

2020 fast casual
TOP 100
MOVERS & SHAKERS

Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment



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Although 2020 isn't quite half over, it's already been a trying year thanks to the outbreak of COVID-19. As I watch the fast casual industry rebuild from the upheaval, however, I know two things about its workers and leaders:

1. They take care of one another.
2. Their innovation, creativity and ingenuity never stop even while facing a pandemic.

The crisis has been especially hard on restaurants, which

normally employ millions of global workers. Instead of closing up shop, however, so many fast casual brands have not only found ways to stay in business by pivoting to online ordering, curbside pick up and delivery, but are also using precious resources to help those in need. From collecting customer donations and creating unique social media campaigns to raise money for out-of-work restaurant employees to giving thousands of dollars worth of food to frontline workers and cutting delivery fees, the giving spirit of this industry is contagious.

And that's exactly what the world needs in times like these. The world could use some positive news as well, which is why we are pleased to introduce this year's class of Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers.

As in years past, we recognize 75 brands and 25 leaders, who aren't afraid to take risks in order to grow their businesses as well as to propel the fast casual industry. Our winners have many things in common. They show innovation on and off the menu and are passionate about expanding their brands while also doing a little good along the way.

Although they share those attributes, they are each "one of a kind," which is how they landed on the list.

Congratulations to our 2020 winners.

Cheers,

Cherryh Cansler

VP of Editorial

Network World Media Group



Cherryh Cansler
VP of Editorial,
Network World Media Group

#1 SWEETGREEN

sweetgreen®

Sweetgreen, a salad-centric fast casual founded in 2007 known for its locally-sourced ingredients, is this year's top brand for a variety of reasons. Innovation when it comes to expanding its reach, not being afraid to test new strategies and leading the industry in employee management are just a few.

Although it opened 15 units last year, the 104-unit chain's real growth stems from the success of "Outpost," a lunch-pickup program available now in nearly 1,000 locations across nine cities. The chain delivers Sweetgreen cuisine at set times to specific areas in which customers have requested via an online request form system. Common locations are office buildings, apartment complexes and fitness centers, so employers and landlords often host the service for workers and residents.

So far, Outpost has more than 100,000 users and should reach about 3,000 more locations this year.

One-on-one delivery is also important to the chain, which is why last year it raised \$150 million dollars to develop an app-based delivery program and also acquired Galley Foods, a Washington, D.C.-based meal service delivering ready-to-eat fresh meals. The move allowed Sweetgreen to leverage Galley Foods' knowledge of logistics technology, live courier operations and high-volume production.

Sweetgreen leadership understands that all of these accomplishments would not be possible or sustainable if the chain didn't have reliable employees to keep everything operating smoothly. And the chain does its best to show its appreciation. It recently gave all employees five months of paid parental leave, for example, and offers competitive pay and equity opportunities for head coaches.

"We believe it is our responsibility to lead the way given the U.S. is one of the few countries that does not mandate any paid leave for new parents," according to Founders Nicolas Jammet, Nathaniel Ru and Jonathan Neman.



#2 &PIZZA

While the pizza industry is dominated by lower-priced chains, &pizza has found its niche by offering pizza under a socially conscious umbrella. Founder Michael Lastoria calls his 39-unit brand “an anti-establishment establishment built on the renown of its creative pies and craft beverages, slick design aesthetic, and the strength, unity and vibe of its living-wage-paid, ampersand-tattooed tribe.”



In 2019, the company debuted several initiatives to drive business, including the launch of its mobile kitchen business — &mobile — which leverages the company’s ventless, electric cooking platform to produce and distribute pies from mobile kitchens.

Tapping into the marketing and analytics capabilities of third-party marketplace partners allowed the brand to not only deliver improved pie quality and shorter delivery times, but also helped it avoid the pitfalls of other non-traditional restaurant formats.

Understanding the value of the direct relationship with both customers and tribe, &pizza is developing a proprietary, digital-operating ecosystem branded &OS, which includes a mobile application, mobile web browsing and ordering, kitchen display systems and associated demand prediction and throttling. It’s built upon the company’s text messaging platform, which leverages robust digital capabilities to drive tribe and guest engagement, brand relevance, and ties flash sales and other promotional events to real-time, culturally relevant events.

The same text line and associated CRM also serves as a tribe-facing repository for training initiatives, real-time communications, and a sourcing mechanism for tribe-led innovations, like its recent partnership with Lyft. The dedicated flat fare rideshare program — Lyft for Late Nights program — provide &pizza employees who travel between 11 p.m. and 5:30 a.m. with \$4.50 rides.

#3 DOG HAUS

Dog Haus wrapped up 2019 with 9.1% in same-store sales growth, which can be attributed to several initiatives, including improved training; stronger connections with consumers and communities through national and local philanthropic initiatives; and continued menu innovations highlighted by the recent debut of plant-based offerings.

Menu innovation has long been a staple of the Dog Haus brand, as evidenced by its Chef Collaboration Series and Mixologist Collaboration, both of which feature limited-time items rolled out on a monthly basis to benefit its national charity partner, No Kid Hungry.

Throughout 2019, Dog Haus positioned itself for rapid growth by selling franchise territories in Arizona, California, Colorado, Texas, West Virginia and Wyoming. In conjunction with the brand’s 10th anniversary, more than 20 franchise locations in 15 markets across seven states are projected for the new year.

Plus, Dog Haus’ virtual restaurant strategy is securing the brand’s place at the forefront of today’s customer service model. In September, it opened its first virtual restaurant location with Kitchen United in Chicago’s River North neighborhood and will add 10 more by year’s end.

Additionally, the brand unveiled a partnership with Live Nation which brought Dog Haus to a dozen concert venues across the U.S., from San Diego to Boston. In 2020, the Live Nation partnership is expected to expand to additional venues, doubling Dog Haus’ presence.



#4 CHIPOTLE

Always a leader when it comes to menu innovation and technology, Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc. launched a rewards program last year that quickly grew to 7 million members in seven months, which helped digital sales grow 87.9% and led to an overall revenue increase of 14.6% to \$1.4 billion in Q3. In fact, the brand's innovation in the digital space contributed to it becoming a \$1-billion-dollar digital business.

The chain also introduced new menu items like Carne Asada, finished the installation of Digital Make Lines, and launched best-in-class benefits for its 80,000 employees including the option to earn a debt-free college degree.

Other initiatives include growing its "Food with Integrity" programs and sustainability efforts including the pilot of Chipotle's gloves to bag program, a closed-loop upcycling solution to the industry's disposable plastic problem and an initiative dedicated to preserving the future of real food and farms in partnership with the National Young Farmers Coalition.

Going forward, the chain is focused on continuing to execute five key strategies:

1. Making the brand more visible and loved.
2. Running successful restaurants with a strong culture that provides great food, hospitality and throughput.
3. Leveraging our digital-make line to grow sales and expand access.
4. Engaging with customers via Chipotle Rewards.



#5 POKÉWORKS

After realizing that consumers wanted more transparency, Pokeworks made efforts last year to revamp the entire menu. From vegan options to cooked proteins, the 50-unit chain crafted products catering to a health-focused clientele that still have the Hawaiian flavors in which the brand is known.

In partnership with Bravo's Top Chef alumnus, Chef Sheldon Simeon, Pokeworks rolled out two limited-time spice-centric, flavor-packed bowls — the Spicy Sichuan Bowl and the Lava Bowl. It also unveiled a warm, torched poke that is served with a broth, called Poke-Zuke, which customers often order in the colder months.

Pokeworks has ridden into 2020 on the momentum of opening 20 units last year, which took its total count of restaurants to 46 with 130 in development. As it strives to meet its goal of opening 30 units by the end of the year, it's also aiming to extend its lead with health-conscious offerings while delivering on its four brand values: authenticity, positivity, sustainability and innovation.

Founded in 2015, Pokeworks is seeking single-unit and multi-unit franchise partners to join its team of entrepreneurs. The average investment for a Pokeworks is \$250,000 to \$850,000.



#6 WOW BAO

With a well-known reputation of innovation in technology, 2019 showcased Wow Bao's menu innovation with the introduction of Gluten-Free Bao, Impossible Bao and Bowl and Zoodles.

The Chicago-based chain, however, is just as innovative when it comes to expanding its reach in out-of-the box ways. It has several licensed and pop-ups locations inside grocery stores as well as TD Garden in Boston, music festivals and the Hyatt hotel.

Its frozen CPG line is available in all Jewel-Osco and Mariano's in the Chicagoland area, giving fans the ability to enjoy bao and potstickers at home whenever the craving strikes.

All of this could not be accomplished, however, without the efforts the chain made this year to streamline operations and training for existing locations, as well as reducing labor costs and COGs, providing a benchmark of efficiency for future franchisees.

Lastly, in a move that is truly unique, the chain has made some of its menu items available to any restaurant interested in offering it to customers via carry out or delivery.

"We believe that every kitchen can be a third-party kitchen for Wow Bao," President Geoff Alexander said during an interview with FastCasual.

This year, Wow Bao is planning three to five airport locations as well as adding a location in Union Station, Washington D.C., and satellite sites throughout Chicago.



#7 THE HALAL GUYS

The Halal Guys is opening its 100th location this year, which is no small feat for a brand founded by three Egyptian immigrants as a hot dog cart on 53rd & 6th in Manhattan. The chain, which has over 300 units in development and plans to open up to 70 by year's end, has stores already in exotic locales such as Jakarta and Seoul as well as the US, Canada and London.

Understanding that the only way to grow is to have its operations zipped up, Halal has brought on numerous tech vendors. It uses Punchh for its loyalty and app, Aloha and Revel for POS, Tattle for guest feedback, Field Day for LSM outreach and recently implemented Design Huddle and Shotzr to share high-quality photos and design elements across the organization without using sharing sites such as wetransfer.

It's also connecting Design Huddle with its print provider Dot It through an API that will allow one-click ordering of custom posters and merchandise for franchisees.

The chain's latest project, however, was hitting grocery shelves through a partnership with CAA-GBG, a brand management platform helping Halal extend its reach through licensing and product extension initiatives focused on the specialty food and grocery space.



#8 PANERA BREAD

Panera Bread, which was one of the first mainstream fast casuals to throw itself into the digital world and has served as an industry role model in eliminating chemicals from its foods, is at it again. After realizing how popular subscription services have become, the coffee giant rolled out its own offering unlimited hot drip coffee, iced coffee and hot tea for \$8.99 per month.

“Coffee is an important daily ritual for so many — it can give you a dose of optimism — it lifts you up,” Panera CEO Niren Chaudhary said. “We kept asking ourselves, why can’t it be more accessible, more affordable? Moreover, could unlimited coffee translate to unlimited optimism?”

The goal, said Chaudhary, who stepped into lead the brand last year, was to eliminate the price barrier and the false choices between convenience and quality — between good coffee and craveable food.

Last year, the chain also went all in on delivery, rolling it out nationwide through DoorDash, Grubhub and Uber Eats. In addition to being able to order from Panera’s own app and web site, consumers may use all three apps to order Panera.

“These partnerships capitalize on the delivery base we built over the last few years and use an economic model that works for us,” said Dan Wegiel, Panera executive vice president of growth and strategy. “More consumers than ever will be able to access Panera with the service-level expectations to which they have grown accustomed — we love that.”

Delivery via the Panera app and ecommerce platforms remains in place and will continue to be a strongpoint of access, for both new and existing Panera customers. Year to date, Panera’s platforms have driven more than 28 million delivery orders, resulting in delivery becoming 7% of Panera’s overall sales.

Panera
BREAD®



#9 BURGERFI

BurgerFi has been on a mission to “redefine the way the world eats burgers,” and it appears that the U.S. Air Force has noticed. The 125-unit chain, last year, was selected by Air Force Services as the only better-burger concept to be a part of a global initiative to enhance food quality, variety and availability on Air Force bases.

Since its inception, BurgerFi has offered 100% Angus beef burgers and was recently named “Best Burger Joint” by Consumer Reports and fellow public interest organizations for its commitment to antibiotic-free beef — one of only two burger chains in the U.S.

In addition to expanding its domestic and international presence through the Air Force, BurgerFi is also opening more franchise locations around the globe. BurgerFi opened its third Mexico City location in September 2019 and is exploring other development opportunities in the country. Its international footprint grew considerably in 2019 with new locations and agreements signed for Kuwait and Puerto Rico.

Additional international development in South America, the Caribbean and the Middle East is also being pursued in 2020.



#10 BONCHON CHICKEN

Bonchon, based in New York City, recently reached 100 stores in the U.S with 20% growth and a 6% increase in same store sales growth.

The original Korean-style fried chicken concept opened in 2002 in Busan, South Korea, and has grown to several hundred locations worldwide, including Thailand, Bahrain, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. The brand's U.S. arm opened in 2006, and Americans have quickly fallen for its technique of double-frying and hand-brushing wings, giving them a signature taste that is different from any other chicken chain.



Representing the cultural shift towards Asian and international cuisine in the fast casual industry, the chain has a loyal brand following across 22 states.

Bonchon, which plans to add 22 units in the U.S. by the end of 2020, recently launched online ordering and mobile app and rely on a variety of digital initiatives, including digital advertising, social media, and third-party delivery integration into its digital POS.

#11 I HEART MAC & CHEESE

The past year has been filled with a variety of milestones for I Heart Mac & Cheese, a 12-unit chain headquartered in South Florida. It launched a vegan menu, rolled out new catering options and added Mac Bites, which are baked, bite-sized easy-to-eat treats, to the menu.

