

2019 fast casual
TOP 100
MOVERS & SHAKERS

Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment



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Executive Summary

Wow Bao is this year's Fast Casual Top 100 Mover & Shaker, and the fact that a concept focused on healthy cuisine topped the list is proof that customers are embracing more healthful food options. In fact, 17 of the Top 25 brands on this year's list fall into the healthy category, which often includes Asian and Mediterranean concepts.

In its 2018 Healthy Eating Consumer Trend Report, Technomic found that consumers were making food and beverage choices based on their personal definition of health. The report found that 66% of consumers looked for calorie counts on restaurant menus at least some of the time, and 34% said they'd be likely to order dishes made with vegetables.

"The foodservice landscape will become more competitive when it comes to tastier, more innovative healthy menu offerings," said Maia Chang, senior research analyst at Technomic. "This means that more brands will face additional pressure to differentiate through transparency and preparation techniques, as well as brand and sourcing stories."

Choosing the Top 100

Although nearly half the brands on this year's list fell into the healthy category, a variety of cuisine types, including pizza, burgers, barbecue and Mexican cuisine, still found a place. It wasn't an easy list to compile, however, as hundreds of brands nominated themselves by taking part in a survey about their business practices and also nominated executives whom they believed best represented the industry.

A panel of judges weighed each nomination carefully before deciding on the final 100, composed of 75 brands and 25 executives.

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

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

Sincerely,

Cherryh Cansler

Director of Editorial, Network World Media Group



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Editorial director,
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#1 Wow Bao

Although Wow Bao exists via company-owned stores, airport locations, sports stadiums, college campus units and a frozen retail grocery line, the 11-unit Chicago-based chain is probably best known as an innovator in technology. Its newest locations, for example, feature a fully automated front-of-house customer experience that merges speed, order accuracy and hospitality. And that's not all.

The chain — which serves hot Asian steamed buns, potstickers, and rice and noodle bowls — has also integrated its POS with desktop and mobile app ordering and added third-party delivery platforms, email marketing and loyalty programs. The back-of-house solution fully integrates with accounting and inventory management, and each team member has access to an online training portal that includes videos and evaluations.

"We are now utilizing unique customer data to target and personalize our marketing initiatives," said Christine Reznicek, marketing manager.

The brand doubled its size in 2018 and will do the same this year, thanks to the private equity funding it recently acquired.

The funding also helped Wow Bao open a home office last year, adding seven positions, including a senior director of business development, a chief technology officer and a director of employee experience to handle all human resources requirements. Wow Bao also partnered with a supply chain team to establish a pipeline for growth and address the needs of its licensed units. It plans to begin franchising this year as well.



#2 Pokéworks

Consumers are demanding transparency in the food they order from fast casual restaurants, a trend that the founders of Pokéworks are counting on to flourish.

“Healthy eating is not just a trend or a fad, but a necessity to ensure you are doing what is best for your body,” said Kevin Hsu, co-founder and chief marketing officer (CMO). “At Pokéworks, we are striving to deliver clarity on the sourcing practices we have with each item we serve to meet this demand.”

Hsu founded the brand in 2015, in Manhattan with his brother, Kasper Hsu, and college buddies and brothers Peter Yang and Michael Wu. The four shared a vision of bringing people quality and affordable flavorful food.

Heightened by the popularity of the poke trend — which has reached an annual growth rate of 25% and growing — Pokéworks has 38 locations with more than 100 under development. It opened 18 units last year and is on target to open 30 by the end of 2019, including making its international debut. The brand has a master franchise agreement to open in Mexico.

Offering guests an authentic taste of the islands, Pokéworks — in collaboration with Bravo’s “Top Chef” Sheldon Simeon — provides a fresh take on Hawaiian-inspired poke burritos, bowls and salads derived from the local waters.

Setting the tone for its continued growth, Pokéworks joined forces last year with



Toridoll Holdings Corp., a Tokyo-based restaurant company that operates 1,028 restaurant locations in Japan and 533 overseas. The \$1.6 billion holding company will help Pokéworks open 400 locations and launch a presence in Japan.

#3 The Halal Guys

The Halal Guys may have gotten a humble start as a food cart in the '90s in New York City, but the chain has since grown to 80 brick-and-mortar units, opening 36 of those last year. It's on track to more than double its presence in 2019, said CEO Ahmed Abouelenein, whose goal is to hit 180 locations by the end of the year and eventually have 400 locations around the world.

The concept, which has restaurants in 17 states and six countries, opened its first European location earlier this year in London and aims to open three more England-based locations within the year.

The Halal Guys has embraced innovation by recently partnering with Kitchen United, a company that offers off-premise kitchen centers for brands and franchises. The chain's cuisine is available for pickup, delivery and catering from the off-premise kitchen space in Pasadena.

The chain reported \$2.2 million in same-store sales in 2018, and keeps its customers engaged and employees happy via its mobile loyalty app, digital POS, online food safety inspections and mystery shopper programs, Abouelenein said.

Another way the chain is looking outside the box to make customers happy is through



a recent partnership with Allset, a company that allows guests to place orders and pay in advance. In the app, diners select the arrival time, order, pay and tip in advance. The restaurant is then able to prepare the meal for service when the guest arrives.

#4 Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh

If Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh had to define a mission, it would be to make fresh Mediterranean food a staple across the U.S. It is well on its way as the 30-unit chain is entering three markets this year, with 28 units in the pipeline for St. Louis, Boston and Indianapolis.

The chain, which opened four units and reported a 9% increase in same-store sales last year, also deployed native online ordering for both retail and catering within its mobile app. The enhancement removed barriers to ordering and is an example of



Garbanzo's commitment to upgrading the customer experience and streamlining operations via technology.

Internally, the company used an Oracle-powered custom back-of-house solution,

a Brink cloud-based POS that feeds directly into the BOH platform. Externally, Garbanzo offers customers a rewards program powered by Paytronix, including a mobile app with native online ordering and integration into Monkey Media for catering. Tattle measures customer feedback, and SweetIQ manages Garbanzo's digital presence.

That tech-savvy approach attracts not only millennial customers but also operating partners.

"I'm a millennial and proud of it, so I was searching for an emerging brand that attracts other millennials by using a forward-thinking approach, and Garbanzo does exactly that," said [Derek St. George, a Boston-based operating partner](#)



#5 Nékter Juice Bar

Aggressive expansion is on the horizon this year for Nékter Juice Bar, which opened in 2010 in California, with a goal of not only delivering clean and unprocessed juice and smoothies to its guests but also changing generational thinking on how people view their food, health and individual lifestyles.

Fast forward to 2019, and 150 units later, Nékter is still educating consumers but is also listening to them. It recently wrapped up a "listening tour" that involved conversations, interviews and focus groups with guests in 13 U.S. states.

The feedback underscored Nékter's predictions that consumers were becoming more concerned with sourcing, and inspired the brand's in-house R&D team and marketing department to focus even more on transparency and ingredient integrity, CEO and co-founder Steve Schulze said. The brand initiated a national sourcing and distribution program to ensure produce and other ingredients are sourced

as locally as possible to retain peak freshness and optimal nutritional content.

Nékter, which will open 75 restaurants in existing markets and at least seven in new markets across the country by the end of the year, opened 31 units in seven new markets last year.

It has 167 restaurants in development and will continue to use a cluster approach as it enters markets, Schulze said.

"This approach takes the brand into new markets with initially three to five locations, typically 3 to 5 miles apart, to optimize operations, maximize marketing, and build optimal and meaningful buzz and brand awareness," he said.

nékter
JUICE BAR.



#6 Sajj Mediterranean



Mediterranean cuisine is exploding across the fast casual industry, and Sajj Mediterranean is determined to lead the newest generation to the cuisine with its healthy, locally sourced offerings and customizable menu. Guests choose their entree format (sajj wrap, rice bowl, salad, pita sandwich) and pile it with chicken or steak shawarma, or the brand's falafel, which was named the "best falafel in the Bay Area" by Zagat SF.

Authentic Mediterranean and Middle Eastern sauces, chutneys and beverages made with fresh ingredients sourced from local California farms are also available. Each Sajj location displays a map of the region and connects menu ingredients to the farms where they were grown, allowing guests to see where their meals are coming from.

In 2018, the nine-unit chain, which also has two food trucks, reported a 22% increase in same-store sales and opened four stores in Northern California and Southern California. Its growth plan calls for 15 units to be in operation by year's end.

In addition to store growth, Sajj also worked to stay on top of 2018 industry trends and adapted offerings to meet the demands of consumers. For example, it created Chocolate Hummus as a better-for-

you dessert alternative that uses healthy ingredients and also introduced the plant-based Impossible Kabob, made with a plant-based alternative developed by Impossible Foods.

The chain may be small, but it hasn't let its size stand in the way of being a tech-savvy brand. For example, it uses a cloud-based POS system and has a mobile app with ordering payment capabilities that offers customers digital rewards. It also has an online ordering portal for individual meals and catering, automated accounting and scheduling tools and digital ops control systems.



#7 Teriyaki Madness

Denver-based Teriyaki Madness saw 2018 as an opportunity to push outside its four walls. The 50-unit Asian fast casual brand rolled out delivery and catering and launched a [mobile app](#) for ordering, pickup and connecting with many of the third-party delivery apps.

Those upgrades paid off as the chain reported that its off-premise sales increased 30% along with traffic counts and average ticket size in 2018. Same-store sales were up 13.36%, which was 19 times above the industry average. Profitability was also up 23%, and AUVs exceeded \$1 million.

"We're on a constant quest to keep our guests happy and satisfied," CEO Michael Haith said.

The brand's 2019 growth plan calls for an additional 50 shops to open in new states as well as international growth. It will also sign agreements to develop up to 108 shops.

Also helping Teriyaki Madness increase sales and profitability was the addition of a variety of technology deployments, including Revel's POS iPad-based system, Chatmeter's social media and reputation management platform, ProfitKeeper to manage profit and losses, and Naranga as a digital launch platform, support center and digital library for franchisees.



#8 Sweetgreen

sweetgreen®

Sweetgreen has officially transformed from a small brand created in 2007, by three buddies during their college years at Georgetown, into the restaurant industry's first "unicorn," now worth over \$1 billion. The 90-unit brand is still growing and vying to become the digital food platform of the future.

The brand known for its healthful menu is just as passionate about kids as it is about its food. Since 2010, it has partnered with schools to host workshops teaching more than 9,000 students about healthy eating, fitness and sustainability through fun, hands-on activities, and this year Sweetgreen is on a mission to change school lunches.

However, that wasn't enough for the brand, so it partnered this year with FoodCorps, a nonprofit company working to connect children to healthy food, to pilot Reimagining School Cafeterias. It has three components: The Tasty Challenge in Aberdeen gets kids to think about ways to cook with produce; at a Navajo Nation school in New Mexico, kids can play with different sauces and spices at the Taste Buds Flavor Bar; and children attending an elementary school in Oakland are participating in Our Cafeteria, which allows them to brainstorm ways to make their cafeteria better.

"With FoodCorps we can really scale the idea of Sweetgreen in Schools with a focus on school cafeterias," said Nathaniel Ru, co-founder and chief brand officer of Sweetgreen.

#9 Wahlburgers



wahlburgers

Hardly anyone is surprised that a restaurant run by the Wahlberg brothers is a success. The brand — founded in October 2011 in Hingham, Massachusetts, by chef Paul Wahlberg and celebrities Donnie and Mark, which is also the subject of an A&E reality show — has grown to 29 restaurants in 19 states and Canada and will open its first London location this year. It has even partnered with Hy-Vee, a Midwestern grocer, to roll out 26 Wahlburgers restaurants, making it the brand's largest franchisee. Its first three Wahlburgers locations opened in 2018: at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota; in West Des Moines, Iowa; and in Olathe, Kansas.

One way the brand stays connected with its guests is via "Virtual Visitor," an automated, live engagement experience that enables the Wahlberg family to remotely video into the restaurants equipped with the technology to have face-to-face conversations with guests.

Not a brand to be satisfied by relying solely on the brothers' fame, however, the chain uses fresh ingredients and is continually testing new offerings. For example, it launched the meatless Impossible Burger last year, and its frozen retail line is available in more than 4,000 grocery stores across the country. It also has a line of branded clothing, hats and accessories and has taken its burgers on the road via a food truck in Boston.

#10 Wing Zone



It was a tale of two halves for Atlanta-based Wing Zone in 2018. In the first half, the company was down 11%; however, after making some changes, including a revised marketing plan and a focus on operations, the company was up 14 percent by the second half of the year.

