minimum Wage, believes it is important to take care of his 490 tribe members (employees). He has played a significant role in the fight to raise the minimum wage in Washington, D.C. For example, last year he raised wages in D.C. to \$11.75 an hour to surpass the District of Columbia's minimum wage. In Maryland and Pennsylvania, &pizza opened its first Baltimore and Philadelphia locations by opting for a starting hourly pay of \$10.50, above Maryland's \$8.25 minimum and Pennsylvania's \$7.25 minimum.



# Top 24 Executives



## ***Marla Topliff, President of Rosati's Pizza***

Marla Topliff not only oversees Rosati's Pizza, a thriving 200-unit pizza chain, but also is a huge supporter of the restaurant industry in general. She is chairwoman of the National Restaurant Association, a member of the Pizzeria Industry Council, a strong advocate for No Kid Hungry, a member of the advisory board for the Illinois Restaurant Association and is on the membership committee and ambassador for the International Franchise Association.

Topliff is an advocate for small-business owners and isn't afraid to speak out against regulations that she believes would harm industry growth.

"Currently the franchise industry is facing new threats from various proposals coming out of Washington such as the Joint Employer Bill, which could severely jeopardize the entire franchise model," she wrote in a Forbes commentary published this year.

Although Topliff has been in the restaurant business for 20 years, she began her career in marketing. Rosati's was her biggest client before the chain wooed her into leaving the marketing firm to become the brand's director of marketing. She took over as president in 1999.

"Being an 'outsider,' I had to spend time in the stores training and learning every position so I could understand the business better," said Topliff, who opened 11 stores in 2016 and plans to add 20 in 2017. "A journey I truly loved — it was an amazing education."

She apparently has found her calling.



## ***Geoff Alexander, Executive Vice President of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, Inc.***

Launching and growing restaurant concepts is Geoff Alexander's specialty. The Executive Vice President of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc. and president of Wow Bao has had his hands on a variety of other brands, including Shaw's Crab House, Mity Nice Bar & Grill, Big Bowl, Vong's, Vong's Thai Kitchen, Tucci Benucc and Frankie's Scaloppine.

Since 2009, however, his focus has been on Lettuce Entertain You's Wow Bao, which features the steamed bao — meat- and vegetable-filled "hot Asian buns."

Under Alexander's leadership, Wow Bao has grown to include five company-owned stores, five licensed stores, two hotel affiliates and two catering partners. A leader in technology, Alexander has implemented mobile and desktop online ordering, added bicycle delivery and domestic shipping, installed self-ordering kiosks with facial recognition, launched a mobile gift card and loyalty platform and turned Wow Bao into a well-respected Chicago social media influencer.

Wow Bao was one of the first Chicago brick-and-mortar restaurants to use a food truck, hitting the streets in 2011 with its BAO-Mobile.

Recently, Alexander has overseen Wow Bao's inclusion into NFL stadiums, MLB stadiums, university campuses and airports and more than 50 grocers selling Wow Bao's frozen retail product line.

# Top 24 Executives



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

After spending the past eight years leading the digital and technology efforts at Dickey's Barbecue as CIO, Laura Rea Dickey took over in 2016 as the chain's CEO. Her husband, Roland Dickey Jr., left the role to assume the CEO title of the brand's parent company, and Laura Rea was just the woman to fill his shoes.

After all, her background in marketing, training and information technology has equipped her to run the nearly 600-unit chain, which is still in growth mode. She is in talks with potential franchisees, for example, to bring the Texas-style barbecue to Asia, Europe and possibly Canada.

As CIO, Dickey made sure the chain was leading the industry when it came to technology. She was responsible in 2015 for implementing Smoke Stack, the chain's cloud-based, big data system that collects customer data. It has made data-driven business insights quick and easy to attain, allowing the chain to focus efforts on using data instead of manually analyzing it, Dickey said.

"This significant improvement to our reporting and analytics environment translates into more dollars saved and earned," Dickey said.