It also partnered with Beyond Meat, to provide Americans interested in maintaining a healthy and environmentally conscious lifestyle, better access to those options.

Off the menu upgrades included introducing its first-ever mobile app that allows guests to order online, earn and redeem loyalty points and permits them to pay via mobile device on Android and Apple Pay. The chain also kicked off a seamless online ordering system and rolled out a College Ambassador Program.

Since last year, the number of open locations is up 100%, and the chain has entered several states including Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey and Texas. It recently signed its first franchise for Manhattan, marking its arrival in the Big Apple.

With a goal of selling 150 agreements by the end of the year, I Heart Mac & Cheese has come a long way from its first opening in 2016, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.



#12 BLAZE PIZZA

The past year has been transformative for Blaze Fast-Fire'd Pizza as the 350-unit chain launched various programs and products to set the stage for further growth in 2020.

In Q2 last year, Blaze Pizza introduced a plant-based protein option, with its spicy chorizo. In the summer, it became the first national pizza concept to offer a Keto Crust, with just 6 grams of net carbs for the whole crust, and in the fall, the brand entered into the digital commerce game, building a full-on delivery and carryout ecosystem.

That meant developing an entirely new product portfolio of large 14-inch pizzas and building strong partnerships with third-party delivery providers. Finally, it introduced a frictionless website, providing guests with a more convenient and seamless ordering experience than ever before.

This new leg of the business was introduced in fall 2019 with the “Upgrade The Way You Pizza” campaign, featuring its investor LeBron James and included the first entree to streaming television advertising. This initiative captured share from the legacy pizza players and increased online sales to an enviable 17%.

Blaze only knows one speed — fast. As such, it has exploded into 41 states and grew its global footprint across six countries, including high profile locations like Disney Springs, Universal CityWalk and STAPLES Center. Now with a significant presence in Canada, poised to open the 10th location in the Middle East and enviable unit count growth, Blaze is not slowing down its rapid expansion. It will continue to build its cult following through the development of craveable products, guest-centric operations, brand-building initiatives and innovation in the digital commerce space.



#13 TROPICAL SMOOTHIE CAFE

In 2019, Tropical Smoothie Cafe opened more cafes and sold more franchise agreements than any other year in its company history. It also opened its milestone 750th and 800th locations, and in total, opened 124 cafes and signed 213 franchise agreements in 2019.

In addition, the brand experienced same-store sales increases of 5.7% — twice the industry average — marking eight consecutive years of positive SSS growth.

Alongside its rapid growth, TSC featured better-for-you menu items to enhance the guest experience and stay ahead of industry trends with a variety of flatbreads, wraps, quesadillas, sandwiches, bowls and breakfast.

The brand, which operates more than 830 locations across 44 states, specifically designs menu innovations for target audiences with special limited-time offerings, including the popular “mocktail-inspired” smoothie offerings like Watermelon Mojito. In 2020, TSC will launch limited-time-only smoothie flavors, allowing the brand to set itself apart from the competition and push the limits of its space with healthier nods incorporating unique twists and tastes.

Boasting an average unit volume of more than \$730,000 — the highest in the company’s 22-year-history — with the top 50% reporting an AUV of more than \$938,000, the brand is looking to achieve an AUV of \$1 million with a total of 1,500 restaurants in the next five years.



#14 GARBANZO MEDITERRANEAN FRESH

The fast casual market is filled with an endless number of flavors, fusions, and cultural inspiration to fit the taste of any consumer, but Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh understands that flavor alone is not where the puck is going.



GARBANZO®
MEDITERRANEAN FRESH

Striving to deliver a perfect balance of delicious and nutritious food, the Denver-based chain has extended its “clean” food policy to its beverage line-up. Now serving TRACTOR beverage company’s non-GMO, organic “softer-drinks,” the brand has removed any and all artificial ingredients from any product it serves — even its fountain soda.

Garbanzo, which has more than 30 locations, follows a mantra of “feel good food,” making sure that every recipe features a special, yet accessible, eating experience at a great value. It is committed to shaking people out of their “food apathy” and supporting them in feeling good (brighter) more often.

It’s also bucking tradition by opening in locations like universities and airports, which create a greater brand awareness by offering the perfect balance of transient guests and local guests. Brick-and-mortar locations are obviously still a large part of Garbanzo’s plans, but the company is looking outside the box in order to continue expansion.

Its growth plan is to make fresh Mediterranean food a staple across the U.S. starting with multiple restaurants opening in three markets in 2020. Garbanzo also has 28 units in the pipeline (St. Louis, Boston and Indianapolis). Plus, it hopes to ink more than 20 three-to-five unit deals by year’s end.

#15 MUTTS CANINE CANTINA

Mutts Canine Cantina is a Dallas-based restaurant concept that doubles as an urban oasis for dogs and their owners. Both locations feature a bar and restaurant that serve burgers, fries, sandwiches and a variety of cocktails. Guests with memberships, which can be purchased by the day, month or year, are given a code to skip the line and unlock entrance gates with the wave of a hand.

The main dining area is filled with bright yellow picnic tables that encourage communal dining. The gated small and large dog parks feature grouped Adirondack lounge chairs, so dog owners can relax and socialize among themselves while their canines burn off energy.

The brand’s innovative model benefits communities in that it can exist in odd-shaped or undevelopable tracts within popular urban areas, making each location original.

Additionally, the concept, owned by FreeRange Concepts, founded by Kyle Noonan and Josh Sepkowitz, inspires community and promotes outdoor living.

Mutts has received over 100 inquiries from potential franchisees and has its sights set on bringing the concept first to the rest of the Sunbelt states: Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and California.

MUTTS®
Canine Cantina



16. TERIYAKI MADNESS

Teriyaki Madness opened 24 locations in 2019, putting it at the 64-unit mark. The fresh Asian fast casual grill's 2020 growth plan is to add 40-50 units by expanding into new states and university campuses. Teriyaki saw 2.2% increase in same-store sales in 2019 and over the past three years sales have risen 171%.

Teriyaki Madness, based in Denver, is a fully digital company with each location using the Revel POS iPad-based system that integrates into its other systems. The chain is also enhancing technology for the consumer as well. The corporate team, for example, launched an online ordering mobile app with Olo and Punchh that includes a loyalty program allowing consumers to earn points to get free food.

It was a smart move. Last year, loyalty members spent 19% more than non-loyalty members, and the program has increased ticket count and average ticket size.

CEO Michael Haith is on a mission to "put the soul back into franchising." He believes the era of cookie-cutter stores, uniforms, etc. has depleted employee motivation, leading to a lack of personality and character within U.S. food franchises.



A starting point was allowing employees and franchisees to make each store unique to its neighborhood, surroundings or even identity of the owner.

17. CAPRIOTTI'S

It's unusual to find a brand with a 40+ year heritage that breaks out in an already crowded segment of the restaurant industry. Capriotti's is one of those brands, however, adding more than 100 shops and 24 franchise partners in 28 new markets to its development trajectory.

The Las Vegas-based brand experienced positive same-store sales and increased average unit volumes in 2019, and its 2020 franchise disclosure documents will post growth in its currently disclosed average unit volume of \$738,000 and an AUV of \$1.1 million for the top 25% of the brand.

"We continue to experience significant growth in our off-premise revenues related to our success in building both our catering business and delivery aggregator revenues, which were well into double digits as a percent of sales," CDO David Bloom told FastCasual.

The department of defense approved the chain last year to provide food service into arenas as diverse as the Pentagon and numerous other federal government facilities, military bases and highly secure locations across the country.

Over the next year, Capriotti's will add several add units throughout the U.S. and is looking into international expansion.

18. SAJJ MEDITERRANEAN



Mediterranean cuisine is exploding across the fast casual industry, and SAJJ Mediterranean is hoping to lead a new generation with its healthy, locally sourced offerings and customizable menu that is friendly to most dietary preferences.

Transparency is a key component to the SAJJ experience, which is why each of its locations display a map of the region and connects menu ingredients to the farms where they were grown.

While staying true to Mediterranean cuisine, SAJJ also works to stay on top of trends and adapt offerings to meet consumers' demands. The brand has launched a variety of modern and Mediterranean-inspired dishes such as Chocolate Hummus & Cinnamon Chips, the plant-based Impossible Kabob, freekeh grain bowls, green garbanzo hummus and falafel and Lifestyle Bowls geared toward keto and paleo diets.

Within 2019 alone, SAJJ strengthened its foothold in Northern California with the opening of four restaurants, two of which opened within weeks of one another. Due to these openings, SAJJ experienced a 50% growth rate and went from eight stores at the end of 2018 to 12 stores and counting by the end of 2019.

18. SAJJ MEDITERRANEAN

As part of its expansion, SAJJ debuted a “SAJJ 2.0” store design highlighting its dedication to local, farm-sourced ingredients and food transparency. Elements include live olive trees in-house, earthy and neutral-toned decor, communal dining areas, large windows for natural light and larger “We Love Our Local Farms” wall decals that detail the regional farms where menu ingredients are sourced.

SAJJ’s goal is to reach 20 restaurants by the end of 2020.

19. B. GOOD

Innovation was prominent in 2019 at B. GOOD — not only on the menu with the types of items its offering guests, but also off the menu with the channels it is leveraging to meet guests in ways that complement, not complicate, their busy lives.

On the menu, the Boston-based chain took a bold stance against faux meat expanding its plant-based offerings by staying true to its mission of serving “Food with Roots.” New offerings included three unique twists on plant-based burgers and one blended turkey/mushroom burger. It also launched a menu rebrand, broadening options, while simplifying the ordering experience.



B. GOOD, which has nearly 30 units, overhauled the menu board structure and also published a first-ever Animal Welfare Policy, articulating its commitment to serving ingredients and products that are not only good for our guests, but also the planet.

Off the menu, the chain introduced a mobile app and points-based loyalty program and added delivery. It also expanded relationships with third-party delivery and office delivery aggregators, opened its first ghost kitchen in downtown Chicago and implemented DropSpots, shelving units within corporate offices that enable workplace delivery.

Lastly, B. GOOD prioritized non-traditional venues like airports, opening its first in Logan Airport with another one slated for early 2020

20. BEAN SPROUTS

One of the few exclusively female-founded chains in the US, Bean Sprouts is a nationally recognized, hip and healthy café that designs its menus with kids and families in mind.

Its Imaginibbles children’s menu is featured on a low counter, empowering kids to make their own healthy choices and relieving moms and dads of the guilt of taking their families out to eat. The menu, which offers a variety of choices for families with picky eaters, allergies and other dietary challenges, adheres to clean ingredient guidelines and features organic and sustainable foods, compostable packaging and an eco-friendly design.

Building on the late 2018 release of their second cookbook, Bean Sprouts Kitchen, Co-founders Shannon “Peacasso” Seip and Kelly “Pea Brain” Parthen’s kicked off 2019 with numerous media appearances. From live segments on NBC Los Angeles and local ABC and CBS affiliates in Cincinnati, to features in LA Parent and National Geographic Kids, Bean Sprouts Kitchen served as a centerpiece for driving new revenue for the chain as well as the platform for forging new partnerships and increased national brand recognition.

Bean Sprouts, which first opened in 2007, in Wisconsin, now has 18 units, opening locations last year inside the Kidspace Children’s Museum in Pasadena and the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco. It also executed contracts with Marble Kid’s Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina, and McWane Science Center in Birmingham, Alabama.

In 2020, Bean Sprouts will add six to eight units opening in new markets in the Southeast as well as expanding in its current markets.

21. MCALISTER’S DELI

Thirty years ago, a dentist from Oxford, Mississippi, had a vision to turn an abandoned movie-set diner into a small,



21. MCALESTER'S DELI

yet charming, neighborhood restaurant and gathering place. That vision became a reality when the first McAlister's Deli opened in 1989 and now spans 450 restaurants across 27 states.

McAlister's is now reaping the rewards from its [2018 rebrand](#), which included a new restaurant prototype, logo, interior design and more. The refresh translated to big wins for McAlister's. In 2019, it added 31 restaurants and signed 129 franchise agreements to develop 129 locations over the next several years. One of the largest development agreements included the signing of a development deal with Best Choice Restaurants, an affiliate of [Sun Holdings](#), a franchise organization founded by mega multi-unit operator Guillermo Perales. As part of the deal, the franchisee is spearheading McAlister's Deli growth in Florida, Louisiana and Texas, in addition to developing 47 restaurants over the next seven years.

By the end of 2020, the brand aims to have more than 500 restaurants open.

22. SALADWORKS

[Celebrating its 100th opening earlier this year](#), Saladworks hopes to double that number in less than a year, and CEO Kelly Roddy isn't afraid to try a few innovative things to do it. His latest trial-and-error project is testing virtual kitchens via a partnership with Kitchen United, where the brand is renting kitchen space in Chicago, Scottsdale and Austin.

If the tests prove successful, Roddy, who took over as CEO last year, may



add 50 to 100 virtual kitchens to the Saladworks portfolio.

"We're looking at a lot of different ways to grow, and we're already off on a good start," said Roddy, who pointed out the chain has entered the nontraditional market, serving customers on military bases, college campus and in airports.

To that point, Saladworks is trying to "widen the funnel" so guests can experience it how, when and where they want it. In addition to on premise growth opportunities such as the revitalization of the Saladworks guest engagement program and launching new grain bowls, it also embarked on a variety of off-premise growth initiatives through enhanced online-ordering capabilities along with signing deals with three major third-party delivery services and a massive catering partnership with EZ Cater.

In addition, Saladworks is testing a "store-within-a-store" program by inserting a restaurant within the produce section of a few major grocery chains.