Wing Zone continues to be a menu innovator after more than 25 years, introducing unique menu items in 2018, including a Zesty Breaded Wing style and two new wing flavors. The company, which is now working on its 2019 upgrades, focuses its innovation efforts on the shifting tastes of consumers and leverages its expertise in takeout/delivery. Its lineup of wings has been honored year after year at the National Buffalo Wing Festival.

It's also not afraid to evolve; it added third-party delivery, for example, and continues to invest in tech to engage its guests. It recently launched text and email marketing with results tracking and adjusts its strategy based on data collected from those platforms.

Wing Zone continues to expand, with franchise locations opening across the country, and plans to open eight locations this year in the U.S. It's also expanding its international footprint, with 12-14 international locations (Panama and the Philippines) opening by the end of the year.



#11 &pizza

Founded by Michael Lastoria in 2012, Washington, D.C.-based &pizza is up to over 30 units and focuses on company culture. The chain, known for letting its employees be who they are — tattoos and piercings are welcome — is also passionate about paying fair wages. Lastoria has been an active voice in the Fight for \$15, for example, and employs strict policies of paying a fair and livable wage.



The brand is also known for taking care of its communities. For example, during one of the government shutdowns in 2018,, &pizza gave laid-off workers 30,000 free pizzas. In what might be described as good karma, the chain then garnered a lot of press and customer love from a video of a man eating from an &pizza box during an [interview](#) outside the Michael Cohen trial in March 2019. It got nearly 2 million views and inspired Lastoria to create several memes and an official “hallway pizza” to capitalize on the attention.

“People were really getting a kick out of, No. 1, how we mobilize as a brand and take advantage of just the fact of how someone was eating pizza behind a camera that went viral, and No. 2, the power and impact of internet culture,” Lastoria said during a [podcast](#). “And the cool thing for a brand like ours is that internet culture is literally right down the middle of something that we understand because the brand happens to be more youthful.”

The average age of the pizza joint's employees is 23, which explains why it is digital savvy, from its in-store screens that feature menu items, memes and social media activity to the weekly podcasts that Lastoria hosts for employees.

#12 Protein Bar & Kitchen

When it comes to innovation, Protein Bar & Kitchen is fearless. It not only added riced cauliflower to its protein-packed menu last year but now is testing CBD oil in its drinks.



The chain gives customers the option of adding 30 milligrams of CBD oil to their drinks as a floating boost, meaning employees will drop the oil on top of an already made shake or coffee. The boost is \$2.99.

“Research has shown CBD has great promise in treating inflammation, pain, sleeping disorders and aiding in relaxation — all things that obviously appeal to our guests,” CEO Jeff Drake said in a recent interview. “CBD can deliver many of these benefits without any psychoactive effects.”

CBD oil isn't the only new thing at the chain; it changed its name last year from Protein Bar to Protein Bar & Kitchen and is redesigning the menu and the look of its 19 locations. It's keeping its orange color but is swapping out brown details with white and teal accents and adding a separate area dedicated to mobile-order pickup.

The menu now includes breakfast and offers eggs cooked in ghee and offers the Beauty Brew smoothie, iced coffee, a protein and almond milk concoction made with collagen powder and a Whole30 bowl that follows a no-added-sugar meal plan.

The chain, founded in 2009 in Chicago, has locations in Denver and Washington, D.C.

#13 Tender Greens

Los Angeles-based Tender Greens, founded in 2006, proved it wasn't afraid to be first last year when it announced it was panning cash. Over the years, the chain, which specializes in healthful options and is backed by Danny Meyer, had seen the percentage of its cash transactions drop significantly and decided to ditch it entirely.



“It seems that people are moving away from cash and technology is making it easier than ever to tap and go,” according to a note on its website. “We crunched the data, did some time-motion studies, and tested our theories at a new restaurant. We learned that a significant amount of time (both guests and our team) was spent on handling cash and managing that cash. At the restaurant we tested cashless, we noticed that guests were getting through the line faster and our teams were getting back hours of time to do more interesting and meaningful things.”

To make it easier on guests, the chain launched a digital gift card feature on its mobile app, allowing customers to pay in-store and online using gift cards on the app.

Leadership believes that customers will spend less time waiting in line and that getting rid of cash is more efficient because workers can focus on cooking and spending time with guests instead of the administrative work associated with cash.

“It's cleaner and better for the environment because there will be no armored trucks picking up and dropping off cash, no more plastic deposit bags, and paper for cash deposit slips,” said the brand, which now has 30 units.

#14 Moe's Southwest Grill

Moe's brand hallmark, the "Welcome to Moe's" greeting, is heard by guests 11,275 times a day across 700 restaurants, and the chain stays in close contact with them via digital channels. Moe's has more than 800,000 fans across its social channels, for example, and 14% of all 2018 transactions came from the brand's mobile ordering and loyalty app.

Moe's, based in Atlanta, relies on those social tools to learn what customers want added to the menu. For example, it launched several seasonal salsas last year, along with an upgraded taco platform with new ingredients, including shredded cabbage, pickled red onions and queso fresco.

Last year, the chain unveiled a prototype — The Oasis — which included a full interior and exterior redesign, significant menu innovation and updated brand positioning.

"Over the past 18 months we've taken a comprehensive look at our brand and intently listened to our fans in the process," President Bruce Schroder said. "As a result, we have updated the restaurant design and expanded the menu — both of which deliver on the brand's new positioning, 'Untamed Southwest.' By fully activating our middle name and putting our own distinctive spin on the meaning of Southwest, our goal is to maintain cultural relevance and truly set ourselves apart in the fast casual restaurant industry."



#15 Blaze Pizza

To say that Blaze is on fire would not be an exaggeration, as 2018 was another breakthrough year for the California-based brand. It opened 80 units, bringing its total to 315, which included five locations in Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in just nine months, and ended the year with 19 international restaurants.



The chain — backed by equity firm Brentwood Associates and founding investors which include LeBron James, Maria Shriver, movie producer John Davis and Boston Red Sox co-owner Tom Werner — features custom-built pizzas, salads, lemonades and s'more pies. What sets this fast casual pizza joint apart from its competitors, however, is its dough. Employees make it from scratch using a proprietary recipe developed by executive chef Bradford Kent (the "Pizza Whisperer"), which requires a 24-hour fermentation period to produce his light and crisp crust.

It's apparently in high demand, as is delivery. In Q4 2018, for example, off-premise digital sales grew 121% and now make up 10% of sales. To help better fill those orders, the chain launched a new mobile app and partnered with four third-party delivery companies.

This year, Blaze leadership expects to exceed 20% of sales through digital orders.

"Since the beginning, we've planned to build this second leg to our business and now the day has come," Blaze co-founder and CMO Elise Wetzel said. "It's why we've built a second make-line and an oversized oven into every restaurant since the beginning. This untapped capacity is a huge competitive advantage and allows us to grow our off-premise business without sacrificing our dine-in guest experience."



#16 Crave Hot Dogs and Barbecue

As far as brands go, Crave Hot Dogs and Barbecue is just a baby but is cutting its teeth quickly. After spending their entire careers in the restaurant industry, Salvatore Rincione and his wife, Samantha, created the brand that features customizable barbecue sandwiches, hot dogs, brats and sausages in February, but it will have 18 units open by the end of the year. It's open seven days a week and offers dine-in, drive-thru and delivery options.

"We did not have a single corporate unit opened, and for 2018, we sold over 12 units," Rincione said.

Locations are already open in Oklahoma, Texas and North Carolina, and the brand has signed 12 franchisees with hopes of reaching 50 units over the next couple of years.

Part of Crave's popularity stems from its self-service beer wall, created by iPourIt, that offers local craft and domestic beer from 18 to 32 tap handles. Crave also offers a red wine, white wine and cider option on tap.

Although the brand is young, Crave isn't waiting to upgrade its customer service. It opened with self-order kiosks and a Crave app that allows guests to collect loyalty points, order ahead and pay.

#17 CoreLife Eatery

CoreLife Eatery is evolving as one of the fastest-growing brands in the United States. It opened its first eatery in May 2015 in Syracuse, New York, with hopes of creating a place that sought out the best foods available and prepared them in front of customers instead of having a truck deliver pre-prepared foods.

It's working. In fact, the brand more than doubled its revenue in one year, reporting a 133% revenue spike in 2018. Under the direction of Panera Bread's former chief development officer, President Scott Davis, the brand is taking its bone broth, bowls of greens and grains, grass-fed steak, all-natural chicken and fresh tofu across the country. Opening 26 units last year, CoreLife Eatery plans to have 70-75 locations open nationwide by the end of 2019, and 300 over the next five years. Half of CoreLife's units are company-owned; half are franchised.

"It didn't start that way," Davis said in a recent interview. "The first phase was we built our own stores as a model. In the last year and a half, we've added franchise locations. It helps us get the brand out into other markets. We've been planting seeds in suburban markets. We wanted to be the first significant player around this idea of clean eating and wellness."

The brand's genuine dedication for healthy eating and living is evident through



its CoreLife Challenge. Although it started a couple of years ago, it has ramped up to a nationwide effort as a 21-day challenge to encourage people to eat and live a healthier life by giving participants the tools (including food) necessary to eat and live healthier.



#18 Spyce Food Co.

After becoming fed up with not being able to find affordable, healthful meals, Michael Farid, Kale Rogers, Luke Schlueter and Brady Knight created the world's first restaurant featuring a robotic kitchen that not only cooks complex meals but also cleans the cooking apparatus. Customers place their orders via touchscreen and wait as a robot makes their orders. The menu features bowls that guests may customize to be vegetarian, pescatarian, gluten-free and vegan.

Each dish costs \$7.50 because the Spyce boys got the idea for their robot when they were hungry MIT graduate students and water polo teammates tired of spending \$10 on takeout lunches and dinners. They began working on the robot in 2015 in their dorm rooms and eventually built a prototype from plywood, parts from Home Depot and power strips in their fraternity basement.

When it was time to launch, they partnered with French chef Daniel Boulud to create the menu and open the first location last year in Boston.

A few months later, the men raised \$21 million in Series A funding and are using it to open a number of restaurants on the East Coast and further develop their robotic culinary platform. They are hiring additional employees to roughly double in size over the next year.

“Just as on day one, we remain singularly focused on delivering an unbelievable meal and experience each time someone visits Spyce,” Farid said.



#19 Asian Box

Asian Box has proven to be an industry leader in Southeast Asian Vietnamese-style street food, featuring fresh, made-to-order menu items that are 100 percent gluten-free.

In 2018, Asian Box opened five locations, bringing its total units in operation to 10. It doesn't look like there are any signs of slowing. Growth plans show accelerated franchising with intent-to-sign deals worth an additional 15 locations while also gearing up for corporate growth in 2020.

With the naming of Mike Speck as CEO, Asian Box is building the brand from the inside out. The company focused on building positive people practices that drive top-line success through methods of positive morale, as well as retaining people who shared its values to make a long-lasting impact. Founder Frank Klein brought in Speck to help manage the growth strategy.

“I've known Mike since before we opened the first Asian Box, and we personally picked him because we know he is eminently qualified to lead Asian Box in the next phase of its growth and is just as passionate about the brand as the founding partners,” Klein said.

#20 Curry Up Now

Since being included on last year's Movers & Shakers list, Curry Up Now, the nine-unit chain based in California, has signed multiple franchise deals in markets across the country, solidifying the brand as the largest Indian fast casual concept in the nation.

In 2018, the brand inked multiunit franchise deals in the Northeast, South, West Coast and Mountain States and is developing 41 franchise stores nationwide in nearly every major region of the U.S. With pending franchise deals in more than 13 new states, Curry Up Now plans to have 100 units in development by the end of 2019, with an additional 200 units sold in 2020.

The brand is known for taking traditional Indian offerings and presenting them in a way that is accessible and approachable for the American consumer. Indian staples such as tikka masala and naan are transformed into Mission-style burritos (a San Francisco signature), poutine and flatbread pizzas — formats that are known and loved in the U.S., but largely unseen in traditional Indian cuisine.

Curry Up Now is also hitting the bar scene. Two of its locations in California, for example, house Mortar & Pestle, the brand's laid-back lounges that serve



handcrafted cocktails, local microbrews and specialty wines. Syrups, sodas and tonics are made in-house to curate Indian-inspired libations, such as the Bangalore Old Fashioned with garam masala and Indian rum. The concept is doing so well that Curry Up Now is adding the lounges to its Atlanta locations slated to open by the end of the year. The chain also offers off-site bar catering, bringing bartenders and craft cocktails to their customers' parties.

#21 Everbowl

Everbowl believes the key to life is motion — and the key to motion is food. This superfood brand has put a plan for success in motion.