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

Carl Howard knows how to identify and build on a concept's strengths. He has positioned Fazoli's, which once was on the brink of bankruptcy, to stand out among other fast casual concepts by providing high-quality food at a fair value.

Howard's turnaround story started in 2008, when he joined the brand as CEO, but he keeps improving the ending. With his leadership, Howard has elevated the Fazoli's menu and customer experience by ditching artificial flavors, rolling out new menu items and changing the service model. While customers still order at the counter, employees deliver orders to the table on real plates — as opposed to paper products — to create an even better dining experience for guests.

Even with Fazoli's recent shift toward high-quality ingredients, the brand still is leading the fast casual industry with food costs as low as 23.1 percent, which has allowed Fazoli's to maintain delivering a "\$10 dining experience for \$7".

Since Howard joined the brand, Fazoli's has experienced tremendous growth, boasting 16 consecutive quarters of same-store sales growth. Franchisees also report nearly three times the industry average growth rate. During the brand turnaround, average unit volumes increased by \$300,000 to approximately \$1.1 million — a 35 percent increase in four years.

# Top 24 Executives



## ***Randy Garutti, CEO of Shake Shack***

Randy Garutti's story isn't new, but the executive credited with helping transform Shake Shack from a hot dog cart in New York to a \$1.8 billion global empire continues to make headlines. Although his claim to fame is as growth driver — Shake Shack spans 100 units and seven countries — Garutti isn't just about making a buck.

He also is known for being passionate about paying hourly workers above minimum wage and giving them access to health care and benefits. He approved manager pay raises in December 2016, for example, a move that was on top of the companywide increase to the starting hourly wage implemented at the beginning of the year.

"We fully expect that labor pressures will continue," Garutti said during a recent earnings call. "Minimum wages are up in the majority of our current and future markets, and we continue to invest in our leaders at all levels to prepare for the growth ahead."

To help compensate, Garutti raised menu prices late last year by 1.8 percent, saying that although he doesn't expect another price increase this year, the chain will continue to pay managers better.

"We're playing offense," he said on the call. "We're building the best team we can to continue to ramp up growth. You look at 40 percent sales growth that we posted for last year; we're doing that with the great human beings who lead our restaurants. And we're going to pay them."



## ***Steve Ells, Co-founder and CEO of Chipotle***

Chipotle CEO Steve Ells, as usual, received a plethora of nominations to our Top 25 list. The reasoning behind this year's nominations were a little different, however, considering the brand has faced a couple of major struggles, including food-safety issues.

Ells has remained calm, assuring employees and consumers that he has everything under control. As one nominator put it: "Steve stood firm and strong in the face of a major food disaster. He was transparent and accountable. He addressed and corrected the problem, made amends, and took ownership. That is an example to follow."

In hopes of regaining consumer trust, Ells is on a mission to prove that he is doing everything in his power to ensure that Chipotle is a safe place to eat. That included hiring a food-safety expert to conduct a comprehensive reassessment of the chain's practices and extending the scope of its food-safety initiative.

"In late 2015, I made a promise to all of our customers that we would become an industry leader in food safety," Ells said. "In keeping with that promise, we've made advancements that have reinvented the way we manage our entire supply chain and care for our customers in our restaurants, while remaining true to our commitment to serve fresh, delicious food made from ingredients raised with care."



# Top 24 Executives



## ***Blaine Hurst, President of Panera Bread Company***

Before taking on the role of president late last year, Blaine Hurst held a number of senior leadership positions at Panera since joining the company in 2010. Most recently, he served as EVP and chief transformation and growth officer, where he was the driving force behind Panera's biggest growth initiatives, including delivery, catering and the evolution of Panera 2.0, a suite of technology updates aimed at improving the customer experience.

"Blaine has been instrumental in our multiyear efforts to transform Panera into a better competitive alternative with expanded growth opportunities," said Ron Shaich, Panera's chairman and CEO. "Blaine is well known and respected within the restaurant industry and the Panera family. Both colleagues and franchisees value his innovative thinking, the strength of the teams he's built and his ability to drive transformative change."