23. CHICKEN SALAD CHICK

Chicken Salad Chick, which operates more than 145 restaurants across 16 states, has experienced record-breaking

growth over the past four years – more than quadrupling in size. Last year, it opened 40 restaurants and signed agreements to open 60 units.

Additionally, CSC achieved its 16th consecutive quarter — fourth consecutive year — of same-store sales growth and a 4.4% comp sales increase year over year.

Throughout 2019, the brand implemented several strategies to fuel that growth. In November 2019, Eagle Merchant Partners sold its share of [Chicken Salad Chick to Brentwood Associates](#), a private equity firm with a current portfolio consisting of Blaze Pizza and Veggie Grill.

Brentwood kicked off its partnership with Scott Deviney, CEO of CSC, to help support and drive the brand's aggressive development plans to grow to 400 restaurants by 2025.

Other exciting announcements included Founder Stacy Brown becoming a franchisee in her hometown of Rome, Georgia, and the launch of the chain's revamped catering program with a redesigned menu and innovative packaging. Stores that rolled out the program March-December experienced an average same-store catering sales increase of 30% over 2018.

24. WILDFLOWER BREAD COMPANY

Celebrating its 23rd year of serving the communities of Arizona, Wildflower prides itself on making a difference for its breadheads (employees), guests and the community. The family owned,

24. WILDFLOWER BREAD COMPANY

privately held business delivers industry leading sales exceeding \$2.6 million per location by focusing on great food, outstanding hospitality and making a difference.

The company spent 2017 innovating from the inside out. It recently rebranded, creating the Wildflower Brand Essence, which includes a focus on “Purpose, Values and Safe Spaces.”

Community involvement is at the heart of the Wildflower purpose. Since 2000, it has supported over 2,000 local organizations, hosted over 400 neighborhood nights in the past decade, provided over 85,000 breakfasts for Loyola Academy students, donated \$4.6 million of leftovers, provided over 1,850,000 meals in support of No Kid Hungry and donated 10% of all baguette sales to the Children’s Museum of Phoenix and local libraries.

Wildflower is working on programs and systems to enhance the experience through continuous education and innovation. It launched a custom app for online ordering as well as recognizing repeat customers with loyalty rewards and is constructing a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility for making its breads and desserts.

Over the next year, it will continue to open restaurants in its home state and is exploring a new market launch for 2021.

25. ALOHA POKE CO.

Although Aloha Poke Co. opened just four years ago, it already has 18 stores and launched a franchising program in 2019 to fuel even more growth. Targeted



cities and towns are in the Midwest, Southeast and Northeast.

The Chicago-based chain, which started out as a tiny location in a Chicago train station, thrives on keeping things simple. It has a flexible footprint requiring as little as 250 to 1,200 square feet. In fact, CEO Chris Birkinshaw has built his operations strategy around what he calls a “simple infrastructure.”

“There is a less complex operation due to the menu, operating procedures and store design,” he said. “We use a single cloud-based system for back-office management, covering scheduling, inventory, invoice capture, AP, financials, etc. The overhead component is a much lighter lift than the usual fast casual franchise.”

He may be onto something, considering the AUV for his locations is \$800,000, and the cost of opening a unit ranges from \$138,800 to \$357,700.

26. VEGGIE GRILL



Since opening in 2006, Veggie Grill has 100 locations in California, Oregon, Washington, Massachusetts, Illinois and New York City. It has a new look, however, which rolled out late last year to its stores in Toluca Lake, California, and Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The farmhouse-inspired design evokes a sense of warmth and comfort in the space while keeping a modernized touch. Interior features include a brick veneer wall with custom artwork, monarch dining room floor tiles with tangerine border tile, beadboard paneling, custom millwork banquettes, booths, hickory-topped tables with driftwood-stained maple chairs, mosaic hex-patterned counter façades, calacatta quartz countertops and iPad ordering tables.

The 100% plant-based fast casual restaurant specializes in high-quality proteins offering the Beyond Burger, Gardein Chickin’ — made from non-GMO soybeans, wheat, peas and ancient grains — house-made falafel and Hodo Tofu. The tofu and tempeh help chefs create sautéed, grilled and glazed food with pleasing textures. Both are made from organic, non-GMO soybeans and are naturally gluten-friendly.

27. WAHLBURGERS

Wahlburgers, which allows customers to choose between fast casual service and a full-service experience, is on the move. Founded by celebrity brothers Mark, Donnie and Chef Paul Wahlberg, the chain now has more than 30 locations and recently announced that its largest

27. WAHLBURGERS



franchisee, [Hy-vee](#) — a Midwest-based grocer — was [converting 21](#) of its in-store restaurants to Wahlburgers locations.

The chain, last year, launched a mobile app featuring user-friendly experiences such as online ordering and access to extended member benefits through its [WahlClub](#), the brand's loyalty rewards program.

To further engage with customers, the chain created "Virtual Visitor," an automated, live experience that enables the Wahlberg family to remotely video into restaurants equipped with the technology to have face-to-face conversations with guests.

Wahlburgers is also dedicated to giving back to its communities. In March, for example, the Wahlburgers [food truck](#) passed out free food to Beaumont Hospital workers in Detroit amid COVID-19 and across all its restaurants, offered free kids meals, free delivery and a family 4PACK for \$40.

28. JUNZI KITCHEN

[Junzi kitchen](#), a Chinese build-your-own fast casual, was founded by a group of friends at Yale University and born out of the Tsai Center for Innovative Thinking at Yale in 2015. It found its new home, however, two years later in New York



City when the friends opened its first NYC location on the Upper West Side near Columbia University.

Since then, the restaurant has opened in Greenwich Village and Bryant Park, has a delivery-only ghost kitchen in SoHo and is looking to expand its CPG offerings by updating house-made chili oils and sauces.

Junzi isn't afraid to take chances if it means getting its food in front of more people. It joined WeWork Food Labs as a founding member, for example, launching Junzi Outposts - shelves that live within WeWork building amenities.

Last year, it also introduced a digital dining pass to midtown Manhattan customers and launched its first web-based proprietary online order delivery platform.

29. TOCAYA ORGANICA

Since opening three years ago, Tocaya Organica already spans 17 locations, and its popularity might stem from the menu, which shrinks the gap between healthy and delicious. The Los Angeles-based chain uses high-quality ingredients to create healthful spins on traditional Mexican recipes and items, for example.

Although it starts out vegan, non-vegans may add animal protein or non-vegan cheese to their items at their discretion.

That flexibility has also helped it grow its catering department, but the chain is just as passionate about social responsibility. It created the [Tocaya Life Foundation](#), which partners with environmentally focused nonprofits to drive awareness of their efforts while raising money.

In line with the foundation's 2019 debut, Tocaya launched "Wave Tank," which invites three non-profits each quarter to pitch the company's executives on why they should partner. Each winner becomes an official partner for the upcoming quarter, and the brands work together to create a new menu dish with a portion of its proceeds going directly to the charity.

30. COOLGREENS

Coolgreens celebrated its 10th anniversary last year with an unprecedented year of growth and ramped up franchise expansion. Additionally, the brand streamlined operations and launched [Coolgreens Market](#) — a smart fridge to expand the healthy eatery's signature salads, wraps, grain bowls and sandwiches outside of a traditional restaurant space and further solidified its position as a modern lifestyle brand.

Coolgreens started franchising last year and brought in [Kathy Davidson](#) as [VP of Franchise Development](#) to help the 10-unit chain get to 50 within four years. Davidson, who helped take Dallas-based Cowboy Chicken from a few corporate stores to several franchised locations

30. COOLGREENS



coolgreens
feed your life

across the nation, is off to a great start. Coolgreens added three restaurants in 2019 outside its home-market of Oklahoma City.

The healthy eatery has executed franchise deals to continue the growth in DFW and has construction underway for two locations Omaha in 2020.

The debut of its mobile last year helped increase online sales 200%, and the brand added Combi and TurboChef ovens to its kitchens and a new employee training and onboarding program to streamline the process for new associates.

31. FAZOLI'S

Fazoli's ended the decade by launching an aggressive franchise development strategy at the beginning of 2019 and completed the year with five area development agreements for a total of 24 locations now in the pipeline.

It also entered a new sector by debuting Impossible meat sauce as a test at five restaurants in its hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, which inspired the launch of system-wide LTO in the spring.

Also on the innovative menu front, Fazoli's debuted Cinnamon Swirl Breadstick Bites, which was a huge hit. The chain typically sells 33 units per

week per restaurant for any LTO dessert, but that doubled with the LTO. Plus, the increase in dessert sales contributed to an average check increase of more than 5% during the time of the promotion.

Technology upgrades were also important last year with the brand elevating all off-premise business and digital technology. Fazoli's joined forces with Olo to expand and streamline its mobile ordering capabilities, and saw a 79.7% increase.

Another key to online ordering success was mobile app upgrades to create a frictionless user experience. Just one month following the launch, loyalty sales increased 42%. With nearly 600,000 rewards members, almost 10% of all transactions are from loyalty guests.



32. CHEBA HUT TOASTED SUBS

Seeing double digit same-store sales every year for the last five, Cheba Hut Toasted Subs, a 22-year-old sub shop based in Colorado, prides itself on zigging when everyone else is zagging.

Most brands, for example, lucky enough to tap 17 new franchisee groups while also reporting system-wide sales up over 40% from 2018 to 2019, might want to keep up the pace.



But Cheba Hut isn't most brands.

Instead it hit the pause button to commit to helping franchisees execute their growth plans, Chief Relationship Officer Seth Larsen said. Growth isn't completely stalling, however. The chain known for curing munchies is adding at least 12 stores this year by sticking to its game plan, which Larsen describes as "smart, sustained growth while maintaining our killer AUVs."

"We have broken the mold of mundane fast-casual concepts and set ourselves apart by becoming the first marijuana-themed 'joint'," said VP of Marketing Brian Loeb, and the pun was most definitely intended. While the brand doesn't plan to serve food made with cannabis, its marketing collateral features pot leaves and relies on several weed-centric slogans. Its catering tagline, for example, is "If you're high, we'll fly," and according to its website, "Our foodies flip the bird to the establishment with our homegrown food, our relaxed environment and our amazing employees; who actually enjoy rollin' in our joint."

By year's end, the 29-unit chain is also launching a new app and a video game in 2020.

33. NEWK'S EATERY



Versatility and innovation have been key drivers of Newk's Eatery growth over this past year. It celebrated its 15th anniversary in September with the launch of Project Strive, a prototype connecting Newk's brand story with the guest experience through an upgraded restaurant environment, paired with a generous dose of hospitality.

From updated artwork that highlights CEO Chris Newcomb's family roots to the teal mosaic wall that honors the chain's commitment to Ovarian Cancer Awareness, no detail was too small.

While initially rolled out in Newk's home market of Jackson, Mississippi, the brand is renovating and refreshing restaurant locations across all 16 states in the next 18 months as it grows into new and existing communities.

Newk's Eatery opened 10 units in 2019, including its first Virginia restaurants. It plans to open 10 restaurants by year's end with an emphasis on expanding its footprint in SEC college towns, with recent openings in Gainesville, Florida and Athens, Georgia, which included a partnership with University of Florida Athletics.

34. ZOUP

During 2019, Detroit-based Zoup continued its evolution from Zoup Fresh Soup Company to Zoup Eatery. It recently opened the doors to the first prototype in Bloomfield Township, Michigan, and plans to add eight stores by the end of year.

Last year, Zoup enhanced its menu, adding Grain & Broth Bowls, organic craft beverages and macaroni & cheese entrees, as well as became a tech-heavy brand. It implemented a new online ordering system via OLO, as well as a mobile app, third-party delivery integrations, Digital POP with animation and video and a loyalty program.

As if those upgrades weren't enough, the chain also inked a deal with several grocers to carry its certified organic broth. It's now in more than 7,000 stores, including Walmart and Sprouts Farmers Market,

"We've brought chef-driven, restaurant-quality, natural and organic broth to retail shelves and the response has been amazing," CEO Eric Ersher said. "Once the grocery buyers taste the difference and experience the product's premium taste, they understand the gap our offerings fill in the category."

35. ARTICHOKE BASILLE

Artichoke Basille's Pizza exploded onto the NYC pizza scene in 2008 with its authentic New York-style pizza ever since. The nearly 20-unit chain specializes in serving an authentic style of pizza born and bred from fourth



generation New York City pizzaiolos.

Artichoke's signature slices and whole pies feature a variety of toppings that range from the unique — artichoke cream sauce and Surimi crab meat — to more traditional favorites like pepperoni, meatball and ricotta.

Its pies, which are never made in a conveyor belt oven, but instead cooked in a more traditional oven, have attracted a cult-like fan base of local New Yorkers, tourists and celebrities. Leonardo DiCaprio has been said to ship Artichoke pies from NYC to his home in Los Angeles.

In 2019, Artichoke opened three franchised locations, signed a location in Manhattan's Times Square and inked a deal with a franchisee to expand the concept throughout the state of Arizona.

Founders Francis Garcia and Sal Basille have appeared on nationally syndicated TV shows like The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, The Rachael Ray Show, Fox & Friends, The Chew, and even starred in two of their own series on The Cooking Channel: Pizza Masters and Pizza Cuz.

36. WHICH WICH

Coming off of celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2018, Which Wich has continued to move and shake over

36. WHICH WICH



the past year. In 2019, CEO Jeff Sinelli named a new president — [Cherry Hearn](#), one of the company’s first franchisees and also the brand’s long-time general counsel.