The brand has opened more than 17 locations in just under three years and is still growing in California. The San Diego-based founder Jeff Fenster is set to open 45 Everbowl locations by the end of this year and is planning to double that in 2020. Expansion has already begun from Riverside and Orange counties, and Fenster will open his first out-of-state store — in Scottsdale, Arizona — in April.

“Driving the expansion is our commitment to making healthy eating accessible and affordable for everyone,” said Fenster, who is passionate about health and a fitness advocate. “Our goal is to open as many stores as we can as quickly as possible,

Top 75 Brands

because this kind of food should be available to everyone.”

Everbowl recently received a \$3 million investment from Canada’s Serruya Private Equity, which has backed Pinkberry, Jamba Juice and Cold Stone Creamery.

Wellness is not Fenster’s only passion; he’s also just as committed to helping the communities in which he does business. Everbowl hires locally and has over 300 employees, and all store managers have been promoted from within the company.

“Company culture is essential to our success,” Fenster said. “We not only believe in providing a healthy and accessible product, we are also committed to fostering a great work environment. The two main rules of Everbowl are to make friends and have fun!”



#22 Melt Shop

Since opening as a walk-up counter in 2011 in New York City, Melt Shop launched a franchising program and now has 13 units in New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Minnesota and Pennsylvania. The chain opened five locations last year and also signed a multiunit franchise agreement to open 23 restaurants across the Northeast — a testament to the brand’s aggressive plans to grow to 100 locations by 2023.

The company’s success stems from its menu of melted sandwiches made from

fresh ingredients. Chefs bake the bread each day and handcraft all their sauces. In 2018, Melt Shop launched the Vegan Burger Melt and Housemade Chicken Tenders across all locations and is continually polling customers to find out what they would like to add to the menu as well as how they want to place orders.

Melt Shop is adding a loyalty component to its mobile app this year, so guests can earn free meals and swag and gain exclusive access to Melt Shop events. Users will also be able to order delivery, pickup and catering through the app.

Growth plans for 2019 include further expansion across target markets throughout the Northeast, including the brand’s home state of New York but also Philadelphia, New Jersey and Delaware.

#23 Chicken Salad Chick

Last year was a great year for Chicken Salad Chick. In addition to celebrating its 10th anniversary, the Alabama-based brand experienced its 12th consecutive quarter of positive growth. Last year also saw the opening of 26 restaurants and the signing of 21 franchise agreements throughout the Southeast, the Midwest and Texas. In 2019, the company plans to focus on developing additional franchise and company locations, and is planning to open 45 restaurants.

“2018 was year of milestones for Chicken Salad Chick,” said Scott Deviney, CEO of Chicken Salad Chick, in a news release. “We debuted in three new states and opened our 100th restaurant. The efforts of our talented support team, dedicated franchisees and passionate store employees over the last several



years have contributed to Chicken Salad Chick’s rapid growth and ongoing success, none of which would be possible without our loyal fans. We’re excited to build upon this momentum in 2019 as we grow the brand in new and existing markets and serve more communities and guests across the country.”

#24 Farmer Boys

Farm-fresh and locally sourced ingredients have become buzzworthy topics over the last few years, but Farmer Boys has been committed to serving farm-fresh food since five burger-loving brothers raised on a family farm opened it 38 years ago in California. The menu is made from locally sourced ingredients, and produce comes fresh and whole to each restaurant.

The 92-unit chain, which opened three units and reported a 5% increase in same-store sales last year, plans to open six this year throughout its existing markets of California and Nevada.

The brand sets itself apart by embracing its farm roots and focusing on top-selling menu items in each daypart, which include the Farmer’s Burger, Farmer’s

Chopped Cobb Salad, Breakfast Burritos and a line of antibiotic-free and hormone-free Natural Burgers.

While the industry primarily promoted low-priced meal deals, Farmer Boys steered clear of the price wars and emphasized its extensive hand-preparation daily and best sellers. The chain also launched its “crispy fries which retain crispiness up to 30 minutes.”

#25 Tropical Smoothie Café

Modern Restaurant Concepts grabbed FastCasual’s attention this year after announcing that it was combining two successful brands — Modern Market Eatery and Lemonade Restaurant Group — into one company.

“This merger creates a platform with the scale necessary to truly disrupt the restaurant landscape,” said Modern Market co-founder and co-CEO Anthony Pigliacampo, who will continue in that role at Modern Restaurant Concepts, alongside Rob McColgan, the chain’s other co-founder and co-CEO. Although the merger means that the companies will share operational platforms, they’ll continue to operate and expand separately via corporate growth in addition to franchising and licensing.

“We both stand for chef-driven, sustainable food, but we do it in very different ways, and we thought, ‘If we put them together, we could get the 1 plus 1 = 3,’” Pigliacampo said. “We’d have the scale of a bigger brand and be able to offer better benefits and support to employees.”

For example, both chains, each of which has about 30 units, use non-GMO

canola oil and can now source it as a nearly 60-unit company. That’s just one of the many benefits of merging. Others include developing customer integration with the third-party vendors they share and increasing their human resources offerings, including better employee benefits and training.

Since Lemonade is based in California and Modern Market operates in Colorado, Texas, Arizona, Washington, D.C., and Maryland, they aren’t competing in the same markets. They do, however, share the same investor — Butterfly — a Los Angeles-based private equity firm. As part of the transaction, global investment firm KKR will contribute its investment in Lemonade to the merger and become a shareholder in Modern Restaurant Concepts.

“With Lemonade and Modern Market Eatery under one roof, we will have an offering that will thrive in more markets and nontraditional foodservice outlets across the U.S. than any comparable single-concept company,” said Chief Development Officer (CDO) Jim Sullivan, former CDO of Carl’s Jr. and Hardee’s parent CKE Restaurant Holdings.



#26 Modern Restaurant Concepts

With notable milestones, achievements, franchise developments and positive comp sales, Atlanta’s Tropical Smoothie Cafe continues to separate itself from competitors. The brand wrapped up 2018 with 6.5% in positive comp sales, opened its 700th location and accelerated its presence in growth markets such as Ohio, Indiana and Texas. It opened 110 cafes and signed 191 franchise agreements last year but also focused on menu innovation, rolling out grilled-to-order quesadillas.

The new menu item’s daily average sales were impressive out of the gate with 23 quesadillas per cafe, resulting in quesadillas making up 6% of overall sales. By specifically designing menu innovations for its target audience, Tropical Smoothie Cafe has been able to leverage food trends to complement its smoothies. This, along with the launch of a limited-time offer Citrus Cactus Smoothie in April and two pressed sandwiches, the fast casual brand is constantly aiming to think outside the box and stay ahead of the industry.

With Charles Watson taking over this year as CEO, the brand is on track to reach 825 locations by the end of the year, with a goal of signing 200 franchise agreements. Target markets include Philadelphia, Charlotte, Houston, Dallas and St. Louis.

Tropical Smoothie is not only focused on growth; it also gives back to its community by supporting Camp Sunshine, which provides an authentic camp experience for children with life-threatening illnesses. The chain hosts fundraisers throughout the year and raised more than \$1 million in 2018. Since partnering with Camp Sunshine 11 years ago, Tropical Smoothie has secured more than \$6.3 million to support the camp.

#27 Cava Grill

Washington, D.C.-based Cava Grill had a banner year in 2018, completing a \$300 million acquisition of its major and much larger competitor, Zoes Kitchen. Panera Bread founder Ron Shaich, who joined Cava as chairman of the board, helped finance the buyout via Act III Holdings, the investment vehicle he created.

Although the Zoes Kitchen brand will remain intact for the foreseeable future, Cava CEO Brett Schulman took over as CEO for the combined company. Cava has 80 locations, with plans to open at least 20 additional restaurants by the end of the year. Zoes, which was a publicly traded company until the acquisition, has more than 250 locations and will open one additional restaurant by the end of 2019.

"Together, these two brands are united by a shared heritage and passion for exceptional Mediterranean cuisine," Schulman said.

As a combined company with a workforce of more than 8,000 team members across 24 states, Cava, founded in 2006, in Rockville, Maryland, is now an omnichannel platform leveraging two service models, digital and app-based sales channels and a line of chef-crafted



dips and spreads sold in more than 250 Whole Foods Markets and grocery stores. The retail line will be in Whole Foods stores nationwide by the end of the year

The chain has also teamed up with several nonprofit organizations to help promote healthy eating and urban gardening skills. Partners include City Blossoms, a D.C.-based nonprofit organization that is committed to creating kid-driven green spaces that teach youngsters about gardening, sustainability and healthy eating, and Future Chefs, a Boston-based learning hub committed to empowering teens with the skills they'll need to become the next generation of thriving culinary professionals.

#28 Freshii

"Eat. Energize." is the guiding principle behind Freshii, which continues to be one of the fastest-growing health and wellness brands in the world, opening its first 200 stores faster than Starbucks, Domino's and even Subway.

It has succeeded in making superfoods like kale and quinoa affordable, convenient and delicious. The eco-friendly company — which features a variety of completely customizable menu items, including breakfast items, soups, salads, wraps, bowls, burritos, frozen yogurt, juices and smoothies — has something for everyone.

Founded by CEO Matthew Corrin in Canada, Freshii plans to have between 730 and 760 stores by the end of 2019 and is projecting an annual same-store sales growth outlook of between 3% and 4% for the year. Freshii opened 69 stores in 2018, resulting in year-over-year net new store growth of 18%. Freshii is partnering with Walmart Canada this year to bring its grab-and-go lineup to at least 100 Walmart sites in Ontario.

"We have a lot of important work to do in 2019 ... Specifically, we will concentrate on simplifying our in-store operations, improving our menu innovation and investing more significantly in marketing and technology," Corrin said.

#29 Mendocino Farms

Growth at Southern California's Mendocino Farms is taking off. The 25-unit chain, founded in 2005 by Mario Del Pero and Ellen Chen, has expanded outside its home market into Northern California and Texas and will have five more units open by the year's end.

Known for sourcing ingredients from local farmers, Mendocino is passionate about high-quality foods. For example, it exclusively offers free-range chicken from Pitman Farms, a three-generation family farm in Sanger, California, and goat cheese from Drake Family Farms in Utah, operated by veterinarian Dan Drake. The brand also receives truckloads of salad greens each day from Scarborough Farms in Calabasas, California.

"For over 20 years, this family farm has earned a reputation for deeply caring for their land, and has been dedicated to growing some of the highest quality and

most beautiful specialty produce around by using small-scale, custom farming methods to ensure incredible taste,” according to [Mendocino Farms](#), which is backed by Whole Foods.

The catering experience is just as important as the dine-in experience at Mendocino Farms, which is why the brand employs dedicated catering specialists at each location who serve as personal party planners. The brand also offers pickup or delivery options.

#30 B.Good

Localization is key for Boston-based burger, bowl and salad favorite [B.Good](#). With more than 70 locations, the brand continues to stay true to its roots of serving locally sourced burgers, bowls, salads and smoothies. With the creation of Hannah Farms a couple of years ago, [B.Good](#) grows food for its restaurants, but also created an opportunity to give back to the community in which it serves. The brand donates 75% of what it grows to local partners, including Camp Harbor View, a nonprofit serving Boston's at-risk youth with summer programming.

“We feed, teach and instill healthy habits through programs like our Farm Internship and Salad Days program — which aims to provide a short and impactful farm experience to get young campers excited about fresh vegetables and healthy eating,” CEO Chris Fuqua said.

Providing healthy options and high-quality ingredients is key to the brand's mission of serving food with local roots. To continue to grow the brand's story, Brent Feldman was recently named chief marketing officer. In an effort to upgrade its customer

experience, the chain added delivery last year via a partnership with DoorDash and [launched a loyalty program](#).

#31 The Habit Burger Grill

With a focus on quality and a consistently positive consumer experience, The Habit Burger Grill — founded in 1969 and headquartered in Irvine, California — is still popular with customers because of its menu variety, its convenience and a strong consumer value for money proposition. It has more than 250 locations and will add more than 20 by year's end.

The chain focused on menu innovation last year, launching a variety of additions, including the Guacamole Crunch Charburger, Sesame Ginger Salad, Golden Chicken Salad and sides including Bourbon BBQ fries and Sriracha Green Beans.

The Habit also spent the year increasing its brand awareness by elevating its presence on radio, adding layers of streaming to reach consumers on their favorite devices during their favorite programming and conducting more local outreach.

Customers weren't its only concern, however. The brand continued its support of No Kid Hungry, helping to raise almost \$450,000, and added a training program called FLAME to help employees find clear career paths with The Habit.