During his multiyear tenure at Panera, Hurst also has served as the senior executive responsible for oversight of a range of functions, including manufacturing, supply chain, information technology, digital, human resources and consumer packaged goods.



## ***Jim Mizes, President and CEO of Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza***

Jim Mizes is a busy guy. As president and COO of this year's No. 1 brand on the Fast Casual Top 100 — Blaze Pizza — he has overseen the chain's growth for the past three years.

The brand reported 175 locations doing \$185 million, signed a multiyear endorsement deal last year with global icon and NBA All-Star LeBron James and opened 70 units. And that was just in 2016.

Mizes predicted that the chain will exceed \$292 million by the end of the year and in another five years will surpass the \$1 billion milestone.

Although he is focused on Blaze, it hasn't stopped him from mentoring young entrepreneurs with big aspirations. He sits on the board of directors, for example, of Pincho Factory, a small fast casual brand hoping to become as successful as Blaze.

"We have truly understood everything he is currently doing at Blaze," Otto Othman, CMO and co-founder of Pincho Factory, said about the mentorship. "To be able to grow so quickly while maintaining the quality and culture that Blaze has is amazing. He truly changed the negative perception that franchising has by building such an amazing company with partners that truly take care of their people."



## ***Michael Mabry, COO of Mooyah***

While most leaders talk about having an open-door policy or a "real talk" attitude, few live up to it quite as well as Mooyah's COO, Michael Mabry.

For years, he has been keeping his employees and franchisees up to date via his letters that share his insights about the brand and industry, but he took it a step further late last year when he executed an Ask Me Anything session on Reddit. Users inquired about everything from his approach to identifying the right franchise partners to his underwear preference between boxers or briefs (spoiler alert: it's actually boxer briefs).

The thread was even nominated as one of the top posts for 2016 on the fast-food sub-Reddit page.

"Michael is the embodiment of our Seriously Fun brand culture," wrote one nominator. "From his wacky socks to his signature selfies with Team Members he meets on his restaurant visits, his fun-loving personality is always on display. Michael encourages our team to let our unique personalities shine when building relationships with our Franchisees, knowing that trust and authenticity are crucial when building a successful Franchisee/franchisor relationship. Michael's commitment to not just the brand, but to the people who live and breathe Mooyah every day, is what true leadership is all about."

# Top 24 Executives



## **Jeff Sinelli, CEO of Which Wich Superior Sandwiches**

If you ask Jeff Sinelli what has made him such a success, the Which Wich CEO probably will tell you that it's his ability to hustle and BS his way into or out of any situation.

"I learned how to hustle," he said during his keynote presentation at the 2017 Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit. "You've always got to be on the hustle. If you can't dazzle them with your brilliance, dazzle them with your bullshit."

He did just that, ending up with an eight-page spread in a trade magazine about Which Wich before even opening one unit. That was in 2003, and although Sinelli started the brand with little more than a lot of talk, he pounced on that buzz and has grown Which Wich into a 400-unit chain.

He also has used his success as a platform to do good, creating Project PB&J two years ago to help battle hunger in Dallas and across the country. Under the program, for every PB&J sold in a Which Wich, a PB&J is donated to a local charity and another is banked for a global fund in case of any natural disasters or large need.



## **Nathaniel Ru, Co-founder and co-CEO of sweetgreen**

After failing to find a healthy place to eat, Nathaniel Ru, 31, and his two college friends were inspired to open sweetgreen in 2007. The chain has grown to more than 60 units and has its own event, the sweetlife Festival, which has become the East Coast's largest music and food festival. It features high-profile musicians and food from top chefs, food trucks and local purveyors and farmers. Each year, the festival attracts tens of thousands of attendees, the largest music event in Washington, D.C.