During that transition, Which Wich launched French fries system wide, named PepsiCo as its exclusive beverage provider, gave back with its 11th annual Flag Your Bag campaign to support active duty, first responders and veterans, and continued to benefit communities through the Project PB&J program, which is a charitable endeavor that donates PB&J sandwiches to people in need.

The chain isn’t lagging behind when it comes to technology, either. Through the use of third-party hardware systems, it’s working toward accepting mobile payments and is looking to add mobile kiosks in high-foot traffic areas such as office buildings, manufacturing facilities, and malls to allow fans to pre-order. Drive-thru kiosks are also in the works.

Which Wich strives to have a positive impact on the environment through conservation efforts and has also built within LEED Certification guidelines as required on specific projects.

37. VITALITY BOWLS

Vitality Bowls, a superfood concept and

allergy-friendly cafe, has seen significant growth since it opened in 2011 and began franchising in three years later. In 2019, the brand featured a nearly 30% increase in total gross sales from the year before and a dynamic growth phase including a combined 40 new locations and signed agreements.

With plans to open 15 to 16 locations and sell 25 units by the end of 2020, the chain hired David Malinowskias last year as [COO](#) to oversee franchisee sales and operations, as well as furthering the franchise opportunity for the brand as a whole.

Since first opening in San Ramon, California, Vitality Bowls has grown to more than 145 cafes now open or in development across the country. Its founders, Roy and Tara Gilad, created the concept after not finding restaurants fit for their daughter who had severe food allergies.



38. MOOYAH BURGERS, FRIES AND SHAKES

To help the restaurant industry adjust to the crisis that is COVID-19, Mooyah Burgers, Fries and Shakes did its best to unite the restaurant industry. In March, it led a Nationwide Restaurant Deep Cleaning Event calling on restaurants

across the U.S. to join it in a deep cleaning effort.

“This is truly a movement to inspire confidence in the restaurant industry as a whole,” [Mooyah President Tony Darden](#) said.

During the outbreak, Mooyah, which has 76 locations, heightened scrutiny on its already stringent personal hygiene and restaurant sanitation procedures. The stores also quickly moved to packaging all food to-go and implemented free delivery with no order minimums.

By year’s end, the Plano-based Mooyah will have added 14 locations, [all of which will feature an updated layout created to accommodate for more community-minded seating areas](#), dedicated third-party delivery pickup and to-go areas, closed kitchens and digital menu boards. The redesign also includes a refreshed logo.

“This new approach will also align with our overall strategy to be accessible to our guests in the manner in which they want to enjoy their dining experience,” Darden said.

In 2019, the chain rolled out its line of Lifestyle Burgers, which have been added to the full menu alongside a new Vegan burger announced earlier this year.

39. IKE’S LOVE & SANDWICHES

Founded by [Ike Shehadeh](#) in 2007 in [San Francisco](#), Ike’s Love & Sandwiches now has more than 70 locations in California, Arizona, Nevada, Texas and

39. IKE'S LOVE & SANDWICHES



Hawaii. With additional locations in development in Chicago, Florida, Utah and California, the chain hopes to end 2020 with 100 stores.

The brand continues to see explosive growth as it builds its dedicated, loyal following and brings its famous secret menu and pop culture-inspired sandwich selections to customers from coast to coast.

The concept offers more than 700 sandwiches — including vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free options — spread with “Ike’s Dirty Secret Sauce,” that’s also baked into the bread. Beyond the extensive and flavorful menu offerings, Ike’s follows a proven business model with low build-out costs, efficient labor practices and waste-reducing operational standards that position it for rapid franchise development potential.

“Love, appreciation and respect are at the forefront of everything we do at Ike’s Love & Sandwiches,” Shehadeh said. “The happiness and enjoyment of our customers are the drivers behind Ike’s.”

40. CURRY UP NOW

Franchising was Curry Up Now’s major initiative in 2019. The 11-unit brand opened its first two franchised locations in Irvine, California, and Decatur,

Georgia, and also secured real estate for 12 locations across Georgia, Utah, New Jersey, Sacramento, Irvine as well as three corporate locations in Northern California.

In addition, Curry Up Now inked a multi-unit franchise deal for Indiana, with the first location in that market slated to open in mid-2020. The brand, which started as a food truck, now has more than 50 units in varying stages of development across the country, and is adding additional locations in Atlanta and San Diego.

In the midst of franchise growth, the company is also pursuing corporate growth of locations that also house its bar concept, Mortar & Pestle, in San Ramon and near the Stanford University campus in Palo Alto, California.

Curry Up Now, which is known for taking traditional Indian offerings and presenting them in a way that is accessible and approachable for the American consumer, plans to finish the year with 20 locations in operation.



41. NEKTER JUICE BAR

From skin care to fast cars, Nekter Juice Bar has spent the past year exploring how to leverage industry partnerships.



The juice chain, which has more than 130 restaurants across 14 states, announced in April that it was opening within several Whole Foods Markets. A few months later, it had inked a deal with BMW and Olo to allow BMW owners to test in-vehicle ordering via the BMW Labs website.

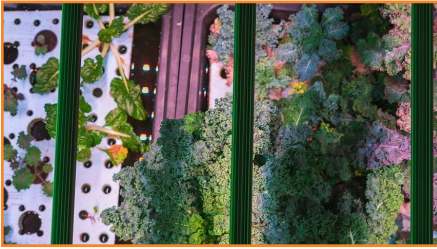
“Since day one at Nekter Juice Bar, it’s been our mission to make our menu of fresh and nutritious juices, superfood smoothies and acai bowls easily accessible to everyone on their individual paths to wellness,” said Steve Schulze, co-founder and CEO of Nekter Juice Bar. “Collaborating with innovative and forward thinking brands such as BMW and Olo will help us expand this accessibility while also supporting our speed of service initiatives for people on the go.”

In November of last year, it hooked up with Skin Laundry, a skincare company providing laser and light therapy services. The chain celebrated the wellness collaboration with the skincare company by giving free hydrating facial sheet masks with the purchase of any Nekter Cleanse drink.

42. BALANCE PAN-ASIAN GRILLE

Throughout its 10 year-history, Balance

42. BALANCE PAN-ASIAN GRILLE



Pan-Asian Grille has been at the forefront of innovation while staying focused on satisfying customers and employees. Customers value connection, convenience and conversation, and to build a stronger connection between them and their food, the Toledo, Ohio-based chain has taken its original concept of transparent kitchens to the next level by operating its own indoor urban aquaponics farm.

That farm was also a lifesaver when it came to dealing with the fallout caused by COVID-19.

“Fortunately, due to having a vertically-integrated aquaponics farm, most of our produce supply is self-sufficient and on a continuous growth cycle. We are not affected by an outside supplier less equipped to handle COVID-19 health protocols,” said Prakash Karamchandani, co-founder of Balance Pan-Asian Grille, who took a lead role in leading the Ohio Restaurant Association through the pandemic and discussing the implications with local and state government officials.

Before the outbreak, customers were already used to ordering via the chain’s mobile app. In fact, 53% of the chain’s gross revenue last year came from app purchases. The chain has also encouraged a direct line between operational methods and

customer feedback by creating a closed loop between customer responses through the mobile app and employee incentives.

From a community perspective, Balance often partners with local organizations, artists, musicians, athletes and other influencers to make a difference. When a location opens, for example, the brand hosts soft launch events showcasing the food, highlighting the creative efforts of its community members, and raising funds for local nonprofits.

43. GUSTO

Former NFL Nate Hybl founded Gusto in 2014 to deliver fresh, flavorful food fast. The underlying passion of his company can be found in its name, which means “enjoyment or vigor in doing something.” Gusto offers a simple menu of bowls and wraps that highlight fresh, high-quality ingredients and bold flavor combinations and don’t hide behind gimmicks or trends. They are served fast and without breaking the bank.

“I set out to invent what I wanted as a consumer and a former athlete who was always on the hunt for tasty, fast food that’s better for your body,” Hybl told FastCasual. “There weren’t many of these options, especially in the South.”

With a passionate team that believes in



“living life with gusto” and a focus on food, flavor and freshness, the company has attracted a loyal following with its five Atlanta locations and is opening a drive-thru operation this year at its Chamblee location with a “co-pilot” to assist guests in ordering.

Seeking to disrupt fast food, Hybl sees Gusto as a growing force in the market with both methodical and responsible expansion in Atlanta and in other large cities throughout the Southeast.

44. COWBOY CHICKEN

For nearly 40 years, Cowboy Chicken has been serving all-natural, hormone-free rotisserie chickens that are hand-seasoned in store, marinated for 24 hours and then slowly roasted for two hours over a real wood-burning fire.

What began in 1981, as a single restaurant in Dallas, has grown into 23 company-owned and franchised restaurants located throughout Texas as well as Louisiana, Georgia, Oklahoma and California.

Last year, the chain collaborated with Atlanta-based consulting chef and Cooking Channel star Eddie Russell to create a healthier menu item. Bolero Bowls, which have fresh vegetables and slow-roasted chicken and come in three choices. The chain also launched crispy drumsticks, handcrafted lemonades and revamped side options.

Tech investments included the launch of a new website with improved online ordering for catering and delivery, finalizing the onboarding of a new

44. COWBOY CHICKEN

back-office accounting platform, and installation of advanced WiFi in all stores and the creation of Pronto Pick-up, which allows diners to order and pay online. Team members prepare and package the orders and place them on a shelf, allowing guests to walk in, find orders under their name and leave.

Cowboy Chicken is also finalizing the design of a new store prototype — Cowboy Chicken 4.0 — which will open by the end of the year.

45. TENDER GREENS

Although Tender Greens is mostly known for its customized salads, it garnered attention last year when it announced a commitment to ensure that at least 50% of its leadership roles would be held by women.

“As a collective industry, no one is doing a good job identifying and cultivating female talent. The industry is in a labor crisis and most of the jobs are dominated by men, especially in the kitchen. I want Tender Greens to do better,” said CEO Denyelle Bruno.

That wasn’t the only exciting news that the chain, which owns and operates more than 30 locations in California, New York and Massachusetts, announced in 2019. [CrowdOut Capital](#), an online, non-bank lender for middle market



companies, completed a term loan to the growing salad chain.

Tender Greens announced a plan in April to grow the company to 50% female leadership by 2020. The company also announced plans to expand its geographic footprint in existing markets.

“CrowdOut provided us the flexible capital we were looking for,” [Bruno said](#). “We are excited to be partnering with them as we continue to grow our brand from coast to coast.”

46. SLIM CHICKENS

Just six years into franchising, Slim Chickens opened its 100th location at the end of 2019, which was a banner year for the booming franchise concept. Same-store sales increased 3.7%, and the Arkansas-based brand nearly 20 franchise openings, launched its first food truck and expanded into new markets including Colorado, North Dakota, and Memphis, Tennessee.

And this year shouldn’t be any different as its multi-unit franchise growth strategy is to grow in the states surrounding Arkansas, throughout the South, the Midwest and then into the North East/Mid-Atlantic states. Slim’s has 31 projected openings for 2020 and is seeking five-to 15-unit deals to surpass 600 units by 2029.

As the energy behind the brand heats up, experienced multi-unit franchise groups and private equity are taking notice. In 2019 alone, Slim Chickens inked eight multi-unit agreements totaling 80 units, bringing its development pipeline to over 350

locations. The brand also attracted an equity investment from 10 Point Capital, the private equity firm behind segment leader Tropical Smoothie Café.

The brand’s menu innovation continued this year with the introduction of Tender Mac-n-Cheese; four new shake flavors, a broadened sandwich platform, jar desserts and salad.

47. PINCHO FACTORY



Nedal Ahmad, Co-Founder, Otto Othman, Co-Founder, Nizar Ahmad, Partner

The strength of [Pincho Factory’s](#) culture and dedication to innovation and unique marketing tactics have helped the Miami-based chain grow to 11 units since it opened 10 years ago.

CEO Otto Othman, who comes from the advertising and design world, knew a mobile app was imperative to enhancing the brand’s customer experience, so he worked closely with Thanx for several months to design an app with a full 360-degree view of guests’ purchasing behaviors.

The app launched late last year, and 100% of Pincho’s digital orders come from loyalty members, and the chain has seen a 178% increase in digital sales. Total sales were up 20% over last year.

The company, which is on target to

47. PINCHO FACTORY

open five units this year, has won two advertising awards for its brand/name change campaign, “We are not a factory,” that went viral, reaching over 1 million people with only a \$1,000 media budget. It also won a Gold ADDY for “Best Guerilla Marketing Campaign” and a Silver Addy for “Best Social Media Campaign.”

Lastly, the chain has developed a new way to train its workforce with its own proprietary portal.

“Our team on the ground absolutely loves it and we have seen guest satisfaction go through the roof,” Othman said.

The chain also has a modern approach to training and operations. It uses an online learning platform, Everbowl University, to teach not only employees but franchisees, and has launched a mobile app and implemented a digital POS in each location.

The chain is passionate about helping its communities, and its good deeds have, in turn, helped the brand. Fenster, for example, earned public recognition when a radio station found out that he was donating 10% of the sales from bowls custom created for a group of patients at a children’s hospital. The station loved it and offered him 30-second radio spots for the entire month.

“I got 80 30-second segments and it cost me no marketing dollars there,” he said.

48. EVERBOWL



Expansion is top of mind for Everbowl, a 30-unit restaurant based in San Diego. With a goal of signing at least 75 franchisees and hitting 100 locations by year’s end, CEO Jeff Fenster could easily be described as ambitious.