#32 Mo' Bettahs

With a line out the door, the people have spoken, and they seem to be talking about Mo' Bettahs, a Hawaiian Island concept



built by founding brothers Kimo and Kalani Mack. Originating from Oahu, Hawaii, this duo saw a need to bring the Hawaiian culture to the rest of the United States.

Partnering with Utah-based Four Foods Group, which owns more than 150 restaurant locations, has been the catalyst for growth. The 10-unit brand opened two locations and reported 14.5% sales growth in 2018. It has already opened two units this year, has five more under construction and will soon reach into the Mountain West states of Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

Store-level IOT and DoorDash integrations and online ordering round out the ability for speedy Mo' Bettahs plate-lunch delivery and takeout.

Its path to growth is set upon quality food: In 2018, the brand created a partnership with Sysco Foods Distribution, followed up with strengthening its key manufacturer contracts, improving every aspect of the food experience.

#33 City Barbeque

City Barbeque has been doing its own thing since its founding 20 years ago, when Kansas farm kid and former National FFA



President Rick Malir teamed up with a competition barbecue team, quit his day job, bought an old doughnut shop in Ohio and opened the first City Barbeque.

Today the brand operates 42 company-owned restaurants in six states: Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, North Carolina and Georgia. The menu is a mix of barbecue classics, unique barbecue innovations and an ever-changing roster of limited-time offerings. Its award-winning meats are smoked on-site over local hickory wood, and the same care is taken with its scratch-made sides and desserts.

City Barbeque's team is made up of folks committed to company values: serving competition-quality barbecue with genuine backyard hospitality; improving themselves and their processes a little every day; and staying true to their purpose of serving and creating happiness.

Elizabeth Grunewald, marketing project specialist, said the brand's pursuit of continuous improvement and innovation is almost unprecedented for an organization of its size. It was an early adopter of call centers, loyalty programs, online ordering, analytics and third-party delivery, and it uses Marketing Vitals across every team in the company, working closely with all technical partners on improving the efficacy of these tools and systems.

#34 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 inspires community and promotes outdoor living.

Mutts plans to expand across major U.S. markets through franchising. Since opening its gates, the company has received over 100 inquiries from potential franchisees and has its sights set on bringing the concept first to the Sunbelt states.



#35 Slapfish

Constantly striving to offer its guests incredible chef-driven food while also offering a high level of customer service has been a solid strategy for Slapfish, which started in 2011 as a food truck in California.

With a goal of getting people to eat more seafood, Slapfish's mission is to make it fun and sexy again, to hopefully get people to eat more of it. Its strategy appears to be going swimmingly.

In 2018, Slapfish began training initiatives to launch its expansion on the East Coast, investing in hundreds of hours of hands-on training programs that allowed it to set operational infrastructure along the Eastern Seaboard for further expansion.

With 15 units and 10 more in contractual development for 2019, Slapfish is operating on both the East and West coasts and is continuing expansions in both markets. It also is developing into other markets in the southern and southwestern United States, as well as an international franchise opening in London in March.

#36 Tocaya Organica

Owned by The Madera Group, Tocaya Organica, a fresh-casual modern organic Mexican concept with 12 locations open across Southern California and Arizona, has doubled revenues over the past year and is projected to do the same by the end of 2019.

Using locally sourced, organic ingredients, Tocaya's menu is rooted in traditional Mexican recipes, naturally



accommodating a variety of eating preferences with vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free alternatives for salads, tacos, bowls and burritos, while giving non-vegans their choice of grass-fed meat, free-range chicken and fish that is always fresh, never frozen.

With lounge areas, mosaic tiles and succulents, guests can enjoy the space as well as their food, aguas frescas, juices, beer, wine and margaritas, making Tocaya a new kind of fast casual experience.

The Madera Group has completed a \$21 million private equity raise to double Tocaya's footprint by the end of the year. It's also launching catering and breakfast.

As the brand expands, however, it will continue to prioritize sustainability efforts, which include the sourcing of organic ingredients, printing on recycled paper and using eco-friendly to-go products, reclaimed wood and LED lighting.

#37 Laughing Planet

Laughing Planet is a nutritious and affordable concept that provides a true farm-to-plate experience. With a variety of burritos and bowls, soups, salads, smoothies, juices and homemade

cookies, the brand is seeing much success with its innovative production and supply chain model, all while leaving a small carbon footprint.

The mixture of fresh, healthy food and the brand's quirky atmosphere provides both nutrition and fun. It opened three units in 2018, bringing the total to 17, and also expanded its vegan offerings and introduced housemade cold-pressed juices to its menu. Its approach to food is simple and straightforward, and the menu offers a variety of clean, whole foods with flexibility for all eaters. Catering to paleo, gluten-free, low-carb and vegetarian eaters, Laughing Planet consistently buys from local farmers to bring the freshest, healthiest food possible.

This year, its goal is to expand to states outside of Oregon, Washington and Nevada.

#38 Fazoli's

After elevating its customer experience and menu several years ago, Fazoli's has enjoyed its reputation as America's largest fast casual Italian chain. And it's still growing. Business highlights for 2018 included a year-over-year sales increase of 1.4% at company locations and 10 restaurant openings. The brand also signed three franchise agreements and set company sales records at two new restaurant openings.

Fazoli's introduced Snacks and Shareables as part of a menu refresh resulting in one of the most successful product launches in the brand's history. The Snacks and Shareables LTO was part of Fazoli's "Killer LTO" strategy, which focuses on culinary innovation and enhancing value offerings to drive traffic.



Overall, the brand saw a 1% increase in sales, the average check was up more than 2%, and the average guest check increased by 4%.

Fazoli's launched a loyalty program in 2018, which has already grown to over 300,000 Fazoli's Rewards members. The brand also introduced third-party delivery (both individual orders and catering) as part of an initial test in company markets. At the end of 2018, Fazoli's launched catering with third-party delivery partners in select locations — with a plan to roll out company wide this year.

#39 Balance Grille

Balance Pan-Asian Grille — which opened in 2010 in Toledo, Ohio — is going strong, according to soaring Yelp and Google ratings, as well as reports of steady sales growth each week. It has five locations, along with a Bubble-Tea bar on the campus of the University of Toledo, and will add five units by 2020.

To oversee the expansion, Balance, which is in the middle of a 90-day Series A round of fundraising, has hired Bryon Stephens, former president, chief operating officer (COO) and CDO of Marco's Pizza, where he helped to expand the brand from 100 units to over 900.

In 2019, Balance Pan-Asian Grille launched a mobile app that has proven

to be successful for operations and customers. Posting a 17% average check growth over the last year, Balance went through a planning and development process with LoyaltyPlant to ensure the app would be a hit. And, the results have proven to target customers' needs while increasing brand awareness. More than 30% of the brand's pickup orders were made through the app, and more than 50,000 impressions have been created from personalized recommendations.

The brand also built an 8,600-square-foot aquaponics farm in downtown Toledo. Benefits from this venture include a simplified supply chain, lower food prices and increased quality control.



#40 Dickey's Barbecue Pit

As a 77-year-old, third-generation, family-owned brand, Dickey's Barbecue Pit has moved from its humble beginnings with a small location in Dallas to the largest barbecue franchise in the world. Though the expansion of the brand continues rapidly both nationally and internationally, Dickey's stays true to the authentic, hand-crafted barbecue that started the business in 1941. While many things at Dickey's have stayed the

same, in-house technology and updated menus ensure Dickey's is a leader in the restaurant industry, setting it apart from its competitors.

Although the brand has always put its guests first, the company went a step further last year when it made guest convenience its first priority. While still incorporating the use of third-party delivery services, Dickey's franchisees across the world began delivering their slow-smoked barbecue straight from the store via their own delivery drivers. This initiative, accompanied with expanding sales from third-party partners, gave Dickey's a sales boost in all markets.



view, order digital gift cards and more, all while earning exclusive benefits and rewards, including a \$5 credit for every \$50 spent. As of December 2018, nearly 60 % of guests had completed their transactions through the app.

#41 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 26 company-owned and franchised restaurants throughout Texas, Louisiana, Georgia, Oklahoma, Kansas, South Dakota and California. It opened seven units in 2018, and future locations are set for California, Texas and beyond throughout 2019.

Cowboy Chicken not only focused on store development last year, but also launched its Pronto Pick-Up option and enhanced its mobile app, which allows guests to order ahead, pay through their phones, earn rewards and avoid waiting in line.

Guests can find the closest Cowboy Chicken location through a new map

#42 Zoup! Eatery

More than two decades after opening its first restaurant, Zoup remains the unchallenged leader of the soup-differentiated category by keeping a keen eye on the fast-shifting landscape and engaging and serving guests what they want, where and how they want it. Zoup! Eatery rebranded this year, and the name is just the start of a total rebranding initiative rolling out in phases over the next several years. The brand has already introduced fresh graphics and messaging on restaurant marketing materials and across digital platforms, and two existing locations will have the new look by the end of summer. The rebrand's goal is to create an "intuitive, engaging space where each guest can enjoy quality food on his or her own timeline," said Elise Rowin, marketing consultant for Zoup! Fresh Soup Co.

At the core of the rebranding is across-the-board menu evolution, which builds on the brand's soup and broth legacy with crave-worthy, memorable

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menu items. This means extending the something-for-everyone offerings with new categories, new menu items and new big, bold flavors.

In addition to major rebranding, first-to-market menu development and “Good Food” initiatives, Zoup celebrated its 20th anniversary this year with sales-driving marketing strategies that included a sweepstakes, giveaways and restaurant celebrations, all supported by POP, organic and paid social media and digital advertising.

Also, as part of the celebration the chain teamed up franchises to deliver Rescue Care Packages to 20 local fire departments.

#43 BurgerFi

BurgerFi continues to be an industry leader in food quality as well as in modern branding and design elements with a focus on eco-friendly sustainability. The all-natural burger brand uses the top 1% of natural Angus beef free of antibiotics, steroids and hormones to offer a true burger experience.

It opened 11 units in 2018, and is planning to open 20-25 more locations by the end of 2019. Last year, it integrated third-party delivery programs as well as loyalty, online ordering and rewards programs engineered for mobile devices.

BurgerFi’s focus on technology makes it attractive for franchisees and customers. For example, it relies on facial-recognition kiosks for increased convenience and personalization.

BurgerFi opened in 2011, and it now has more than 100 units.



#44 Clean Juice

North Carolina-based Clean Juice has seen unprecedented growth over the past 30 months of franchising. To keep up with this growth, the brand moved into a 12,000-square-foot office facility and invested heavily into its corporate team expansion. Although many initiatives were accomplished in 2018, strategic hiring to scale was important because the brand believes it’s all about the people.

Clean Juice, which claims to be the first and only organic juice bar franchise certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, started franchising in summer 2016 and has since opened nearly 50 franchised stores. It is on target to open 50 more locations this year, making it one of the fastest-growing franchise brands in the country.

Also, the chain is focused on streamlining its operations by using some of the latest technologies in the market. For example, it

has one of the highest rated mobile apps in the juice bar category and uses Schoox for training, Smartsheet for development, FranchiseBlast for operations, Meltwater for marketing and Qvinci for finance.

#45 Milk Bar

Award-winning bakery Milk Bar features a variety of dessert options. This cult-favorite dessert empire offers desserts ranging from “naked” layer cakes, cookies and shakes, to items like Crack Pie and Compost Cookies.

Created by chef Christina Tosi, Milk Bar strives to be playful, unexpected and craveable and to make ordinary desserts extraordinary. Its first location opened in 2008 in NYC’s East Village. The brand now has other units there, along with locations in Washington, D.C., Toronto, Las Vegas and, most recently, Los Angeles.

Milk Bar employs an omnichannel approach, which includes using an e-commerce platform, and has widened its reach by shipping freshly baked products across the world. In addition, it has expanded its wedding cake and catering business and offers experiential baking classes in New York, D.C. and L.A.

#46 Burgerim

Known for its variety, Burgerim offers customers 11 patty options (Grass-fed Angus Beef, 28-day Dry Aged Beef, Wagyu Beef, Merguez, Turkey, Chicken, Salmon, Veggie, Spanish Beef, Falafel, Lamb and Protein-based Beef Patty) in addition to a multitude of toppings.

Burgerim has 140 restaurants open with more than 220 restaurants in the



development and construction phase in the U.S. Franchise licenses are being discussed in Europe and Asia.

Recently, Burgerim has partnered with major food influencers to increase company awareness and has implemented new systems to facilitate its tremendous growth.