Ru also is known for his innovative outlook when it comes to incorporating technology and innovation into the business operations. Sweetgreen, for example, was one of the first restaurants to add a mobile app, which now accounts for 30 percent of the chain's transactions. It went cashless this past year, and to stay close to customers sweetgreen nearly shutters the corporate office five times per year, encouraging all execs to work in its restaurants.



## **Patrick Sugrue, CEO of Saladworks**

Patrick Sugrue has given Saladworks a second chance. In 2015, the now-94-unit chain was facing bankruptcy, but it has made a comeback under the guidance of Sugrue as CEO.

"You have to be able to fail fast and cheap," Sugrue said during a session at the annual Fast Casual Executive Summit, where he discussed his five-point plan that has helped the brand increase sales by 15 points since 2014. "The story I want to leave with you is that renewal can work."

Believing that strategy drives structure, Sugrue launched numerous upgrades to the brand, including an updated store design, a mobile loyalty app, a food truck and a kiosk ordering system.

That belief has led to the chain reporting that systemwide sales were up nearly 8 percent in 2016, and the 30-year-old brand is on track to open 18 units by the end of the year,

# Top 24 Executives



## ***Samantha Wasser, Co-founder of By Chloe***

A lot has changed since Samantha Wasser partnered two years ago with celebrity chef Chloe Coscarelli to launch their hip vegan bakery in New York City. The chain now has four units and a stand-alone bakery, and Wasser and Coscarelli have parted ways because of a legal dispute. Wasser, however, isn't letting the drama hurt the business.

Serving as the brand's creative director since its inception, Wasser not only has designed a concept that is highly scalable but also has built a huge social following along the way. Its Instagram account, for example, has grown to more than 60,000 users since launching in 2015, allowing the brand to work with social media influencers around the world.

Wasser has used her millennial-focused strategies to align and launch collaborations with other successful food and beverage brands to introduce the By Chloe brand to new subsets of diners, including a dumpling collaboration with Mimi Cheng's and a vegan milkshake collaboration with Black Tap Craft Burgers & Beer.

Both collaborations featured By Chloe-inspired items on their menus, allowing the chain to reach a far wider customer base without the diners even stepping foot into the restaurant.



## ***Prakash Karamchandani & HoChan Jang, Co-founders of Balance Pan-Asian Grille***

To open the first Balance Pan-Asian Grille, Prakash Karamchandani and HoChan Jang not only combined all their savings and borrowed from family, but they also got a credit line from Home Depot.

That was in 2010; they were 26 with their only restaurant experience coming from Jang, who had worked as a child in his parents' Bowling Green, Ohio, restaurant, The China. Those risky moves have paid off, considering the men have grown the brand to three units and reported nearly \$5 million in same-store sales in 2016.

The pair, which has built a modern Asian-inspired menu that changes seasonally, doesn't follow typical business practices. They will never franchise, for example, and have vowed to always pay employees above minimum wage.

Technology is extremely important, and the team has designed kitchens for maximum efficiency. Because the menu changes often, work stations are adaptable to maintain efficiency.

"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."

The men are working on a fourth location in downtown Toledo as well as a flagship location in downtown Cleveland.



# Top 24 Executives



## ***Biju Thomas, Founder & president of Biju's Little Curry Shop***

Although he's not even 50, Biju Thomas already boasts several successful careers. By the time he opened Biju's Little Curry Shop in 2014, the professional chef had cooked for celebrities and top athletes — including Lance Armstrong — wrote best-selling cookbooks and raced as a competitive cyclist.

Those careers inspired him to create Biju's Little Curry Shop, a fast casual concept that focuses on the healthy cuisine Thomas grew up eating in southern India. He moved to the U.S. when he was 10.

"The food that we eat matters," he said. "The customers have to feel good not only when they eat, but when they get home."

Biju's Little Curry Shop has four Colorado locations and was the first in-store, chef-driven concept to open in a Whole Foods Market.