Although some may think that sounds like a lofty goal, Fenster said his team can handle it because it builds their stores offsite using technology and a modern building approach. All stores are built on pallets, for example, and shipped to their final locations ready to open within 10 days of arriving.

49. FUZZY’S TACO SHOP

With a laid-back vibe and a cult-like following, Fuzzy’s Taco Shop has been making waves in the fast casual segment since it opened in 2003 in Fort Worth, Texas. It now has nearly 150 restaurants across the United States, opening 13 restaurants and signing deals for another six last year. It will add another 15 by the end of 2020 and plans to hit the 200-unit mark by 2021.

The new leadership team that was put in place last year is fueling the growth, which includes Michael Mabry, who joined the team last year as CDO to focus on franchise development. Jessica Wescott was named CFO, Laura Purser

took on the VP of Marketing role, Samir Wattar is now VP of Supply Chain.

Each of these strategic hires will continue to propel Fuzzy’s Taco Shop forward as the franchise looks to expand nationally, according to the company.

Also set on growing its catering business, Fuzzy’s partnered with ezCater last year to increase awareness. That partnership has already led to considerable sales increases for individual locations and as a brand overall, according to the tech-savvy company. It has created a mobile app and offers online ordering, digital menu boards, digital recipe books and a digital POS system.

50. MODERN MARKET

In spite of industry headwinds, Denver-based Modern Market reported that its comp sales were up 9% in 2019, thanks to menu innovation and an improved digital experience for guests. Also, last year, the 30-unit chain joined forces with Lemonade Restaurant Group to create Modern Restaurant Concepts as a way to help both brands improve everything from their back-end capabilities and customer experience to food costs,

Modern Market, which relies on tech-enabled kitchens for fast ticket times,



50. MODERN MARKET

recently created a digital-ordering platform built from scratch, which CEO Anthony Pigliacampo called the most e-commerce oriented website in the industry. After collecting customer data, Modern Market also retooled the presentation of its menus on all channels to optimize placement of items in order to increase check averages.

The brand's menu offers only whole, sustainable ingredients with no artificial flavors and colors, hydrogenated anything, trans fat, hormones, antibiotics or additives.

Farmers, ranchers and chefs make up the company's crew, which means it serves food that is better for its customers and the planet. Its website even houses an e-commerce site that the company has curated with its customers in mind. Products include a bamboo salad serving bowls, gloss acai canteens, ceramic French presses, cookbooks and porcelain tea mugs.

51. WINGSTOP

Wingstop, which operates and franchises more than 1,300 locations worldwide, hopes to become a top 10 global restaurant brand sooner than later. And based on its financial results, the Dallas-based chain is on its way. In 2019, system-wide sales increased 20.1% year-over-year to \$1.5 billion, marking the 16th consecutive year of same-store sales growth, and it has achieved over 400% shareholder return since its 2015 initial public offering.

Part of that success stems from its strong investment in its digital channels,



which generated more than 35% of sales last year via the company website, SMS, Facebook, Twitter, Alexa, General Motors' OnStar marketplace and Twitch. It's also testing other technology innovations to improve guest experiences including ordering kiosks and pickup lockers.

The company believes that its low initial investment, which is under \$400,000, along with its simple operational model and streamlined labor force, have contributed to unit and sales growth. Its domestic average unit volume is more than \$1.2 million, and it is averaging a 75% carry-out and nearing completion of a third-party delivery program roll out to more than 90% of the U.S. system.

52. LITTLE GREEK FRESH GRILL

Tampa-based Little Greek Franchise has 44 stores in seven states and is looking to grow particularly in Texas and Florida.



Nick Vojnovic, CEO

Growth, however, isn't always top priority for CEO Nick Vojnovic. The cancer survivor is just as passionate about giving back to his communities, so the brand often hosts charitable events for a variety of causes, including Stephen Strives and St. Jude's Children's Hospital. It also works with local schools' nonprofits to help raise money for their causes.

"My parents came to the US from Belgrade, Serbia," Vojnovic told FastCasual. "I am the first one in our family born here. We are grateful for being here and the opportunity this country has provided to my family. Many people and groups helped us out. I believe it is important to give back to my community in any way I can. It is one of Little Greek's core values."

Staying involved in the community is also important to Little Greek, which is why it hosts fun events like its annual toga day, where customers dress up in togas to receive a free gyro.

53. STARBIRD

Since launching in 2016 as a mobile-centric restaurant brand, Starbird has been leading the industry when it comes to innovation and technology. It reimagined the traditional drive-thru, for example, to eliminate the line of cars waiting in the pick-up lane. Customers simply use the Starbird mobile app to order and pay. When they arrive at the restaurant, they select "I'm here!" on the app and pull into a numbered parking spot where their food is delivered within five minutes.

53. STARBIRD



Easing the customer experience, however, isn't the chain's only specialty. It's also on a mission to create the best way to eat crispy, gluten-free chicken and creates uncommon quarterly LTOs like Korean Fried, Tokyo Katsu and Hot Honey chicken. Its salad menu is also gaining traction among customers at the chain, which reported a 35% increase in same-stores sales in 2010. Salad sales now make up 20% of those sales.

Delivery and catering are catching on as well, and Starbird has a variety of technology in place to handle the growth, including new ordering and app platforms and a kiosk partnership.

The six-unit chain created by San Francisco-based innovation agency The Culinary Edge Ventures, added a cloud kitchen in 2018 and last year launched its first virtual kitchen brand, Starbird Wings.

54. SALAD COLLECTIVE

Mad Greens and Snappy Salads joined forces last year to create Salad Collective, a Dallas-based restaurant group serving customizable, veggie-centric menu items.

Although the brands are technically housed under one company allowing

them to share systems, they operate independently serving customers a menu filled with protein, fiber, protein, iron and calcium. Even the salad dressings are made with whole ingredients and feature only natural sweeteners like honey, agave or even carrots when needed.

Guests may choose from more than 50 fresh ingredients prepped in house by chefs at each restaurant, making it easy for customers with food sensitivities or special diets to customize their dishes.

Seasonal offerings, which are at the forefront of culinary trends for the fast casual industry, are always available and often include dates, parsnips and cherries.

Mad Greens, which has 14 locations, and Snappy Salads, which has 33, are both increasing sales in 2020 through multiple channels, particularly online ordering, delivery and catering.

55. PARIS BAGUETTE

Although Paris Baguette has more than 3,000 locations and first opened in 1942 in Seoul, South Korea, it is still an up-and-coming brand in the U.S. It spent last year revamping its expansion plan to focus on a more modern design and opened 14 stores within one year, bringing its U.S. total to 85. It opened its second store in Brooklyn as well as a second location in Virginia inside Korean grocery store, H-Mart, in Fairfax.

Additionally, the brand made strategic executive appointments to fuel growth, including promoting Jack Moran to CEO of Paris Baguette Global and making Darren Tipton CEO of Paris Baguette

Americas.

Their mission is to take Paris Baguette U.S. above the 100 mark by the end of the year and to hit at least 1,000 U.S. stores by 2030.

"Our goal is to have one or two in all of the major global cities in which we do business," Moran said.

56. DICKEY'S BARBECUE PIT



Dickey's Barbecue Pit first started as a family owned joint in 1941 and has since grown to over 500 locations in the United States and United Arab Emirates with more on the way in Africa, South America and Eurasia.

Known as a technology leader in the restaurant industry with a proprietary POS and arsenal of Artificial Intelligence tools, the Texas-based Dickey's chain has constantly evolved to best serve its guests whether it's creating new twists on classic barbecue favorites or offering multiple delivery options for guests' convenience.

In 2019, this meant adding the first new permanent menu items in 10 years: Pit-Smoked Wings in eight new flavors complemented by a flavor and size expansion to their fan-favorite ribs.

56. DICKEY'S BARBEQUE PIT

The menu additions added a new shareable/snackable dining channel to the brand's menu leading to new customers and sales growth. From the launch of the campaign on Aug. 30 through the start of the holiday season on Nov. 1, stores saw a 3% increase in daily sales over the same time period last year.

Dickey's also saw a sharp increase in app users, measuring a 116% increase in android users and 16.6% growth in IOS.

57. MAMOUN'S FALAFEL

Opening in 1971 in Greenwich Village, Mamoun's Falafel may be one of the oldest Middle Eastern restaurants in the US, but the 10-unit chain has put in a variety of new systems to help it meet its goal of having more than 100 units in development by year's end and 1,000 over the next few years.

Those upgrades include a new district manager program, simplifying operations and technology enhancements, including Mamouniversity.

The digital training system features training modules for employees and franchisees, while the chain's POS, created by CrunchTime, offers the ability to track inventory, ordering, P&L and more.

To manage its franchisee marketing, Mamouns has tapped MomentFeed, which houses the tools franchisees need for their social media and other marketing needs.

It's also working on a mobile app and online-ordering capabilities.

58. TARKA INDIAN KITCHEN

Hoping to become a regional and then a national player in the fast casual industry, Tarka Indian Kitchen, a nine-unit chain based in Houston, is preparing to franchise.

The Indian fast casual concept, which opened three restaurants in 18-months, is now focused on overcoming some of the current industry obstacles from labor concerns to the rise in off-premise sales.

Delivery, for example, makes up 20% of Tarka's business, and to combat the rising expense from third-party delivery, the chain increased third-party delivery prices, consolidated possible delivery partners and revamped the app and loyalty program to encourage customers to use its own online ordering system.

The strategies worked. The number of app users increased by 20,000 and is still growing, and execs expect same-store sales to increase 3-5% because of these technological additions.

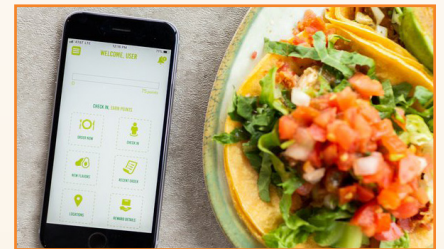
Although customizability has always been a key to Tarka's success, it still offers a made-from-scratch kitchen



where dishes are cooked to order. The model allows the company to showcase the highly complex flavors of its Indian cuisine and makes the menu approachable to first-time guests.

Tarka, which is on target to open two locations by the end of the year, is also planning to add units next year in Dallas, Houston, Austin and San Antonio.

59. CALIFORNIA TORTILLA



When it comes to moving and shaking, California Tortilla has it in the bag with its innovative spirit highlighted in various LTOs, its cult-like following that it calls Burrito Elitos, and its out-of-the-box, buzzworthy promotions - like paying customers to eat chips and queso based on the wind chill. Those elements combined with a technology-forward mind-set has helped it grow to 40 units, ending 2019 with \$32.5 million in same-store sales.

The chain, referred to Cal Tort by its fans, underwent a rebrand last year to introduce a new service model, a culinary take on fast casual to ensure accuracy, customization and engagement. It led to enhancements in sourcing, redesigning the makeline, reconfiguring the restaurant to highlight ingredients, engineering a menu

59. CALIFORNIA TORTILLA

featuring fan favorites but also opening up to customization, selecting interior finishes and upgrading its [mobile app](#).

The chain is focused on growing this year in the southeast region of the United States through franchise agreements in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia. It will also continue growth within Pennsylvania.

60. STARBUCKS

It's a fact that Starbucks has [been driving the adoption of mobile payments](#) over the past few years and is [testing the use of bitcoin for payment](#), but what may not be so obvious is that it has also added [artificial intelligence](#) to its [list of expertise](#). Whether it's [voice-ordering](#) or using espresso machines that [collect data](#), CEO Kevin Johnson knows tech is important as long as it doesn't come at the expense of human connection in his 31,000 stores employing 400,000 workers serving 100 million customers a week.

"At Starbucks, we have always believed that investing in our partners and creating the best possible experience for them leads directly to customer connection," he said in a recent [blog post](#). "We will pursue world-class technology, not just for the sake of technology, but in service of humanity and in support of our mission to inspire and nurture the human spirit one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time."

That goal piggybacks on another Starbucks initiative, [which is protecting employees' mental health](#).

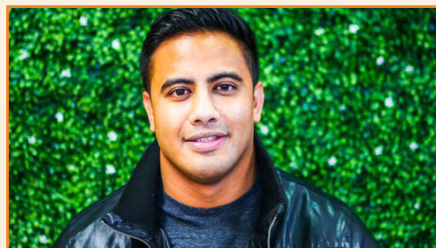
Understanding that one in five adults experience some form of mental illness each year, Starbucks held [an event last fall](#) for 12,000 store managers and field leaders to prove that "mental health matters at Starbucks."

The company is also working with the National Council for Behavioral Health on a dedicated training program for all U.S. and Canada store managers inspired by Mental Health First Aid and has given [all workers free access to Headspace](#), a subscription service offering themed sessions and easy guided meditations.

61. SWEETBERRY BOWLS

Since opening two years ago, Sweetberry Bowls has opened 20 units across seven states, making a name for itself in the healthy fast casual sector. Although it started off by serving only acai bowls and smoothies, it has added poke bowls, wraps and salads. Last year, it partnered with several third-party delivery platforms — Uber Eats, DoorDash, Grub Hub and Postmates, which has added 10% to its topline — and is now testing ghost kitchens.

As the menu and service offerings continue to grow at Sweetberry, so does



Desi Saran, CEO

its sales. In 2018, Sweetberry earned about \$2 million in sales and more than doubled that in 2019, finishing the year at just over \$4 million.

The chain, which opened a mix of corporate and franchised units last year, is now solely focused on franchising and plans to open 10-15 stores by the end of the year. So far in 2020, it has sold nine territories and opened seven locations.