#47 Junzi Kitchen

Junzi Kitchen is committed to making simple, thoughtful, everyday Chinese food for everyone by focusing on updating the rich culinary heritage of Chinese food in America with a modernized, innovative fast casual format. Founded in 2015 by a group of friends at Yale University and born out of the Tsai Center for Innovative Thinking, Junzi found its home base in New York City in 2017, when it opened its first NYC location on the Upper West Side near Columbia University. In just one year, it has opened in Greenwich Village and Bryant Park.

Junzi became a trendsetter by introducing Junzi Dining Pass, a

subscription-based membership-like dining card. The brand found that it could increase guest loyalty over time by thinking less like a traditional restaurant group and more like a customer subscription business. With its small yet powerful team of in-house food designers, experience designers and data scientists, Junzi was able to fuse its obsession for good service with its passion for good food.



#48 Kauai

Off the back of double-digit growth in 2018, South Africa-based Kauai is poised for even more growth going into 2019: The brand has a strong, 23-year heritage of providing healthy and delicious smoothies and meals, which it is capitalizing on to solidify its position as the leading healthy food brand in South Africa.

The brand is uniquely positioned in the health space in South Africa and has sufficient scale to extract significant cost advantages. It operates 156 stores across South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, but despite this scale, the business maintains an entrepreneurial culture that allows it to remain nimble and to quickly act on new trends and opportunities, said Lorna Pretorius, head of Marketing of Real Foods, the chain's parent company.

Kauai has an exciting year ahead, with plans for international expansion into Europe and Asia and the launching of an order-ahead app.

In May 2018, Kauai launched a retail range into Checkers, an upmarket South African retailer, as well as in its own stores, featuring a mix of products that share the restaurants' commitment to nutrient-dense, delicious and clean ingredients.

#49 Chipotle Mexican Grill

Chipotle Mexican Grill had a few rough years as it lost valuation after several food safety scares, but since taking over the brand early last year, CEO Brian Niccol has managed to turn things around. Revenues have increased, digital sales have grown and new marketing initiatives have helped the brand bounce back.

"We made important progress during the (third) quarter with the introduction of our 'For Real' marketing strategy and I'm encouraged by the progress we are making in building a pipeline of customer-focused innovation, driving digital sales, elevating our restaurant operations and effectively executing our reorganization," said the exec, who moved the brand's headquarters last year to Newport Beach, California.

To further shake things up, the restaurant, previously known for its purposeful, limited menu, has been testing five menu items — quesadillas, nachos, chocolate milkshakes, avocado tostadas and an updated salad — at its NEXT test kitchen in Manhattan. If successful, the rest of the nation's units will also offer the additions. During 2019, the brand anticipates opening 140 to 155 restaurants.

#50 Flower Child

Based in Arizona, Flower Child is focused on creating “healthy food for a happy world.” With 23 locations in Arizona, California, Georgia, Nevada and Texas, the brand is dedicated to serving made-from-scratch food using local, fresh ingredients that take people to their happy places. Offering a diverse menu including bowls, grains, greens, wraps, lemonades, kombucha, and organic wine and beer, Flower Child has grown in popularity. Its promise to customers is that — whether they are vegetarian, vegan, paleo or just hungry — there is something for everyone on its menu.

With sugar-, dairy- and gluten-free menu options, Flower Child’s mission is to “radiate positively delicious vibes.” Flower Child works with ranchers who respect, protect and love their animals and food supply, and all proteins are raised naturally without additives.

In 2018, Flower Child partnered with Phoenix-based startup Pal to become more welcoming to children with developmental disabilities. It became the first restaurant to become a “Pal Place,” offering families a video tour of the restaurant before they visit, as well as a sensory scale to help parents plan ahead.

#51 Fatburger

Hollywood-based Fatburger is taking its delicious all-American food across the ocean. The brand has taken its burgers, wings, shakes and fries to Singapore, with the first location opening late last year.

“Entering the Singapore market has been a goal of ours for a very long time,” Andy Wiederhorn, CEO of FAT Brands, said in a news release. “We had to be deliberate in

our strategy to join this colorful and rapidly growing nation and have finally found the perfect partner in Deelish Brands.”

FAT Brands has proven to be a leading global franchising company that strategically finds, markets and develops fast casual and casual dining restaurant concepts around the world. Fatburger has been in business for more than 70 years, and has become known for its extraordinary quality and loyal customer base. The brand continues to evolve, featuring a contemporary design and ambience, with the same dedication to serving custom-built burgers as it has since 1952.



#52 Nando's Peri-Peri Chicken

South African-Portuguese concept Nando's Peri-Peri Chicken continues to serve flame-grilled chicken with its peri-peri pepper sauce that comes all the way from southern Africa.

Nando's experienced a 12% growth between U.S. and Canada in 2018, opening 10 restaurants, and is planning a huge growth spurt for the U.S. and Canadian markets. To get ready, the brand hired a chief technology officer

(CTO) for North America, who is helping it bring in technologies to better reach guests. In 2018, it completed a cloud-based POS deployment and launched an e-gift card; earlier this year, Nando's launched a mobile app that includes digital wallets and loyalty points, rolled out a digital e-learning system and is finalizing a pilot of digital display boards.

In addition to innovations in technology, the brand created a salad line and a rice bowl to give customers more menu options.



#53 Which Wich Superior Sandwiches

The entire vibe that Which Wich was built upon is the realization of moving and shaking — and as the company turned 15 in 2018, the disruptor in the sandwich category didn't slow down. Early in 2018, Which Wich opened its first location in the United Kingdom with a restaurant in London.

The Dallas-based chain focused on operations in 2018, while laying the groundwork for major changes to come in 2019: an expanded composed menu based on the performance of a new test menu in selected markets; the development of a new restaurant design, which is set to debut in 2019; and an investment in technology, including the potential for kiosks and digital ordering to improve the ordering process and create a more profitable model.

It also added Eggwiches featuring a runny egg to the menu and is continuing its commitment to philanthropic causes and conscious capitalism with its Project PB&J campaign. Since its founding five years ago, it has donated nearly 1 million peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches to benefit local organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, The Salvation Army and homeless and emergency shelters in the 400-plus markets Which Wich serves. It also provided aid during recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Hurricane Irma in Florida.



#54 Artichoke Basille's Pizza

Artichoke Basille's Pizza exploded onto the NYC pizza scene in 2008, and has been making a splash in the industry with its authentic New York-style pizza ever since. Artichoke's slices and whole pies differ from most NYC slices because they are made with a thick, sturdy crust and crisp bottom. Its pizza toppings range from the traditional (Margherita, Pepperoni, Sicilian) to the unusual, such as the Surimi-topped Crab Pie and namesake Artichoke Pie, made with artichoke hearts and a spinach cream sauce. The signature flavors have attracted legions of fans composed of NYC locals, tourists and celebrities alike — Leonardo DiCaprio has been said to ship Artichoke pies from NYC to his home in Los Angeles.

In 2018, with 12 units open, Artichoke signed multiunit franchise deals in new markets (New Jersey and Connecticut) and is renovating and rebranding a pizzeria in Oakland, California, to strengthen the brand's presence in Northern California.



#55 Farm Burger

Farm Burger was founded in 2010, as a collaboration between organic cattle rancher Jason Mann and seasoned restaurateur George Frangos. The goal was to make high-quality food — such as locally sourced grass-fed beef and organic produce — accessible beyond the fine dining sphere, which had previously been home to most farm-to-table concepts.

Today, the Atlanta-based restaurant group has grown to 12 locations across the Southeast and in California and built a loyal fan base by offering 100% grass-fed beef, dry-aged and ground fresh, plus other chef-driven menu items made with locally sourced ingredients, including chicken and veggie burgers, farm-fresh salads, sweet potato fries and more, with an emphasis on in-house production of cured meats, pickles, sauces, jams and preserves.

In typical Farm Burger fashion, the brand has focused on growing its footprint organically and sustainably,

only opening locations when all the conditions were right.

To help fuel growth, the company hired David Danowitz as COO last year. With more than 25 years of restaurant experience with various positions with the Goldbergs Group and Mellow Mushroom, his job is to oversee the company's operations and identify opportunities for development across all departments.



#56 Coolgreens

Coolgreens is growing beyond Oklahoma City and bringing down-the-line made salads, wraps, quinoa bowls, sandwiches and flatbreads to new markets across the country. With its new catering program, enhanced menu focusing on fresh-cut vegetables and toppings, Coolgreens is seeing double-digit sales growth and will triple the size of the company in 2019.

With three locations under construction between Tulsa and Dallas, the chain also has leases signed in Boston and Dallas and will open 10 units in 2019.

To enhance its customer experience, Coolgreens rolled out a mobile app in April, and in 2018 unveiled a catering program that contributed to a 156% year-over-year increase in catering sales. It also introduced many company initiatives around its culture and people, most notably the “coolstories” program,

in which the brand begins every meeting with a story of kindness or gratitude recognizing acts of giving of oneself.

#57 The Pie Hole

The Los Angeles-based pie and coffee shop The Pie Hole has expanded its handmade pie concept to eight locations across Southern California, including six stores in Los Angeles county and one each in Orange and San Bernardino counties, and two locations in Tokyo.

In 2018, the brand hired restaurant industry veteran Edie Ames as its CEO. Ames was brought to The Pie Hole team to oversee expansion efforts and continue launching the brand across the U.S. and abroad, according to a company news release.

Ames brings 30 years of experience from places including The Counter, Built Custom Burgers and Wolfgang Puck Catering, and she sits on the board of directors for The Cheesecake Factory Inc.

“We are excited to welcome Edie to The Pie Hole team, as we know her vast experience in the restaurant industry will help us exceed the goals we’ve set for the company,” The Pie Hole co-founder Sean Brennan said. “Edie’s passion for the industry matches the passion we had when we initially opened The Pie Hole, and we have full confidence she will carry the concept to its full potential.”

#58 Salata Salad Kitchen

Salata Salad Kitchen is looking to make big changes this year, starting with a



redesigned restaurant that focuses on the guest experience. The prototype debuted earlier this year in Lake Mary, Florida, and includes a modern look and a neutral white and gray palette that allows Salata’s bright, colorful ingredients and toppings to be the focal point of the restaurant. It also features dining “neighborhoods,” which are intended to suit guests’ various needs, preferences, moods and times of their visits.

The dining neighborhoods include a power aisle for to-go orders; a quick, in-and-out area for lunch at a table or window bar; a community table for dining with friends; a lounge area that is ideal for afternoon work sessions; and a more traditional area for having dinner in a booth with family or friends.

Since opening in 2005, Salata has opened more than 80 locations, and restaurants have thrived by focusing on their product offerings, presentation and back-of-house processes that reflect the business’s functional needs.

Salata is growing rapidly, with approximately 20-40 restaurant openings a year and is moving into new markets, including Florida and Louisiana. With an emphasis on franchise recruitment, Salata will be poised for exponential growth in the coming years

#59 Pincho

Miami’s Pincho (formerly Pincho Factory) is spearheading and pioneering the Latin fast casual sector with flavors and ingredients most Americans have never encountered in a selection of familiar and popular foods (for example, burgers, grilled skewers and chicken sandwiches). With unique menu items such as the Fritanga and Toston burgers, the brand is primed and ready to export its flavors to the rest of the country.

Pincho has opened 12 units since it hit the scene in 2010 in Miami. While 10 units are built out, full-sized restaurants, two are in sports stadiums. The brand also has a handful of Miami-area locations in development and has partnered with a Washington, D.C.-based franchise partner to open multiple locations in 2019.

In 2018, Pincho brought on Jayson Tipp as its CEO, and he immediately drove initiatives to increase efficiency and productivity in operations. By developing standardized operations, introducing technology and redesigning the menu, the brand was able to reduce food and labor costs by 6%.

#60 Mooyah Burgers, Fries & Shakes

While many brands from the “better-burger boom” have gone away, Mooyah Burgers, Fries & Shakes continues to grow and improve the model via its heavy franchisee-first mentality and a corporate team that focuses its energy on supporting the men and women who make up the system.



In 2018, the company underwent a “Simply Better” menu transformation to reduce the menu and enhance operations. It also launched its first national TV advertising campaign last year, continued to roll out entries in its successful “Taste to Try” program, emphasized the shake line with a “Summer of Shake Love” promotion and furthered nontraditional growth with the brand’s first location inside a casino (also the first location in Rhode Island).

The brand, based in Texas with 88 units, closed out the year with the ambitious Free Mooyah Double Cheeseburger Day, when the company gave away double cheeseburgers at all locations. The company plans to continue that momentum in 2019, with plans to open a location every month during the year.