The retail partnership is just a jumping-off point for Thomas, who is launching a line of Indian spices, simmer sauces, flatbreads and grab-and-go beverages that he plans to roll out to retailers nationwide.



## ***Carl Chang, Founder of Pieology Pizzeria***

Carl Chang is on a hot streak. Although he launched Pieology Pizzeria in 2011, 2016 was really his year. He closed a strategic investment from the founders of Panda Restaurant Group and also purchased a competitor, Project Pie. Both deals will help him accelerate growth and get him a step closer to his goal of clinching the title over the fast casual pizza empire.

According to Chang, the deals of 2016 are only the first big match points of many to come for Pieology Pizzeria. The chain is steadily expanding its U.S. footprint, with more than 130 locations in operation and well over 750 commitments throughout the country in various stages of development.

Whether providing lessons to help his brother, Michael Chang, win the Grand Slam title; acquiring, developing and managing over \$1 billion worth of real estate; or blazing the trail in the world of custom pizza, Carl Chang's goal has always been the same: to be the best.

Chang strongly believes that his 35 years of experience and knowledge of the real estate industry will take him to the top.



## ***Jae Kim, Founder of Chi'Lantro***

Born in Seoul, Korea, Jae Kim moved to the United States when he was 12 years old. Growing up as a Californian immigrant raised by a single mother wasn't always easy, but Kim refused to let any of his struggles keep him from aiming high.

In fact, his never-give-up attitude helped him create Chi'Lantro, a barbecue-inspired mobile food truck and full-service catering company, and then land a spot on ABC's "Shark Tank."

After trying out for the show three times, the millennial business owner finally won the chance to pitch his Austin-based concept to the sharks late last year. It ended with business expert Barbara Corcoran making a \$600,000 investment, saying she was impressed with Kim's 25 percent increase in same-store sales from 2015 to 2016.

Before his stint on TV, Kim had put everything he had on the line to achieve his dream of creating his own business. He maxed out his credit cards and used his entire savings to create the successful multi-location business that is Chi'Lantro.



## ***John Vincent, CEO and co-founder of Leon***

John Vincent is a man ahead of his time. In 2004, he and Henry Dimbleby founded Leon, a London-based healthy fast-food chain with the goal of creating “fast food as it would be served in heaven.”

The chain — which has about 50 restaurants throughout the U.K. and one in Amsterdam, and plans to open in the U.S. by the end of the year — offers food options built around the Mediterranean diet. It focuses on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, seeds and unrefined cereals and replaces butter with healthier fats such as olive oil, uses spices and herbs instead of salt to flavor dishes and encourages more chicken and fish.

The 45-year-old visionary is passionate about providing healthy menu options not only at his restaurant but also to the world in general, especially children.

In 2013, for example, he helped draft the School Food Plan to help England’s government improve the food eaten by schoolchildren. The plan contains 17 actions to transform what children eat in schools and how they learn about food. He also was instrumental in launching Cook5, which aims to teach every child in the U.K. how to cook five dishes before the age of 16.

Sustainability is another passion of Vincent, who is a founding member of the Sustainable Restaurant Association, which exists to help restaurants become more sustainable in the way they source their ingredients, engage with their local communities and manage their impacts on the environment.

If that is not enough to focus on, Vincent also helps other business owners, often lending his expertise to executives attending industry events. He will give the keynote address at this year’s [Restaurant Franchising & Innovation Summit in London](#).



## ***Howard Schultz, Executive chairman of Starbucks***

Although Howard Schultz traded in his CEO title this year to focus more on the Starbucks retail brand, his status as the face of the brand is more dominant than ever.

“I’m not leaving the company,” Schultz said. “I’m here every single day. I will help Kevin (Johnson) and the team whenever necessary, but Kevin and the team are in charge.”

Schultz is focused on innovation, design and development of Starbucks Reserve Roastery locations and the expansion of its retail store format. His passion for ensuring that Starbucks is

a leader when it comes to conscious capitalism, however, remains intact.