"Our goal is to go global with Sweetberry Bowls. Within the next five years, we're hoping to expand internationally," [CEO Desi Saran told FastCasual](#). "Based on the phenomenal feedback we've received within the last 12 months, and with the help of our team and trusted partners, I am certain that this goal is attainable."

62. SKY'S GOURMET TACOS

Sky's Gourmet Tacos may only have two locations, but it has been making major growth strides since Barbara Jean "Sky" Burrell opened it 28 years ago in Los Angeles with \$2,000 and a dream.

Soon after its lobster and shrimp tacos garnered it national attention (fans include Usher and Stevie Wonder), Burrell added crawfish, filet mignon and shitake mushrooms to the taco lineup, along with burritos to hamburgers.

And that was just a jumping off point for the brand.

In 2017, it added "Sky's Gourmet Market Place" in the Marina City Club in Marina del Rey, California. The market not only sells a refined original menu

62. SKY'S GOURMET TACOS

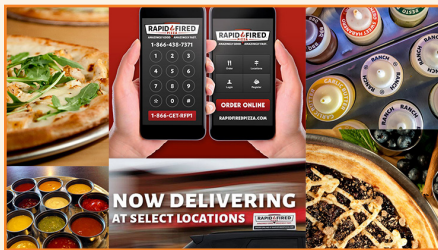
but is also has a full deli and grocery store. In April of last year, Sky's original location moved to a larger property, and the brand is now part of Amazon Restaurants and Amazon Prime Sales and Caviar Catering. It also has a retail division that sells the chain's sauces via Amazon and Walmart.

Later this year, Sky's is opening in the new NFL Stadium Complex in Inglewood, California.

Clearly, the company has spent the last few years creating a sound base of operations, supply chains and staff to handle its expansions.

"I was born to a tradition of good food, and food is the one thing that all people, no matter who they are, can share and come together – that I was born with," Burrell said. "Life taught me the rest."

63. RAPID FIRED PIZZA



Rapid Fired Pizza, based in Kettering, Ohio, has rolled into 2020 on a growth spurt. The 35-unit chain opened 11 locations last year and is expanding this year into the Midwest, East Coast and Texas by relying on area developers, who assist the brand in selling franchises. They also oversee store opening and ensure that RFP standards



are met at individual stores. The 2020 goal is to add 10 Area Developers in 2020, which would more than double the present count.

That goal, of course, wouldn't be possible if the pizza didn't resonate with customers, but Rapid Fire guests have complete control over their pizza orders starting with the crust. They may choose from the chain's standard thin or pan crusts as well as a gluten-free option. And earlier this year, Rapid Fire launched its No Doh pizza, which allows customers to replace crust with spinach leaves or grated parmesan cheese to cut at least 350 calories and carbs up to 98%.

"We have been watching the trends that focus primarily on low-carb, gluten-free, keto and paleo diet options, and we wanted to have more options available for our customers," VP Kelly Gray recently said. "Customers love the variety of options as well as the speed at which the pizzas cook – in just 180 seconds."

64. THE HABIT BURGER GRILL

The Habit Burger Grill made headlines earlier this year when Yum Brands, the parent company of Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and KFC, acquired it for \$375 million.



Although Habit, based in Irvine, California, with 300 company locations in the U.S. and China, will remain in its current headquarters and continue to be operated under its current president, Russell Bendel, Yum Brands CEO David Gibbs called the transaction a "win-win" as it allows YUM to offer a new investment to its franchisees while also helping to scale the better-burger brand.

Bendel said that over the past few years, the chain had focused on becoming a total-access brand by growing its delivery business, expanding online ordering and mobile channels and enhancing the in-store experience by introducing drive-thrus, kiosks and technology-centric solutions for operations.

"We're proud these and other actions have made The Habit Burger Grill an attractive candidate for a transaction of this kind," he said recently.

Other exciting 2019 news included the chain signing a 25-store development agreement deal to expand throughout



64. THE HABIT BURGER GRILL

Cambodia. The first unit will open this year in Phnom Penh.

65. TAZIKI'S

Although Taziki's is looking forward to opening its 100th location and entering three new states this year, the Birmingham, Alabama-based chain is even more excited about helping others with its HOPE program.

Created by Taziki's Founder Keith Richards in partnership with schools across the nation, Herbs Offering Personal Enrichment helps students with special needs learn how to grow, harvest and sell fresh herbs and gives them experience in getting paid for their work. Taziki's chefs then use the herbs harvested by workers.

About 75% of the chain's locations are involved with the HOPE Project, which employs 67 workers with special needs, and the goal is to get every unit on board by the end of the year.

Taziki's is proving that helping those in need isn't a hindrance to growing a brand. In fact, the chain's same-store sales were up nearly 7% over the previous year. And it's adding a variety of tech-savvy enhancements to elevate its customer experience, including Express Pick-up, where guests use digital

notification boards to see when orders are ready.

Also, Taziki's has reintroduced curbside through its app in multiple locations as well, improved its POS and has changed the layout to its physical cook lines in order to meet guests demands accurately and quickly.

66. ORIGINAL CHOP SHOP



Will Evans, CFO, Jason Morgan, CEO, Kyle Frederick, COO

Original ChopShop's mantra of "just feel good food" is all about customization. Whether it's serving food for breakfast, lunch, dinner, as a snack or via catering, the Phoenix-based fast casual brand is always innovating to meet the changing needs of its customers. The menu, for example, provides options free of gluten, dairy, lactose and soy, along with vegetarian, vegan and whole 30 options.

And Kyle Frederick, chief operating officer, isn't afraid to test uncommon concoctions. Last year, for example, he rolled out over a dozen trendy offerings, including a Jacked O'Lantern Protein Shake, Beet and Hummus Salad and the Acai Super Fruit Bowl.

Original ChopShop's innovative nature has led to an impressive growth rate,

considering it first opened in 2016 and already has 17 locations. Same-store sales in 2019 were \$16.1 million, and total sales were \$20.4 million. It opened three locations last year, and each now boasts an AUV of over \$2 million with cash on cash returns of 40%.

The chain, led by Jason Morgan, the former CFO for Zoe's Kitchen, will add four additional locations by the end of the year.

67. AZZIP PIZZA

Azzip, which is pizza spelled backward and pronounced Ay-Zip, has seen tremendous growth over the past three years with annual same-store sales growth of 13.4%, 11.8%, and 13.3%, respectively, due to its focus on creating great workplace environments.

After all, Brad Niemeier, who founded Azzip Pizza in 2014 after winning a business plan competition while a student at Purdue University, quickly learned that great customer service can only come from happy employees. And that's exactly why the nine-unit brand pays well and equips new employees with welcome kits, Azzip swag and free pizza coupons. It also hosts a monthly "Home Office Takeover," where the corporate execs run the stores and employees are sent home with pay. Those perks have resulted in lower turnover — 55% in 2019 — when the industry average hovers around 73%.

Azzip, based in Indiana, is just as passionate about customer loyalty, which is why it created the "Power of Pizza," a customer service philosophy,



67. RAZZIPI PIZZA

focused on finding ways to drive customer loyalty by building more memorable visits for guests instead of relying on an impersonal, data-driven loyalty program.

Employees have the “pre-emptive thumbs-up” to go above-and-beyond to create “6-star experiences” for guests by surprising them with free cookies, rewarding loyal customers and hosting “Make Your Own Pizza Day” for kids at the store. This emphasis has resulted in an internal satisfaction rating of 97.6%, and external metrics include an average Yelp rating of 4.4 stars and average Google rating of 4.7 stars.

68. NAF NAF MIDDLE EASTERN GRILL



Naf Naf Middle Eastern Grill’s focus remains on growth and innovation. Since it launched its [franchising program last year](#) and [hired a VP of Franchise](#), it has signed 45 deals, bringing the brand to three new states by the end of 2020.

When it comes to innovation, the 38-unit chain isn’t afraid to take risks. It has opened a Naf ghost kitchen inside Eats on Sedgwick in Chicago, a virtual kitchen that allows customers to place orders for delivery or pickup but may also walk into the building lobby to order through kiosks.

Although the centerpiece of every Naf Naf is its open kitchen and bakery where chefs cook everything in view of guests, technology is also important to the guest experience. Customers may engage with the brand via its mobile app or website as well as its in-restaurant digital menu boards.

Employees also have tech at their fingertips with the brand’s core training method housed on a digital platform supported by Discover Link. Each Naf Naf restaurant is equipped with a tablet for easy access to the training platform, HRIS system and daily communications.

69. SALATA

Houston-based Salata Salad Kitchen’s decision to [rebrand last June](#) is paying off as the 14-year-old chain saw a 3.3% lift in its 2020 first-quarter sales. It’s also on target to increase same-store sales and double off-premise growth by the end of the year.

All that growth is stemming from the chain’s focus on streamlining operations.

Salata, for example, recently rolled out a new mobile-optimized online ordering experience, a cloud-based point-of-sale system from Toast and an updated catering ordering platform. It also made delivery available from all locations, a service customers obviously



loved considering online ordering sales increased 879% during a week-long partnership with DoorDash that offered zero fees.

That’s not all that’s new at Salata, however.

The chain is also working on a new mobile app built by Paytronix that should simplify the digital experience and loyalty program for on-the-go guests. It will feature online ordering, including access to Salata’s nutrition builder tool and a Salata location finder.

Tech isn’t the only place innovation is happening. Salata Salad Kitchen [hired Kevin W. King](#) as its first corporate [executive chef](#). He’s tasked with ensuring brand, food production, menu planning, food cost, safety and cleanliness requirements are met.

70. BEYOND SUSHI

Beyond Sushi, which opened in 2012 as a completely self-funded plant-based chain restaurant in NYC, now has seven locations and is on a mission to expand outside its home state.

What sets this sushi joint apart from others is that it serves no fish. Although one would think the key ingredient in sushi would be the fish, the chain — founded by owner and Chef Guy Vaknin — is completely fish free. In fact, its motto is “Eat clean and leave a lasting impression on our planet.”

And apparently, the idea sat well with two sharks — Lori Greiner and Matt Higgins — of the TV show, “Shark Tank.” [They invested \\$1.5 million](#) for 30% in the West Coast business and

70. BEYOND SUSHI

15% in the East Coast operations.

Vaknin's deal made it the first vegan business on "Shark Tank" to reel in a deal.

Its vegan-friendly menu, which is certified kosher and allergy-friendly, includes sushi, kebabs, risotto, homemade breads and sake-infused cocktails. Customers may dine in, carry out or have their fish-free fare delivered. They can even book Beyond Sushi for private events, including weddings, corporate lunches or parties, where professional chefs run sushi stations stocked with a rainbow of colors and variety.

71. VOODOO DOUGHNUT

With its in-your-face attitude, Voodoo Doughnut often grabs a lot of attention from its funny slogans and quirky doughnut names. The Old Dirty Bastard, for example, comes with chocolate frosting, Oreo cookies and peanut butter, while another favorite is the Maple Blazer Blunt. It's shaped like a marijuana cigar and dusted with cinnamon sugar, and the top is dipped in maple frosting and red-sprinkle embers.

The concept is the brainchild of friends and entertainment-minded Portlanders Kenneth "Cat Daddy" Pogson and Tres



Shannon. They opened the first location in 2003 in Portland, and a month later, Voodoo already had its first mention in the national press. Whether that was more to do with the doughnuts or the off-the-wall marketing, the world may never know, but the brand has since been featured on The Travel Channel, The Cooking Channel, MTV, Good Morning America, The Today Show, The Tonight Show and in print publications such as People, Playboy, Conde Nast, Spin, GQ, Jane, Maxim and Food & Wine, to name a few.

Although Voodoo didn't open its second unit until 2008, it's up to nine locations in five states. We'd say, this doughnut shop is on a roll.

72. PITA MEDITERRANEAN STREET FOOD



More than 30 locations of Pita Mediterranean Street Food have opened in the Southeast since the chain launched in 2012, in Peachtree City, Georgia, and it's not slowing.

"There simply were no Mediterranean options here," Pita CMO Michael Carino, who's a longtime friend of Founder Nour Rabai. "The Pita concept was built on the knowledge of these traditional cuisines and cultures of the Mediterranean that have a far greater

influence in larger cities such as Chicago and New York City but are unique and flavorful to the South."

The chain, which relies on a centralized commissary kitchen where products are made and distributed, reported that year-over-year sales as a company were up 60% last year, and plans are underway to open 12 to 15 units by the end of 2020.

"When guests arrive, I want them to have hot, fresh, made-to-order Mediterranean food that's served in a timely manner," Rabai told FastCasual. "I want them to notice that our food is not only beautiful, but it's flavorful and authentic to my homeland."

73. JUICE IT UP

Celebrating 25 years this year, Juice It Up is known as a pioneer in healthy menu innovation. It was one of the first chains, for example, to make available superfood ingredients like spirulina, collagen, acerola, acai and pitaya.

In fact, the chain is so dedicated to being on the cusp of the healthy food trend, it has a full-time health guru and nutritionist who designs menu items that are both functional and delicious. And in an effort to make sure customers understand that passion, the chain recently rolled out an updated prototype



73. JUICE IT UP

design and layout to bring production of its offerings to the front of house.

The Irvine, California-based brand continues to broaden its presence in its home state with openings in Ripon and Delano, two rapidly growing communities in Central California.

With 100 franchised locations open or under development in California, New Mexico, Oregon and Texas — 77 of which are in California — California remains a key area of growth for the brand.

The brand plans to open three additional Southern California locations in Costa Mesa, Santa Ana and Rialto this year.