Mooyah has 80 operating franchise partners, many of which are family units or business partners that have shared ownership of restaurants.

#61 Hot Head Burritos

Hot Head Burritos, which has a growing list of menu items toasted in under 60 seconds, launched its first Hot Head Cantina concept in 2018 and has three more under construction. The cantina model gives franchisees the option of



spicing up their stores with a myriad of alcohol options and snack foods.

Founded in Ohio in 2007, Hot Head Burritos is up to 75 stores open in seven states and is building momentum with six more stores under construction. The brand is seeing strong interest from both existing franchisees and new franchisees to open more stores and will continue to grow by using an area developer model. Area developers assist in selling franchises, opening stores and overseeing standards at individual stores.

Its POS system is the heart and soul of the operation; after a lot of research, the company chose Brink, which has developed several proprietary labor and scheduling systems to assist franchisees in managing operating expenses. Chowly is the newest addition to the brand’s operations as a way to coordinate and oversee the third-party delivery services offering our products.

#62 Naf Naf Middle Eastern Grill

Naf Naf Middle Eastern Grill continues to make its mark by offering a differentiated fast casual dining experience where guests can enjoy authentic, handmade Middle Eastern dishes.

Through a customizable and approachable format, the Chicago-based brand guides its guests in exploring the best flavors of Middle Eastern food and focuses on three core items made in-house daily: chicken shawarma, falafel and pita.

The centerpiece of every Naf Naf is the open kitchen and bakery, where chefs cook everything in view so guests can see the fresh pitas baking, the shawarmas roasting over an open flame and the falafel being handcrafted.

Naf Naf continues to demonstrate strong growth and performance. In fall 2018, it launched a new Chicken Kebab Plate, which was the first addition to its menu since it opened in 2009.

Additionally, in 2018, Naf Naf officially launched its franchise program, hoping to add 200 restaurants by 2020. To help accomplish this goal, the brand hired Dave Vernon, former CDO of Wingstop, to join the team and lead franchise sales.

#63 Heritage Eats

Napa, California-based Heritage Eats continued to expand in 2018, by opening a location on the Stanford campus, marking the brand’s third unit.

After a successful 2018, which saw the company grow from a single-unit operation into a three-unit company, the brand is spending most of this year focusing on its core fundamentals and foundation as a brand but is also exploring additional Bay Area opportunities for the fourth quarter of 2019 and will open three units in 2020.



Ben Koenig founded the brand in 2015, in an effort to be a “globally inspired, fast-fine restaurant concept serving sandwiches, salads, wraps, rice bowls, tacos and more with a focus on elevated ‘daily life’ food from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Latin America and beyond.”

At Heritage Eats, guests can individualize their experiences with an assortment of toppings, including roasted corn and edamame, quinoa tabbouleh, Asian pickle and local garden greens. Pre-designed menu offerings rotate with the seasons.

Koenig developed the brand from a desire to understand the everyday food habits of different cultures. The concept attempts to highlight flavors from around the world in a vibrant, energetic and welcoming atmosphere.

#64 Lloyd Taco Factory

Founded in July 2010, as the first food truck in Buffalo, New York, Lloyd Taco Factory serves fresh street food inspired by Mexican, Polynesian and Asian cuisine. In 2015, it opened its first brick-and-mortar restaurant, pairing its award-winning food with a craft cocktail

bar focused on mescal and scratch-made ingredients. It now has four food trucks, two restaurants and, in 2017, the company expanded into the world of ice cream and coffee with the opening of Churn Soft Serve & Coffee.

Throughout 2018, Lloyd received national media attention for both its food and social media presence. It partnered with Facebook, for example, in July to promote Community Boost, a free multiday conference on running a small business in the digital age.

Throughout the year, the brand focused on internal improvements. Across all departments, it looked at everything from daily processes and position responsibilities to technology use and general communication. The inward evaluation led to the development of new customer service processes and the creation of standardized operating procedure docs for everything on its menu.

#65 Shake Shack

Since its founding in 2004, Shake Shack has been one of the fastest-growing food chains in America. Although it started out as a hot dog cart in Madison Square Park in Manhattan in 2001, it opened its first permanent location in 2004 and now has more than 200 locations across 27 states and 13 countries.

Even with global expansion, Shake Shack continues to focus on lessening its footprint and is committed to extending hospitality beyond the four walls of each Shack into the surrounding community. The chain, for example, has food trucks as well as airport and food hall locations.

Unit growth at the company grew 38%, and revenue jumped 28% to \$459.3

million last year, according to CEO Randy Garutti, who described 2018 as the chain’s “most ambitious year yet.” It opened 49 restaurants, 34 company-operated and 15 licensed, and will grow 50%, hitting \$700 million in total revenue by the end of 2020. Salt Lake City, New Orleans and Columbus, Ohio, will be the next U.S. cities to get their own shacks. In March, Shake Shack Covent Garden in London reopened with a revamped design as well as new menu items such as the caramel bourbon shake and a vanilla frozen custard blended also with caramel and bourbon.

#66 Spin Pizza

Spin Pizza, a 15-unit chain based in Kansas City with locations in Los Angeles, Dallas and Papillion, Nebraska, spent 2018 rebranding in preparation for expansion.

Ed Brownell and Gail Lozoff founded Spin Neapolitan Pizza in 2005, after working together at Bagel & Bagel, which eventually became Einstein Bros. Bagels. Lozoff has since retired, but Brownell is leading the brand by updating the menu and website.

“Our new menu, inspired by James Beard Award-winning chef Michael Smith, who helps develop our menu, has been in test mode at a Kansas City location since summer,” Brownell said. “Based on feedback from our guest survey, the revised menu has been a huge success.”

Some menu additions include a 14-inch pizza option, Chicken Cobb salad, Turkey Bacon Avocado sandwich and the Italian sandwich. The chain is also

offering a BYOV (Bring Your Own Vino) for a \$5 corking fee. Other adult beverages include beer on tap, bottled beer and two housemade Red and Blood Orange sangrias.

Other changes included a new website, adding simplified menu boards and replacing most of the Italian words with easier-to-pronounce English equivalents.



#68 Bean Sprouts

One of the only exclusively female-founded chains in the U.S., Bean Sprouts is a nationally recognized, hip and healthy cafe that designs its menus with kids and families in mind. Its award-winning Imaginibbles children's menu empowers kids to make their own healthy choices and relieves moms and dads of the guilt of taking their families out to eat. The menu offers a variety of choices for families with picky eaters, allergies and other dietary challenges.

Led by its co-founders Shannon Seip and Kelly Parthen in 2007, Bean Sprouts has raised the bar in the restaurant industry not only by offering a hip and healthy menu and customer experience that delights kids and parents alike, but also by breaking through industry stereotypes to encourage management and leadership opportunities to a diverse group of women and minorities in the historically male-dominated restaurant industry.

Seip and Parthen debuted their second cookbook, "Bean Sprouts Kitchen," in late 2018, and it made Amazon's Best Book in November 2018. It was also featured in Parents Magazine.

Bean Sprouts has 16 units in seven states, including five that opened last year in Pasadena, California; Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Santa Ana

Zoo; Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium; and Cincinnati Museum Center Kidspace.

Bean Sprouts will plant six to eight units this year, focusing mostly on existing markets but also entering the southeastern U.S.



#69 PizzaRev

PizzaRev continues to be an industry leader in menu innovation. PizzaRev partnered with Caulipower, based in Encino, California, late last year to introduce cauliflower pizza crust to its locations across the United States. Most recently, PizzaRev introduced the "Craft Your Half" promotion in early January, which offers guests a half-pizza and side salad option for \$6.

PizzaRev also focuses on accommodating those with dietary needs, offering several options for guests who follow gluten-free, vegan, vegetarian and other diets, further demonstrating the brand's understanding of today's consumer. With 42 total locations, PizzaRev opened four locations in 2018 and is targeting Chicago, South Florida, Texas and California for franchise growth.

In preparation for even more growth, the brand added industry heavyweights to its leadership team in 2018, including Brian Durkin, a real estate strategist who has held senior executive titles at McDonald's.

#67 Bareburger

Founded in 2009, Bareburger takes a simple, joyful and organic approach to food. Using fresh and clean ingredients, the New York-based brand takes pride in preparing and cooking food that is also environmentally conscious.

Bareburger's menu is over one-third vegetarian and plant-based, and it brought in Chef Vegicano (Rudy Ramos) last year to open its all-vegan location in New York City. Chef Vegicano, a former musician by trade and a vegan for more than 14 years, is self-taught and is most known for being a part of various pop-ups throughout New York City.

"Taste defeats tradition any day of the week," Ramos said. "I approach vegan food with no rules, utilizing flavors from all around the world to make delicious eats. I'm excited to be working with Bareburger; they've literally given me the reins to come up with something truly exciting. What's cool is that I've been eating vegan options at Bareburger for years — now I'm creating a restaurant with them."

Bareburger has grown to 47 locations in four countries.

He'll support franchisees with location selection, site analytics and restaurant design expertise. PizzaRev also hired Renae Scott, CMO, who spearheaded the partnership with Caulipower. Prior to joining PizzaRev, she most recently served as chief marketing officer at Togo's Eateries.

#70 Smoke's Poutinerie

Ajax, Ontario-based Smoke's Poutinerie franchise chain has topped more than 150 locations in North America in less than 10 years, and is planning to be a global brand by providing a unique Canadian food experience that will entertain the world.

"We're not a restaurant," founder and CEO Ryan Smolkin said about the chain that offers 30 types of poutine, a dish originating from the Canadian province of Quebec, consisting of french fries and cheese curds topped with gravy. "We're more than fries, curds and gravy."

Smoke's Poutinerie hosts events, for example, such as a karaoke challenge, and Smolkin organizes an annual World Poutine Eating Championship, which also includes a CEO challenge. The event is a fundraiser for Friends of We Care, a charity organization focused on sending children with disabilities to camp.

While entertaining is an important part of the brand's success, its dedication to high-quality food keeps customers coming back. Smolkin began sourcing his product directly from suppliers his second year in business and said he is determined to use only premium ingredients.



#71 Beef Shack

Illinois-based Beef Shack has been cooking up legendary beef, burgers, dogs and shakes since 2012. Famous for the Chicago-legend The Cheezy Beef, the Shack also shakes things up with shack seasoning and sauce, and a variety of sides and shakes in an atmosphere decorated with local random stuff found from real neighborhood people's garage sales.

In 2018, Beef Shack began franchising and now has five stores in operation. It plans to have 10 locations open by the end of 2019, with a goal of spreading its legendary meats across the entire continental U.S. According to its website, the simple menu lends itself to a franchise with a small kitchen that is easy and efficient to run.

Beef Shack has a strong marketing program with the goal of hiring the best brand marketers in the country. Its Facebook ads are catchy and the entire concept is built around the attitude that its food is crazy good.

#72 Wingstop

Wingstop opened its 100th restaurant internationally in January 2018, in Reynosa, Mexico. Add that number to the more than 1,000 units in the U.S. and



the fact that it has locations in Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Colombia, and it's easy to see why Wingstop keeps making the Top 100 list.

Last year marked the 15th consecutive year of positive same-store sales growth for Wingstop, and it's hoping to continue into 2019. It's focusing on building greater awareness through national advertising, innovating through technology to enhance the guest experience and optimizing delivery in test markets ahead of a national rollout.

Over the next decade, Wingstop has development deals for 100 locations in the U.K., 75 in France and 110 in Australia/New Zealand.

#73 Fuku

Fuku, a fried chicken spot created by Momofuku creator David Chang, has locations in New York and Boston. Chang founded Momofuku in 2004 and has since been called one of "the most influential people of the 21st century" by Esquire.

Fuku specializes in a fried chicken sandwich but has grown to serve a variety of fried chicken variations, sides and slushies.

Fuku's mission is to provide simple, delicious and thoughtful food drawing from both Asian and American influences, including the sweet and spicy

Top 75 Brands

Koreano with pickled daikon and a sweet and spicy glaze; the spicy fried chicken sandwich with a habanero chicken thigh, pickle, butter and potato roll.

According to executive chef Stephanie Abrams, Fuku likes to have fun with its menu.

“When you think about it, almost all of our food is meant to be eaten with your hands instead of utensils, and we also have several items that are meant to be shared,” she said. “Fuku isn’t just a great place for a quick lunch, it’s also a destination for groups to enjoy a fun and casual meal.”

#74 VeganBurg

Since VeganBurg, a 100% plant-based burger joint, opened in 2010 in San Francisco, it’s been on a mission to redefine food pop culture and comfort food with its menu and has been breaking the stereotype of how a burger should look and taste. Signature fan favorites include the Creamy Shrooms Burger, Seaweed Fries and Sizzling Broccoli.