In a January memo to employees, for example, Schultz said the chain would create 260,000 jobs and hire 10,000 refugees over the next five years. He also stressed his opposition to the president’s proposed wall on the Mexican border and promised employees that they would not lose their health care coverage.

“We are living in an unprecedented time, one in which we are witness to the conscience of our country, and the promise of the American Dream, being called into question,” he wrote. “These uncertain times call for different measures and communication tools than we have used in the past. Kevin (Johnson) and I are going to accelerate our commitment to communicating with you more frequently, including leveraging new technology platforms moving forward.

“I am hearing the alarm you all are sounding that the civility and human rights we have all taken for granted for so long are under attack, and want to use a faster, more immediate form of communication to engage with you on matters that concern us all as partners.”

# Top 24 Executives



## **Aaron Noveshen, Founder of The Culinary Edge & Starbird**

In addition to being the founder of The Culinary Edge — a food innovation agency that creates and launches restaurant concepts — chef Aaron Noveshen is the co-creator of Pacific Catch and Starbird Chicken. Starbird, a fast casual concept that opened last year in Sunnyvale, California, offers a new blueprint for the modern drive-thru that does away with traditional windows and drive-thru lanes, relying on mobile technology and a retail-esque click-and-collect model.

“Our goal is to create the best possible fast-food experience, and reposition the term ‘fast food’ to breed positivity and joy,” Noveshen said. “In doing so, we did extensive research into every aspect of the restaurant experience, from the menu to the experience to the operations and to the technology.”

The chain, which raised nearly \$5 million during its second round of funding, will open a second unit by the end of the year.

“We are working to transform the dull fast-food landscape by utilizing super-premium ingredients and evolving the traditional drive-thru experience with our mobile ordering and car-side delivery app,” said Noveshen, who is director emeritus of the California Restaurant Association and is a former director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association. “The response from the community has been extremely positive, and we are thrilled to expand to a larger audience.”



## **Maira Morales, Corporate executive chef of Schlotzsky's**

As corporate executive chef of Schlotzsky's, Maira Morales not only develops all recipes and limited-time offers for the chain's 372 units, but also leads the research and development department and is the culinary face of the company.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Morales is passionate about traveling the world to educate herself about different foods to incorporate into her recipes.

“Travel as far as you can,” said the chef, who has been featured in numerous television shows on the Travel Channel, Telemundo network, the Cooking Channel and Fox Utilisima network, and is fluent in English and Spanish. “It provides you with a different perspective of life, as you learn from other cultures, cuisines and lifestyle. Your world will be different as you'll see it from someone else's eyes.”

Known as an industry expert, Morales has been featured in a variety of publications and will speak at the 2017 Fast Casual Executive Summit, which will be held Oct. 22-24 in Nashville.



## **John Pepper, CEO of Boloco**

John Pepper took transparency to a new level this year when he published a blog on FastCasual spelling out the company's struggle to survive.

“As the tweeters honestly share, with seeming regret, Boloco really isn't what it used to be — both real and perceived,” he wrote in a blog describing “four years of business hell.” Things were really bad the past two years, Pepper said admitting to waking up several times to a negative bank balance and “at

the lowest of times having to beg our teams to make an extra deposit early in the morning to climb back to zero so the bank wouldn't bounce checks.”

To get the business back on track, Pepper has made many sacrifices, including selling five units, shuttering the corporate office overlooking the Boston Common and cutting his executive team. He is now CFO and controller, CMO, social media intern and HR admin backup, for example, but the one area he didn't shortchange was restaurant staff. In fact, he gave them raises and continues to pay above minimum wage in all units.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, however. For the first time in 15 years, the company was profitable, and that's despite sales continuing to slump versus year ago, Pepper said.

Boloco isn't alone, of course, when it comes to struggling, but what's different about Pepper is that he wasn't afraid to admit his mistakes in hopes of creating a better brand. That is the epitome of a good leader, and one of the many reasons he made our list.



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