74. FARMER BOYS



Considering farm-to-table is a relatively new trend, Farmer Boys could be considered a pioneer, since launched in 1981. Since then, it's been serving hormone-free, antibiotic-free meat and cage-free eggs, and its veggies have always been hand-chopped in the kitchens and served within days of harvest.

The 90-unit chain is hoping to add six-to-eight locations this year but is even more focused on empowering women. The brand, which has more than 30 women on its corporate team and nearly

300 female managers and employees, changed its name for the month of March to "Farmer Girls" to honor Women's History Month. For a limited time, it also christened its most popular menu item, the Bacon Boy burger, "Bacon Girl."

"While our concept was started by five brothers, our team is supported by all genders and we wanted to use Women's History Month to recognize that and express our gratitude," President and COO Karen Eadon recently said.

Additionally, more than 27% of Farmer Boys franchisees are female.

75. TORCHY'S TACOS

Created 10 years ago as an elevated street taco concept in Austin, Texas, Torchy's Tacos now has more than 70 locations in four states with an AUV of \$3.8 million. Part of that success stems from its low turnover rate, which owes in large part to its managing partner program that pays GMs 7% of operating profit plus base pay. Those benefits can often result in GMs making up to \$100,000 per year, which inspires their loyalty in an industry that is used to losing employees every few months or even weeks.

Since joining the company in 2018, CEO GJ Hart has been revising operations to

increase throughput, such as predicting what's going to be ordered and when, making tortillas in-house daily, never reheating meat as well as alleviating some of the stress on kitchen staff.

He's also hired an executive team full of restaurant executives who have experience running large companies including 7-Eleven, Texas Roadhouse, Taco Bell and Dunkin.'

The company plans to add 100 company-owned restaurants in the next five years, which like all its locations will have their own unique designs and will be committed to responsibly sourced ingredients.



TORCHYS

KELLY RODDY

CEO, SALADWORKS

Kelly Roddy has been a staple in the fast casual industry for years and is probably best known as the CEO of Schlotzky's where he spent 11 years. He took on a new challenge last year, however, and is now charged with growing Saladworks, a 100-chain based in Pennsylvania.

"Saladworks is poised for explosive growth and to be a national success," said Roddy, who isn't afraid to try new strategies to fuel that growth. He's testing virtual kitchens, for example, via a partnership with Kitchen United in Chicago, Scottsdale and Austin.

"We are trying to lead the way and grow aggressively," he said. "We are trying to be on the cutting edge vs watching others make mistakes."

If the tests prove successful, Roddy would like to add 50 to 100 virtual kitchens to the Saladworks portfolio, which would go a long way toward helping him meet his ultimate goal of doubling the brand's size to 200 locations by year's end.



GEOFF ALEXANDER

PRESIDENT, WOW BAO

It's fair to say that Geoff Alexander leans into innovation. From being one of the first execs to implement self-ordering kiosks 10 years ago and adding a fully automated dining experience in 2017 to testing a virtual kitchen before it was a trend, Alexander isn't afraid to take risks in order to move Wow Bao forward.

His latest big idea for Wow Bao involves giving restaurant brands all over the U.S. access to another revenue stream by allowing them to serve a limited menu of its Bao, bowls and dumplings.

"We believe that every kitchen can be a third-party kitchen for Wow Bao," said Alexander, who began testing the idea earlier this year with a sister restaurant in Schaumburg, Illinois. He's also launched it with an existing tenant inside Kitchen United in San Francisco.

The up-front cost for a brand to participate is about \$2,000, which includes online training and onboarding as well as the first order of packaging and all kitchen equipment needed to cook the buns — an aluminum kettle, rice cooker, bain marie/hot well.

"Our goal is for the third-party operator to do \$2,000 a week in sales," Alexander said.



AMY JONES-HOM

VP OF OPERATIONS, SWEETGREEN

It's no mystery as to why sweetgreen landed the top spot in this year's Top 100 list, but many people might not be as familiar with the woman behind its operations.

Amy Jones-Hom, whose mantra is "a restaurant's customers are only as happy as its employees," has made technology the focus of the 14-year-old chain's labor management strategy.

Sweetgreen has its own mobile app, for example, which tracks schedules, hosts training videos with a gamification component and serves as a way for employees to communicate with management. Employees, who use the app called Sprout, only via iPads or desktops while they are in the store, have their own accounts that not only show them a clear career-development path but also track their training progress and award them points as they complete modules.

"We have (built) a culture with it," said Jones-Hom, who spent five years directing operations at Red Robin before joining the sweetgreen team.

Good communication is just part of what it takes to have a happy team. The other half is about creating a family atmosphere with an inclusive environment, which is why Jones-Hom loves that the chain gives employees five months of paid parental leave and also pays them to volunteer in their communities.

"That's part of who we are at sweetgreen," she said.



MICHAEL WU

CEO, POKEWORKS

Michael Wu has been instrumental in bringing poke to mainstream America without diluting the traditional concept.

"One challenge we have faced is the over-popularization and 'trendiness' of poke," he said. "The culturally-inspired dish has become mainstream, which may have caused some to believe its cultural significance has been diluted. At Pokeworks, we're working to ensure that we are serving customers an authentic cultural mix of flavors, while keeping our menu fresh and innovative."

Introducing the dish to as many guests as possible has been Wu's mission since opening the chain five years ago with his three college friends. The company now has 50 locations, with plans to hit 100 by year's end.

We're always trying to keep our menu innovative, without compromising tradition," said Wu, who spends a lot of time in the kitchen working on new menu items. He's recently partnered with Bravo's Top Chef alumnus and owner of Maui's Tin Roof, Chef Sheldon Simeon, to ensure tradition is honored while they innovate the menu.

"Customers can count on tradition and innovation to go hand-in-hand at Pokeworks," Wu said.



MICHELLE BYTHEWOOD

PRESIDENT, SALATA

Michelle Bythewood has been an impactful catalyst for change since she joined Salata as CMO three years ago. Before taking on the president role last year, Bythewood built Salata's entire marketing team from the ground up, organized and led their inaugural brand conference and spearheaded the research and development that led to the creation of Salata's new restaurant prototype and rebrand.

As president, Bythewood is now facilitating the rollout of the rebrand in which she was the catalyst.

"Now, with the modernized rebrand that is based on a deep understanding of our current and future guests, we are putting more intention on the front-of-house customer experience," she said. This will help us stand out from competition in this space and support the aggressive growth plans we have laid out in front of us to enter new markets and attract new guests."

She's also been busy enhancing the brand's leadership, bringing on the chain's first corporate chef as well as hiring David Wheeler as chief development officer, who developed Salata's CRM system, a digital interactive market planning program and a new franchise sales website.



MICHAEL LASTORIA

FOUNDER, &PIZZA

Michael Lastoria has a controversial view when it comes to paying his employees. The founder of &Pizza, a 39-unit "anti-establishment establishment," believes that all restaurant workers should be making a living wage, and that stance, is sometimes unpopular among his peers.

"It is getting more expensive to live in all aspects in the United States," said Lastoria, who believes more brands should be looking at how to pay a \$15 minimum wage even before laws are passed that require it. "How can you look at it as a net positive given you know those dollars are important to those people who are coming to work for you?"

Lastoria is proof that the strategy can work, considering he started with that thesis in 2012 and still has, what he describes, as one of the "healthier economic models" in the industry.

Lower turnover and a strong employees culture, he said, drives top-line revenue for the brand.

Not only does paying people a living wage make them feel better about the company they work for, it helps them live better lives, Lastoria said.

"And that's what really matters here. Sometimes a simple "doing the right thing" is the right thing," he said. "When forced to pay up, CEOs will figure out a way to right-size their business as they always have and the lowest wage workers in this country will be lifted up."



YONG ZHAO

CO-FOUNDER, JUNZI KITCHEN

While studying at Yale, Yong Zhao, who grew up in Panjin, northeast of Beijing, craved the homestyle Chinese food he had as a boy. Not being able to find similar options around campus, he called his mom to learn how to make chun bing, a type of wrap with protein, noodles and veggies.

That phone call was the first step to Zhao working with a group of friends to create Junzi Kitchen five years ago on campus. The concept now has four units and a delivery-only concept in NYC, and has inspired Zhao to keep Chinese food thriving in the U.S.

“The whole industry doesn’t work anymore, basically,” said Yong, who discovered that 10% of the more than 28,000 Chinese takeout restaurants in America closed in the last year. He sees Junzi’s simple, healthy and affordable fast casual Chinese model as the solution, however, which is why he’s raised \$5 million to buy other Chinese restaurants in New York city from retiring owners. He plans to modernize them while keeping parts of their original menus.



CHARLES GUZZETTA

CHIEF BRAND DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, BURGERFI

Charlie Guzzetta, one of the youngest top execs in the fast casual industry, has been with BurgerFi six years, participating in nearly 90 grand openings. He’s been the catalyst behind the brand’s growth, and his leadership has helped move the company’s footprint to nearly 125 units, both domestic and international.

As CDB, he leads business development all over the world and has been involved with every aspect of BurgerFi during his tenure, including operations, public relations, marketing, new store openings, franchise brand development and more.

Starting with the company as marketing manager, Guzzetta is now the BurgerFi Brand Ambassador and has appeared on several national business and lifestyle TV and radio shows. He participates and represents BurgerFi in most industry events and is highly sought by the media for his far-reaching industry perspective.



SCOTT BOATWRIGHT

CHIEF RESTAURANT OFFICER, CHIPOTLE

Since leaving Arby's in [2017 to join Chipotle](#), Scott Boatwright has been instrumental in the seamless integration of technology into the chain's operations. His contributions helped [digital sales](#) explode over the [last year](#).

Boatwright, for example, oversaw the addition of Digital Make Lines and Mobile Pick Up Shelves, which has created a more frictionless experience. He also helped to launch [Chipotle Rewards](#) as well with an incredible cross functional partnership and ample employee training to provide an easy transition to a new process.

The launch was so successful the program has seen more than 7 million enrollments in seven months. [Chipotlanes](#) (drive through mobile pick up window) is another example of innovation and integration between operations and technology working together to further both access and convenience for guests and delivery partners.

Boatwright also lends his expertise to other fast casuals by speaking at industry events. He'll keynote this year's [Fast Casual Executive Summit](#).



PRAKASH KARAMCHANDANI (PK), HOCHAN JANG (CJ)

FOUNDERS BALANCE PAN-ASIAN

Prakash Karamchandani (PK) and HoChan Jang (CJ) founded Balance Grille 10 years ago at the ages of 25 and 26 years old, respectively. Strategic partnerships with famous athletes, rappers, visual artists and food bloggers have elevated Balance as a place to see and be seen, and have served as creative advertising and marketing strategies.

Having invested early in [technology trends](#), PK and CJ made the brand accessible and visible in an increasingly online world. By choosing to make their kitchens open and transparent, they have made it easier for customers to connect with their food.

Although the men started with humble beginnings in 2010, running one Asian-inspired fast casual store and managing less than 10 employees in Maumee, Ohio, they have built the company to five locations and boast the [first indoor aquaponics](#) facility to be vertically integrated into a restaurant concept.

The millennial duo are still growing with PK perfecting his public speaking and leadership skills this year, presenting at events and [conferences](#) focused on technology, business innovations, entrepreneurialism and aquaponics. Meanwhile, CJ continues to earn more culinary accolades and was honored with a Best of Cleveland award for his Taco Menus.



Prakash Karamchandani



Hochan Jang

JAMES PARK

CEO, GARBANZO MEDITERRANEAN FRESH

James Park is an innovator, who understands the need for convenience, value and speed in the competitive fast casual environment.

Since joining Garbanzo as CEO in 2015, he has led the company in a brand overhaul from Garbanzo Mediterranean Grill to Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh. Changes included a complete menu rebrand resulting in three consecutive years of same-store sales increases and four-plus star online guest reviews.

And it's not just guesswork. Park is known for his data-driven decisions to optimize Garbanzo's consumer value proposition. The menu updates, for example, included cutting 25 menu items in order to speed up service times from as long as 30 minutes for a line of 20 people to as little as 10 minutes.

Park is also a savvy marketing and operations executive who has never been afraid to implement bleeding-edge technology into his customer experience - even when other brands weren't yet there.

Lastly, Park is an entrepreneur, acquiring an equity interest in La Boulangerie de San Francisco, founded by French baker Pascal Rigo. Park and Garbanzo co-owner, Michael Staenberg, are building a franchising organization and support center for the bakery and is aggressively franchising in 2020.



SARAH GROVER

VEGGIE GRILL

Sarah Grover, the woman behind #thegreatamericantakeout, is proof one person can make a big difference to many.

The interim CMO for Veggie Grill saw how COVID-19 had basically changed the restaurant industry overnight and knew the only way through it was for brands to help one another.

"I wrote up the concept brief, shared it with our ad agency, High Wide and Handsome, and they came back very quickly with the #thegreatamericantakeout, the logo," she told FastCasual.

"Together, we put together a social outreach to everyone we know and it took off from there."

About 48 hours later, the idea was live, and 300 brands were on board.

"The message was a simple one," she said. "If we plan to survive this horrible situation and keep our team members employed, we must leverage the power of one and amplify our message to America: Please order take out."

After week one, restaurants asked for a repeat, but in order to keep the idea fresh, it needed to include more partners to help amplify the message. That's when Grover reached out to friends at Pepsi and Coke and asked them to come together to support the cause.

"Before I could finish my pitch, both brands said, 'YES.'"