VeganBurg, which has two units, is ramping up franchising in 2019. Its goal is to open 300 stores in California, and it is also looking for a master franchise in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia.

“Our aim is to solidify our franchise system and bring it to the rest of the world,” said marketing manager Kat Hossen, who also realizes that to expand the brand needs to raise funds to ramp up its R&D and supply chain.

“Let’s face it – everyone wants great buns in their hands – people want great-



tasting burgers!” she said. “And that’s what we’re all about. We have invested eight years in perfecting the ultimate plant-based burger recipe and concept; that’s why we’re here. Our main focus is to provide the best burger that they’ve ever tasted. Simply put, our burgers appeal to a broader market. We are the only burger brand that has the ‘East meets West – best of both worlds’ factor. We make an appealing global brand.”

#75 Freddy’s Frozen Custard & Steakburgers

Although Freddy’s Frozen Custard & Steakburgers feels like an old-school diner, there’s nothing tired about it. The franchise continues to enter new markets, implement technology systemwide and serve chef-inspired menu items across the nation. Today, more than 300 Freddy’s restaurants serve 31 states across the nation.

In 2018, Freddy’s opened its first location in Wyoming and signed seven agreements to enter the Wisconsin and New Jersey markets. The company, based in Wichita, also expanded into nontraditional spaces for the first time with the opening of locations at Wichita

State University student center and Oklahoma State University football and basketball stadiums.

Freddy’s also continued its ongoing innovation in 2018, introducing a smaller restaurant prototype with an updated kitchen design that maintains volume capacity.

Freddy’s has 36 franchised locations and four corporate locations under construction, with a projected 50 locations opening throughout this year. The chain is making its international debut this year at the Mall of the Emirates and the Dubai Mall and is also exploring other countries to enter.



Top 25 Executives



Peter Yang, co-founder, Pokéworks

Peter Yang had his first bowl of poke in Hawaii about seven years ago and immediately knew he had to bring it to New York City. With a little help from his brother and two college buddies, he opened the first unit in 2015 in Manhattan and gained global exposure in January 2016, when he helped introduce the poke burrito via a video posted on Business Insider. It has received more than 49 million views, helping Pokéworks become a millennial favorite. The brand now has 38 locations with more than 100 under development. It opened 18 units last year and is on target to open 30 by the end of 2019.

Other industries have taken notice of Yang's innovative nature. For example, Forbes named him to its 30 Under 30 list last year, and he is a member of the [2019 Delta Under 30 Advisory Board](#), which is helping the airline develop innovative solutions to enhance the customer experience.



Denyelle Bruno, CEO, Tender Greens

[Denyelle Bruno](#) just may be the Wonder Woman of the business world. Before she joined Tender Greens in 2017 as president and was [promoted to CEO last year](#), the Los Angeles native helped to build what are now some of the world's most innovative and iconic brands outside the restaurant industry.

Bruno, who holds a master's degree in organizational design from the University of San Francisco, worked alongside Steve Jobs on the team that launched the first 25 Apple Stores. She was also president of retail operations at Drybar Holdings, where she opened 55 locations in three years,

while maintaining the company culture and enhancing the entrepreneurial spirit of the business.

Tender Greens, however, wasn't her first restaurant gig. She also worked for Peet's Coffee and Tea, where she systemized the entire enterprise.

Tender Greens is up to 30 units with plans to expand across the nation.



Geoff Alexander, CEO, Wow Bao

With over 25 years in the restaurant industry, Geoff Alexander is a respected innovator and technology leader. Under his leadership, Chicago-based Wow Bao, founded in 2003, has revolutionized the way diners interact with restaurants, first as an early adopter of self-ordering kiosks to the now [fully automated front-of-house experience](#).

Staying ahead of the curve of the ever-changing marketplace, Alexander, who is also a managing partner of Wow Bao's parent company, Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, has used nontraditional methods to drive the brand, from mobile and online ordering, social media engagement, data analysis and personalized marketing, to licensing with airports, university campuses and sports stadiums.

And to the naysayers who question if the world can handle a fully automated restaurant experience, Alexander points to the fact that the 11-unit brand doubled its size in 2018 and will do the same this year.

"Was the world ready for Facebook? Shopping on Amazon? It's the same thing in restaurants," [Alexander said](#). "Hospitality is evolving."

Top 25 Executives



Prakash Karamchandani, CEO, Balance Pan-Asian Grille

Prakash Karamchandani isn't afraid to take a risk, which he proved last year by building an 8,600-square-foot aquaponics farm in the middle of downtown Toledo, Ohio.

"Our customers know not just where our ingredients are sourced, they can visit the facility and view the production happen," said Karamchandani, who co-founded the brand in 2010 in Toledo. "We are connected deeper in our community with new relationships, including with children's science and learning museum, Imagination Station, which will be organizing educational tours for school children and adults."

It may sound like a lofty goal for the five-unit chain, but Karamchandani likes to embrace innovation. Last year, for example, he instituted a "managerless" form of restaurant operation, and during the previous year, he launched and revamped its mobile ordering app three times before settling for anything less than perfection. It makes one wonder what the innovator has up his sleeve.



Michael Lastoria, founder, &Pizza

Michael Lastoria is a serial entrepreneur known for building companies around four core principles: design-driven, culture-centric, brand-led and, most importantly, morally sound. In 2012, he co-founded &pizza, a counter-culture pizza brand embodying these values. Since its inception, &pizza has grown to 35 units throughout the East Coast.

In addition to &pizza, Lastoria co-founded JWALK, a New York-based full-service creative agency; after overseeing rapid expansion, he and partner Doug Jacob sold the company in 2017. He also founded a marketing and media services company in 2002, and sold it in 2006, to Seaport Capital,

a New York-based private equity firm, in 2006.

Lastoria, however, is probably best known for his fight to help employees receive fair wages. As a vocal advocate in the Fight for \$15, he employs strict policies of paying a fair and livable wage and speaks regularly on the value of design thinking, innovation and entrepreneurship. Recent appearances include the Fast Company Innovation Festival, Inc. 5000, WeWork Creator Awards and the Fast Casual Executive Summit.



Ryan Smolkin, CEO and founder, Smoke's Poutinerie

Ryan Smolkin is rarely seen in anything but his signature red-and-black plaid flannel shirt jacket or jammies along with his hat and shades. That's because the founder of Canada's Smoke's Poutinerie is a marketing machine who is on a quest for, what he describes as, "global domination." His strategy: encouraging customers to rock out to 1980s hair band music while stuffing themselves with cheese and gravy-topped fries.

Smolkin, who owned graphic design and branding companies before creating Smoke's 10 years ago, has 150 units in North America, but is hungry for more. He's in the middle of a global tour in an effort

to find franchise partners to help him bring poutine to the masses.

Smolkin hasn't shied away from controversy or the spotlight in his effort to put Smoke's center stage. He created pictures mocking Wendy's and KFC, and even built a mock Stanley Cup trophy from poutine, both actions which incurred criticism from the companies.

"That's media that doesn't cost me anything," he said. "You'll remember the plaid coat even if you don't like what I say," he said.

Top 25 Executives



Kristie Smith, director of development, Pita Pit Canada

Pita Pit is getting into the weed business, thanks to Kristie Smith, the brand's director of development. Now boasting more than 600 stores across North America and internationally across 13 countries, Pita Pit has joined forces with WeedMD Inc., a federally licensed producer and distributor of medical-grade cannabis, in Canada to launch Pioneer Cannabis Corp., a company that will help Canadians operate their own cannabis retail stores.

"Pioneer brings an opportunity to those entrepreneurs interested in joining the cannabis industry, but who may not have the financial backing or the operational experience to pursue opening their own retail cannabis store," said Smith, who has been with Pita Pit for eight years and will now also serve as president of Pioneer. "Through this collaboration of established Canadian companies, we are paving the way for small businesses to participate in the emerging retail cannabis space that will promote local economic growth and opportunities."



Kyle Noonan, owner and co-founder, Mutts Canine Cantina

Kyle Noonan is an American entrepreneur, speaker, television personality, sommelier and creative tastemaker who, along with his best friend, Josh Sepkowitz, co-founded a hospitality and entertainment company, FreeRange Concepts. The duo has since grown it to a \$50 million company, and the 5-year-old brand is on pace to eclipse \$100 million in revenue by its seventh year.

The friends also co-founded Mutts Canine Cantina, one of four concepts under the umbrella of FreeRange. Mutts, based in Dallas, is known as an urban oasis for dogs and their owners, serving burgers, fries, sandwiches and a variety of cocktails.

Although the brand has only two locations, Noonan has big expansion plans. He has partnered with Fransmart in hopes of growing across the U.S. through franchising. Since opening its gates, the company has received more than 100 inquiries.

Not only is Noonan an innovative entrepreneur and respected speaker, he has been recognized as a media personality appearing in national outlets such as CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox, Bravo, ESPN, Food Network, Travel Channel, Food & Wine magazine, The New York Times, FastCasual and The Wall Street Journal.



Chris Fuqua, CEO, B.Good

Before joining B.Good in 2017 as chair, Chris Fuqua held roles in marketing, operations, finance, strategy and supply chain as a senior executive at Dunkin' Brands, a consultant at McKinsey & Co. and an officer in the U.S. Navy. He's now sinking all that experience into B.Good, a Boston-based brand that literally grows its own food for its burgers, bowls, salads and smoothies.

B.Good, not only relies on Hannah Farms, also in Boston, to stock its produce, but also donates 75% of its yield to local partners, including Camp Harbor View, a nonprofit serving Boston's at-risk youth with summer programming.

Fuqua's goal is to "grow food for our restaurants, create an educational community space for customers and give back to the community here in Boston, where we opened our first restaurant," he said. "Hannah Farm is a physical embodiment of our values."

Fuqua had some big shoes to fill when he took over as CEO in 2018 from the brand's co-founder Anthony Ackil, but he's proving himself worthy. The brand is opening about two units per month, and Fuqua just oversaw the launch of the brand's loyalty app.

"The guest experience is important now more than ever," he said. "With the launch of B.Good rewards and our new app, we're delivering a frictionless guest experience that fits into customers' busy lives, while also offering them rewards they can feel good about."

Top 25 Executives



Alex Canter, owner, Canter's Deli

Alex Canter was raised in the kitchen of Canter's Deli in Los Angeles and is the fourth-generation owner/operator of the restaurant. Growing up in the family business, his primary role was to identify and implement new technology to bring the old-school deli into the next generation. Canter's Deli now has 180 full-time employees in its West Hollywood location.

The 20-something didn't simply take over the family business. He has created a delivery-specific brand called Grilled Cheese Heaven, supported by a pair of off-site kitchen commissaries. And in 2017, when the deli was struggling to stay open, he created Ordermark, a platform that integrates third-party ordering services (Uber Eats, DoorDash, Postmates, etc.) in one platform, which he has made available to other restaurants. He has since raised more than \$12.5 million to help grow the company that has already partnered with hundreds of independent and chain customers throughout the United States. Customers include TGI Fridays, Qdoba, Veggie Grill, Dickey's Barbecue Pit, Yogurtland, Johnny Rockets and Sonic.

Although he's young, Canter has gained quite the reputation for being tech-savvy and an innovator. Forbes named him to its 2019 30 Under 30 Enterprise Technology, and he recently spoke at the Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit.



Akash Kapoor, founder and CEO, Curry Up Now

Akash Kapoor has been a self-employed entrepreneur and businessman since childhood. He moved to the U.S. in 1993, from India, and grew a variety of businesses before creating Curry Up Now with his wife, Rana. The brand opened in 2009, as the first Indian street food truck in the Bay Area, and has since grown to include four food trucks, two craft cocktail bar concepts and six brick-and-mortar locations with franchised locations planned in nearly every major region of the U.S., including two set to open this year in the Atlanta area.

"The Atlanta restaurants will be our first to open on the East Coast, and the idea that the food truck we founded in 2009 is growing into a coast-to-coast brand blows my mind," said Kapoor, who often lends his expertise on panels during industry events, including the Fast Casual Executive Summit and Restaurant Franchising and Innovation Summit.

Curry Up Now has 41 franchised and corporate stores sold and in varying stages of development across the country and has pending franchise deals in 13 additional states. It aims to have another 100 units sold by year's end, with an additional 200 units sold in 2020.



Scott Davis, president and chief concept officer, CoreLife Eatery

Scott Davis is a leader and innovator in the fast casual restaurant industry, specializing in brand positioning and clean/healthy menu development. Less than two years after leaving his post as chief concept officer at Panera Bread in 2014, where he was instrumental in creating the brand's entire image, he joined CoreLife Eatery in 2016, to head up menu development and guide strategic brand growth at the chain.

Under Davis' leadership, the Syracuse-based brand doubled its revenue in one year, reporting a 133% revenue spike in 2018, and is taking its bone broth, bowls of greens and grains, grass-fed steak, all-natural chicken and fresh tofu across the country. Opening 26 units last year, CoreLife Eatery plans to have 70-75 locations open nationwide by the end of 2019, and 300 over the next five years.

Top 25 Executives



The Spyce Boys: Michael Farid, Kale Rogers, Luke Schlueter, and Brady Knight; founders, Spyce

Known as the Spyce Boys, Michael Farid, Kale Rogers, Luke Schlueter and Brady Knight created the world's first restaurant featuring a robotic kitchen that not only cooks complex meals but also cleans the cooking apparatus.

Each dish costs \$7.50 because the Spyce boys got the idea for their robot when they were hungry MIT graduate students and water polo teammates tired of spending \$10 on takeout lunches and dinners.

They began working on the robot in 2015 in their dorm rooms and eventually built a prototype from plywood, parts from Home Depot and power strips in their fraternity basement. The rest, as they say, is history. They eventually partnered with French chef Daniel Boulud to create the menu and opened the first location last year in Boston, but one restaurant isn't enough for the young entrepreneurs. They've already raised \$21 million in Series A funding to open a number of restaurants on the East Coast.



Christina Tosi, founder, Milk Bar

Although Christina Tosi — pastry chef, author and television personality — founded Milk Bar in 2008 in NYC's East Village as the sister bakery to the Momofuku Restaurant Group, she has since created her own dessert empire. After realizing customers couldn't get enough of her unusual desserts — Crack Pie, Compost Cookie, “naked” layer cakes with unfrosted sides and Cereal Milk Soft Serve — she opened storefronts in Washington, D.C., Toronto, Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

Called “one of the most creative people” by Fast Company, Tosi is a two-time James Beard Award winner, made Fortune magazine's 40 Under 40 list in 2018 and has written three cookbooks:

“Momofuku Milk Bar,” “Milk Bar Life” and “All About Cake.”

As if that wasn't enough to keep her busy, Tosi is also a judge on the cooking shows “MasterChef” and “MasterChef Junior” and appeared on “Chef's Table,” an Emmy-nominated docu-series on Netflix. She has been the subject of stories in The New York Times and Adweek and has been interviewed on “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon” and the “Today” show.



James Park, CEO, Garbanzo

James Park is an innovator who understands the need for convenience and speed to stay competitive, which is why he streamlined the brand's menu from 65 ingredients to around 40. The change sped up service times from as long as 30 minutes for a line of 20 people to as little as 10 minutes.

Park, who was named “most admired CEO” by the [Denver Business Journal](#), joined Garbanzo as CEO in 2015 and has led the Denver-based concept's rebrand from Garbanzo Mediterranean Grill to Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh, which has resulted in three consecutive years of same-store sales increases and four-plus star online guest reviews.

But he isn't content to have his hands in just one brand. Park and Garbanzo co-owner Michael Staenberg [acquired](#) an equity interest in the cafe-bakery brand La Boulangerie de San Francisco, founded by French baker Pascal Rigo. The team also acquired The Loving Cup, another strong west coast brand with a cult-like following.

Top 25 Executives



Shauna Smith, president, Four Foods Group

Since co-founding Four Foods Group (FFG) with her husband in 2008 in Utah, Shauna Smith has been one of the hardest-working women in the industry. Smith, who took over as president earlier this year, had spent the past decade as chief merchandising officer for the company, which now includes 150 locations, including Little Caesars Pizza, Kneaders Bakery & Café, Swig, R&R BBQ and Mo' Bettahs.

Smith, who has been directly involved with day-to-day operations since the company opened its first Kneaders Bakery & Café location 11 years ago, has worked in every capacity of the restaurant. She has also directed all of FFG's buying and merchandising of the retail operations inside the company's 50 Kneaders restaurants. As FFG broadened its scope through the acquisition of 71 Little Caesars restaurants in the Southeast, plus its smaller brands, she has played a pivotal role in welcoming new employees into the popular Four Foods Group culture.

With two to five additional sites in development or under construction every month, FFG has ranked among Inc. Magazine's 500/5000 fastest-growing companies in America for seven consecutive years and employs more than 4,000 people.

"We're opportunistic and will seek the best brands with the most opportunity," she said. "Our future looks a lot like our past 10 years but with more jet fuel. We plan to invest in and scale eight to 10 brands over the next decade."



Brett Schulman, CEO, Cava Grill

Brett Schulman's career started out in finance, but after spending 10 years working for investment banking firms, he traded it in for a few snacks. The Washington, D.C., native took on the COO role in 2006 at Snikiddy, a snack food company that distributed its products to natural and organic markets, club stores and mass retailers. After spending nearly a decade there helping to transform it into a multimillion-dollar growth business that eventually sold to Utz Quality Foods, he landed at Cava in 2010.

Schulman took over as CEO at Cava and became a partner in the Mediterranean concept's sister restaurant, Cava Mezze Restaurant Group, overseeing the \$300 million purchase of Cava's largest competitor, Zoes Kitchen. Schulman now leads the combined company that has a workforce of more than 8,000 team members across 24 states.

Schulman, who has a passion for food and startup companies, helps educate people to eat more healthfully via his membership to the Society of Fellows of The Culinary Institute of America and also supports City Blossoms, a D.C.-based nonprofit organization that teaches kids about gardening, and Garden School Foundation, which provides garden-based education to youth at Title I schools in Los Angeles.

Top 25 Executives



Pete Cimino, founder, Lloyd Taco Trucks

Pete Cimino is the reason food trucks exist in the western New York area. When he first came up with the idea for Lloyd Taco Trucks in 2009, the city of Buffalo hadn't updated its mobile food vending laws since the 1930s. Against the odds, he persisted, working with lawmakers to update first city and then county laws to accommodate food trucks. He also worked with other entrepreneurs to help them launch their own food truck brands.

Five years and four food trucks later, while many brick-and-mortar restaurants were adding food trucks to their business models, he drove the other way and brought the mobile cuisine indoors by opening the first Lloyd Taco Factory. Many people initially questioned the viability of a Lloyd-branded brick-and-mortar restaurant, but Cimino saw it as the next evolution. In December 2015, Lloyd Taco Factory opened its doors with an expanded menu and craft cocktail bar.

While the Factory took center stage, winning multiple awards for its food and drinks, Cimino focused his attention on the next expansion, Churn Soft Serve & Coffee. Within a year of opening, the brand won numerous awards, including Buffalo Spree's "Best Ice Cream — City," and was routinely mentioned in local news and numerous travel articles.



Patrick Renna, president, Wahlburgers

When Wahlburgers CEO Rick Vanzura stepped down last year, Patrick Renna stepped up to lead the brand as interim CEO. Renna, who had been serving as the brand's CFO, is not only guiding it through a global growth phase but is also overseeing the expansion of its retail partnerships. The nearly 30-unit concept's burgers are already in 4,000 grocery stores, for example, and it has a line of branded apparel sold online and at the restaurants.

"I'm incredibly excited when I think about the future of Wahlburgers and our evolution as a company," Renna said. "From the expansion of our restaurants domestically and internationally, to food trucks and our recently launched at-home retail beef program, I think the sky is the limit."

Renna was previously CEO at Boloco, a Boston-based burrito chain, where he also served as CFO for four years. Prior to that, he was CFO at Sebastians Café and Catering, where he spent four years overseeing all financial and administrative policies and procedures for the company; this included leadership during the company's most profitable growth period. Previously, he held CFO positions at Fresh Concepts, which operates fast casual restaurants under the name Fresh City and Souper Salad.



Karen Kelley, chief restaurant operations officer, Panera Bread

As a well-known leader in the restaurant category, Karen Kelley has run several innovative brands. Before joining Panera's executive team at the end of last year, she was at Tatte Bakery & Cafe for just under a year and president of Sweetgreen for four years. She also ran the show as president and COO at Drybar and was senior vice president of domestic and international operations and human resources for Pinkberry.

Although she has spent the latter part of her career in the hot seat as a leader, she started her career pursuing her bachelor's degree while working in Taco Bell in college and holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado Boulder in political science and government.

Top 25 Executives



Michelle Bythewood, president, Salata Salad Kitchen

Not only did Michelle Bythewood build Houston-based Salata Salad Kitchen's marketing team from the ground up as CMO, she also organized and led its first brand conference and spearheaded the research and development that led to the creation of the brand's prototype and rebrand. Those accomplishments proved she had what it took to lead the brand, and she took over as president this year. The marketing guru is now responsible for the management of operations and logistics and creating, communicating and implementing the organization's vision, mission and overall direction across all departments.

Prior to joining Salata, Bythewood served as vice president of brand marketing for Cicis, senior director of field marketing for Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers and as brand vice president of marketing for Schlotzsky's/Cinnabon Express. She is also the founder and principal of Field Marketing Focus.



Keith Hill, co-founder and CEO, I Love Bacon

Keith Hill, co-founder and CEO of I Love Bacon, thought he'd be a car guy but then became a DJ but is now a bacon guru. What started as a food truck experiment in Huntsville, Alabama, has quickly progressed into three brick-and-mortar locations, two trucks and one unit inside a food hall.

Hill started his career by opening an auto accessories store when he was 21 but soon shifted gears to work as a DJ, specializing in lighting, sound and videos for concert tours. Once he got into the nightclub business, he began noticing food trucks at concert venues and eventually partnered with

chef Josh Patrick to launch a food truck.

The duo figured a truck made more sense, economically, than starting with a brick-and-mortar location. Hill, named the Food Truck Operator Influencer of the year in 2018 by Food Truck Operator, has since expanded the company, however, operating in four markets with plans to expand nationally as well as into Latin America by the end of the year.



Brian Niccol, CEO, Chipotle

Replacing any successful CEO is hard, but it's nearly impossible when you are taking over for someone as well-known and respected as Chipotle founder Steve Ells. Brian Niccol, however, hasn't missed a beat since he left Taco Bell last year in hopes of steering Chipotle out of the slump it found itself in after suffering numerous bouts with E. coli and other food safety issues.

Since Niccol's takeover, the chain has modernized its ordering process by adding mobile ordering and payments and has also expanded the menu. The strategy is working.

The chain's stock is back up past \$700 per share, which is a huge improvement over its 52-week low of \$247.52 in February 2018. The financials for Q4 2018 were also solid, as the brand reported in February 2019 that it saw a 6.1% increase in comparable-restaurant sales, which included 2% transaction growth.

"For the full year, Chipotle's average unit volumes exceeded \$2 million with digital sales surpassing half a billion dollars," Niccol said during an investor call. "The growth acceleration this quarter gives us confidence that our strategy is working."

Top 25 Executives



Jeff Sinelli, CEO and founder, Which Wich

Although 2018 marked the 15th anniversary of Dallas-based Which Wich, founder Jeff Sinelli is not one to relax. Instead, he took a proactive approach to evolving the company, overseeing a menu overhaul, which flipped the equation from a heavily customizable menu to a more heavily composed menu, and is working with franchisees to roll it out along with other changes, including a model redesign and brand refresh.

Sinelli also continued to invest in Sinelli Concepts International, which owns Which Wich. He spent 2018 improving Paciugo Gelato Caffè, a 20-year-old Italian gelato franchise concept based in Dallas that he bought in 2017. He has introduced a variety of flavors and retooled the model and operations at the 32-unit concept with a goal of expanding to more locations this year.

Sinelli is also creating a coffee concept and co-branding potential across the brands within the portfolio.



Scott Deviney, CEO, Chicken Salad Chick

Scott Deviney's strategic vision and restaurant management experience have played an integral role in the accelerated growth and rapid expansion of Chicken Salad Chick. When he put together the transaction with Eagle Merchant Partners to buy out the founders in 2015, the brand had 32 restaurants and an AUV of approximately \$900,000.

Today, Chicken Salad Chick is experiencing a 32% increase in unit growth, with 105 locations (up 238% since 2015) across the Southeast, 104 restaurants in development and more than \$110 million in systemwide revenue (a 40% increase from last year).

Deviney, a graduate of University of Georgia's business school, guided the brand last year to open its milestone 100th unit, but it also opened an additional 26 restaurants in 2018. Chicken Salad Chick achieved its fourth consecutive year of positive growth, and the University of Georgia's business school named it No. 4 on its list of top companies founded and/or run by a UGA alumnus.

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