Since then, CORE (children of restaurant employees) Smithfield Foods and NRAERF have joined and also helped to raise funds.



AKASH KAPOR

FOUNDER, CURRY UP NOW

Curry Up Now founder Akash Kapoor has been a self-employed entrepreneur and businessman since childhood when in grade school he sold burgers, hot dogs and snacks before and after films during movie nights.

He also helped with his mother's bakery business throughout college and was involved in other small ventures until launching the first cable business in 1990 in his hometown in India, where it remains the area's largest cable provider.

He moved to the U.S. in 1993 and grew a variety of businesses from credit card marketing to mortgage banking to debt and tax mediation, before leaving the traditional business world in 2009 to start Curry Up Now with his wife, Rana. Curry Up Now was the first Indian street food truck in the Bay Area, and has since grown to include three food trucks, two craft cocktail bar concepts and eight brick-and-mortar locations with approximately 50 more units planned in markets nationwide.

Kapoor's mission is to grow Curry Up Now into the largest Indian food eatery in the U.S. and beyond, all the while staying true to his roots and serving great tasting, quality Indian food.



MICHAEL HAITH

CEO, TERIYAKI MADNESS

After selling his previous businesses to acquire and step in as CEO of Teriyaki Madness in 2014, Michael Haith moved the franchise headquarters to Denver from its original Las Vegas home office and has dedicated himself to giving customers all over the world access to what he calls, "The best teriyaki on earth."

Haith is now on a mission to "put the soul back into franchising," believing that the era of cookie-cutter stores, uniforms, etc., has depleted employee motivation, leading to a lack of personality and character within U.S. food franchises.

A starting point to adding soul, according to Haith, is to allow employees and franchisees the flexibility to make each store unique to its neighborhood, surroundings or even identity of the owner.

Under his leadership, Teriyaki Madness was recently recognized by Entrepreneur Magazine as a Franchisee 500 company and by Franchise Business Review for their top 50 Franchise Satisfaction award two years in a row. The brand also ranked on the top half of the Inc. 5000 list in 2017 with three-year sales growth of 171%.



JEFF SINELLI

FOUNDER, WHICH WICH SUPERIOR SANDWICHES

While overseeing the growth of Which Wich Superior Sandwiches, the nearly 450-unit fast casual he founded in 2003 in Dallas, Jeff Sinelli has also begun franchising Paciugo Gelato Caffè.

He bought the Italian gelato company two years ago under his branding and entrepreneurial innovation company, Sinelli Concepts International, and is on a mission to expand it, while also developing concepts across industries including restaurants, food trucks, beverages, coffee, real estate, hospitality, speaking and events and branding.

He recently launched Supernova Coffee & Beverages and Birdguesa, for example, to disrupt the coffee and chicken segments, respectively.

Sinelli said he's using the company also as a platform to inspire and support young and emerging entrepreneurs within the restaurant and business worlds.



ANDRÉ VENER, QUASIM RIAZ, HAGOP GIRAGOSSIAN

CO-FOUNDERS, DOG HAUS

Nearly 10 years ago, three friends, -- André Vener, Quasim Riaz and Hagop Giragossian-- came together to take the typical hot dog stand to the next level by creating Dog Haus in Pasadena.

The men describe their menu as serving only gourmet hot dogs, sausages and burgers, all made with hormone- and antibiotic- free meat with premium toppings. The high quality ingredients, made-to-order items and fun welcoming environment target a different pattern of consumption from fast food.

At no point over the past decade has the team ever considered bringing outside c-suite executives. Instead, each manages his own aspect of the business, which has resulted in 35 locations, with 14 opening soon and 130+ locations sold nationwide.

The trio's newest business venture is The Absolute Brands, a restaurant group comprised of Dog Haus and eight virtual kitchen concepts, which are delivery-only offering off-shoots of the Dog Haus menu.

"At Dog Haus, we are unlocking the box on what you can do within the typical four walls of a restaurant," Giragossian said. "Ultimately, our end goal with virtual kitchens is to reach wider audiences with our acclaimed, innovative menu items."



André Vener



Quasim Riaz



Hagop Giragossian

AARON NOVESHEN

CEO, STARBIRD

As a graduate of Berkeley Haas School of Business, Aaron Noveshen has been a founder and incubator of more than 25 restaurant brands over the past three decades.

In 2002, he founded The Culinary Edge Ventures, which eventually led to the launch of Starbird, a super-premium fast food restaurant specializing in chicken sandwiches.

Noveshen, who has grown Starbird to six locations, has been instrumental this past year in leading the restaurant industry through COVID-19. As the majority of brands have suffered declining sales, Starbird was the exception as it quickly pivoted to:



- Convert all independent brick-and-mortar outlets into drive-thrus.
- Grant a raise to all hourly workers along with two free meals each shift.
- Implement community-driven promotion strategies beyond reminding guests that they are open. Promotions included kids-eat-free and feed-the-frontlines programs.
- 100% digital transactions.
- Launched additional brands on third-party delivery sites like Starbird Salads and Starbird Wings.
- Obtaining touchless thermometers and several weeks' supply of hand sanitizer to ensure the health and safety of teammates and guests.

“This is our industry of hospitality. It’s not about competition; it’s about community. We’ve got to take care of each other,” Noveshen said in a press release.

KEVIN JOHNSON

CEO, STARBUCKS

Following in the footsteps of someone as well-known and respected in the fast casual industry as former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz couldn’t be easy, but Kevin Johnson hasn’t missed a step since taking over three years ago.

He’s continued to carry-out Schultz’s employee-first mantra, launching a variety of training programs and policies last year geared toward protecting employee mental health.

“It has long been our belief that when we put our partners first, the result is an elevated Starbucks Experience for our stores, our customers, and our communities,” he said.

Johnson is just as passionate about technology, however, as he is employee health and has been championing ways to use it to enhance the customer experience without limiting human interaction.

“This age of unparalleled digital connection has brought with it an age of unprecedented human disconnection. While technology has done many wonderful things, it’s also changed behaviors in a way where people don’t interact with one another nearly as much, which is unhealthy and I think is contributing to a global epidemic of human loneliness. I believe we are just beginning to see and understand the implications,” he said. “And I realize that serving 100 million customers a week at Starbucks means we have at least that many opportunities to enhance human connections and perhaps create that sense of community and a place where people feel more connected face-to-face with other people.”



CHRIS FUQUA

CEO, B. GOOD

Spending eight years as a Dunkin' Brands exec working in marketing, operations, supply chain and strategy prepared Chris Fuqua for pretty much anything, including the CEO gig he took two years ago at B. GOOD.

Under his leadership, the nearly 80-unit Boston-based brand has overhauled the menu, implemented a mobile loyalty app and third-party delivery, opened a ghost kitchen and published a first-ever Animal Welfare Policy.

Fuqua is passionate about studying customer behavior and adapting to meet their evolving needs but in a way that stays true to the brand's mission. For example, offering guests an expanded range of plant-based fare, but drawing from the land not the lab, as so many others are doing.

"While lab-grown alternatives may be trendy today, we believe wholesome, responsibly-sourced ingredients and dishes are the way of the future and are thrilled to build on our proven success in the space," Fuqua said.



CARL HOWARD

CEO, FAZOLI'S

As CEO of Fazoli's, Carl Howard is an award-winning industry veteran and frequent commenter on all things related to the restaurant industry. Howard has been instrumental in taking Fazoli's from a concept facing challenges to an innovator in the industry. Through a series of strategic changes in marketing, menu innovation, service and facilities upgrades, Howard set a strategy that ultimately realigned Fazoli's for future success.

His vision in providing an experience to guests when, how and where they want it has challenged his executive team to develop modern strategies to not only communicate better with guests but to also enhance their in-store experience. Fazoli's, for example, reported last year that its remodeled units saw a 12% sales lift.

The elevated dining experience and ability to adapt in an evolving consumer landscape, Fazoli's was the recipient of the 2019 American Business Awards Gold Stevie Awards in Food & Beverage for Company of the Year and Achievement in Management by Howard.



KAREN KELLEY

SVP, CHIEF RESTAURANT OPERATIONS OFFICER, PANERA BREAD

Before joining the Panera team as SVP and chief restaurants operations officer in 2018, Karen Kelley spent more than 30 years leading a variety of brands including Sweetgreen, Drybar and Tatte Bakery & Cafe.

No matter where her career has taken her, Kelley's ability to cultivate talent is always on display. It's a skill she also hopes to teach others how to hone.

"As leaders it's very important for us to not mistake a lack of knowledge with a lack of intelligence," Kelley said during an interview at the [2019 Fast Casual Executive Summit](#), in which she [keynoted](#).

"We look for that deep restaurant experience sometimes, which does matter, but at the same time, when you look for the strongest people with the most potential no matter what they come from, and they're willing to come in and sign up to learn the business and the model you end up with a much more diverse working group.

You end up with a group of people who kinda challenge the status quo. You end up with a group of people who think differently so you find yourself in this place where you get more creative — you stretch the boundaries."



CHRIS BIRKINSHAW

CEO, ALOHA POKE CO

For nearly two decades, Chris Birkinshaw has worked with fast casual brands in the restaurant industry. From store-level operations at Starbucks to senior management positions across several departments at [Potbelly](#), his career has had a heavy emphasis on franchising with regional, national and international development.

Over the past two years as the CEO of Aloha Poke Co., Birkinshaw has helped to transform the small Chicago-based concept to 18 locations with more in development. His focus is on driving operational excellence and franchise growth as well as helping to foster high levels of engagement with corporate and store teams to create an exceptional experience for consumers.

Simplicity is another focus and a reason for Birkinshaw's success. The chain has a flexible footprint requiring as little as 250 to 1,200 square feet, requires no custom coolers, inserts, holding tables, grills, fryers or ventilation, which allows it to serve customers quickly in a simple, clean and trendy environment.

"There are a ton of fast casual restaurants all chasing the same 2,000 square-foot box, creating a lot of competition for real estate and driving up real estate costs," [Birkinshaw said](#). "Since our equipment needs aren't the same, and we don't use a Chipotle-style 30-foot line with a sneeze guard, we can be much more nimble when great real estate is presented that may be a little too small for the traditional fast casual chains."



NATE HYBL

FOUNDER, GUSTO

Nate Hybl, a former NFL quarterback, opened Gusto after experiencing what he describes as a “culinary awakening.”

Although he had limited access to exotic flavors growing up in a small town in South Georgia, he was exposed to different flavors as he traveled during his football career. Middle Eastern flavors were the first to capture his attention, inspiring him to play around in the kitchen.

“I had no idea what I was doing at first; I didn’t even know how to hold a knife,” he said. That didn’t stop him, however, and his curiosity led him to seek out restaurant jobs ranging from dishwasher to general manager in an effort to learn the essence of the business from the inside. At home, he devoured books on his favorite businesses and transformed his own kitchen into a test kitchen where he would experiment with foods that filled him with enthusiasm.

In October 2014, after nearly four years of research, planning and hosting countless “Nate Nights” to test recipes and get feedback from friends and family, Hybl opened Fusto on Peachtree Road in South Buckhead.

“I set out to invent what I wanted as a consumer and a former athlete who was always on the hunt for tasty, fast food that’s better for your body,” he said. “There weren’t many of these options, especially in the South.”

He’s grown Gusto into five locations and said the years he spent as a quarterback have translated into his current restaurant management strategy. He can often be found at the restaurant interacting with guests and employees.

Seeking to disrupt fast food, Hybl foresees Gusto as a growing force in the market with both methodical and responsible expansion in Atlanta and in other large cities throughout the Southeast.



ZAID AYOUB

FOUNDER AND CEO, SAJJ MEDITERRANEAN

Under Zaid Ayoub’s strategic leadership, SAJJ Mediterranean has grown from being a single storefront in 2012 to a network of 12 stores and two food trucks offering catering and event services. It has additional corporate stores in development across California, and aims to have 20 stores opened or in development by the end of 2020.

The growth is made possible via Ayoub’s willingness to give customers what they want. Never afraid to change his operations style, he’s tapped into social media and on-demand ordering to grow the business.

“Consumer behavior changed considerably,” he said recently about how the chain changed its 48-hour notice policy regarding catering orders to only requiring four hours.

He’s also willing to take risks with the menu.

“In the last year or so, we’ve watched as the restaurant industry has begun to adapt and change to meet the specific dietary needs and preferences of consumers,” said Ayoub, who rolled out pre-designed Lifestyle Bowls last year to fit a variety of dietary preferences. “While our offerings are already highly customizable to fit those needs, we wanted to take that one step further and make it easier for guests to order a bowl that fits their lifestyle.”



KELLY “PEA BRAIN” PARTHEN, SHANNON “PEACASSO” SEIP

CO-FOUNDERS, BEAN SPROUTS

Kelly Parthen and Shannon Seip created Bean Sprouts 13 years ago by finding solutions to the challenges they faced when dining out with kids. And they take the same approach to management.

Guided by their core values of health, innovation, positivity and playfulness, they have challenged assumptions of the restaurant industry to build a strong employee culture and a community that promotes diversity.

The results are not only a profitable, growing business but also employee satisfaction and turnover rates unmatched in the industry. The chain, for example, is one of the only exclusively women-founded restaurant chains in the nation as less than 7% of head chefs and restaurant owners are women. The duo, for that reason, is passionate and intentional about moving women and minorities into leadership roles.

In fact, Bean Sprouts’ board of directors and café leadership is a majority of women and minorities, and Parthen and Seip are active in organizations that promote this diversity focus, such as the Women’s Foodservice Forum and the National Association of Women’s Business Owners.

