

2022 fast casual
TOP 100
MOVERS & SHAKERS

Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment



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Although the fast casual industry is much newer than its counterparts of QSR, casual and fine dining, that hasn't stopped it from leading its older siblings when it comes to innovation, nimbleness and creativity.

And those three attributes were top of mind this year when judges sifted through the hundreds of nominations for the 2022 Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers. After hours of deliberation, the panel settled on 75 brands and 25 executives to round out this year's list.

As in past years, the Top 100 isn't solely focused on the most profitable or fastest-growing brands. Of course, those elements are important and often come into play, but companies also make this list for their dedication to innovation, nimbleness and creativity.

Although the brands represented come from a variety of places, offer many different cuisines and range in size, you'll notice that each possesses those three qualities.

We are honored to feature their stories.

Congratulations to all our winners.

Cheers,

Cherryh Cansler

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Top 75 Brands

#1 WOW BAO

Chicago-based Wow Bao is one of the fastest-growing brands in fast casual history, so it's no surprise that it has become the first brand to take the top spot twice on the Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers. After making the list for several years in a row, Wow Bao's first win came in 2019.

In one year, it went from serving its Asian cuisine in just a few markets before the pandemic to being available within 500 locations in 41 states by December 2021.

CEO Geoff Alexander's unique dark kitchen model allows restaurant brands all over the U.S., Mexico and Canada to add Wow Bao's bao, bowls and dumplings to their own menus. The strategy has not only made Wow Bao available in over 650 locations, but it's also served as a second revenue stream for its partner brands. While many restaurants struggled through the pandemic, the additional business helped to keep some brands afloat.

"We believe that every kitchen can be a third-party kitchen for Wow Bao," said Alexander, who is planning to end 2022 with 1,000 locations.

He also recently launched a plant-based concept, Skinny Butcher Crazy Crispy Chick'n, which received a \$10 million investment from Valor Equity Partners to help it expand. Skinny Butcher will be available in 150 locations by year's end.

"We have always been a food first company, and Dave Zilko (Skinny Butcher CEO) and team have created an unparalleled product that we are proud to partner with and represent on a national scale," Alexander said. "While other plant-based chick'n companies have nuggets, we have a full line of menu items that will please any and all eaters."



hot asian buns



#2 CHICKEN SALAD CHICK



After opening 31 restaurants in 2021, Chicken Salad Chick is projected to open 50 more by year's end and will continue to add 50 per year to achieve its goal of 500 locations by 2025.

Alabama-based CSC remains one of the fastest-growing restaurant chains in the U.S., reporting \$255 million in systemwide sales, a 51% increase over 2020, and a 17% increase in unit count year-over-year.

A key piece of this growth is the chain's guest experience. In 2021, for example, the brand rolled out third-party delivery, introduced branded box lunch catering options that offered individualized portions of chicken salad meals, and continued menu creativity, including the creation of seasonal flavors such as Deck The Holly, a holiday twist adding cranberries to the popular Holly Jalapeño chicken salad.

A passion for technology has also helped to fuel growth. CSC has over 1 million reward members on its mobile app, with \$27.3 million in sales over the past 12 months. The chain also relaunched CravingCredits in 2020 with single-sign-on for guests to order online meals as well as catering via the app. It offers OloDispatch for delivery and curbside ordering and boasts a website run by Scorpion. It also has a mobile training program hosted by Wisetail, social media management integrated via Reputation.com, and guest surveys managed by Service Management Group with online/mobile reporting ability.

#3 BURGERFI

With 15-20 restaurants slated to open this year, BurgerFi is continuing its expansion up the eastern seaboard and is no longer satisfied with serving only burgers.

Following its \$156.6 million acquisition last year of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza & Wings, the Florida-based chain plans to acquire more brands to further redefine itself as an industry leader, said CEO Ian Baines.

"The high quality of our food offerings, the substantial number of new restaurants opening and our commitment to sustainability are proof that BurgerFi has established itself as a forward-thinking brand," he said.

The 10-year-old brand also welcomed Martha Stewart to its Board of Directors in 2021 and began expanding several technologies to enhance the guest experience. They include launching in-car ordering in the new generation of 5G interactive cars and testing QR code table-ordering and self-ordering kiosks.

The 140-unit chain, which opened 16 locations last year, also debuted Patty, a robot that interacts with customers by serving

meals to tables and returning used trays to the kitchen. By integrating automation with human operations, the innovation supports workers by enhancing efficiencies and allowing employees to prioritize quality guest service, Baines said.

Its mobile app is also cutting edge, allowing customers to order ahead, send digital gift cards, find nearby restaurants, scan to earn loyalty points and more.

The chain also uses first-party and third-party deliveries, with third-party delivery integrated directly into the POS system. It's also partnered with Yoobic, a digital app-focused training platform, to streamline the employee training process.



#4 DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN

Dave's Hot Chicken is taking the fast casual restaurant world by storm, opening 33 locations in 2021 and more than tripling its count in 2022 with an additional 75 locations planned.

Not only did the 5-year-old chain enter several markets in the U.S. last year, it also made its international debut, opening in Canada and recently signing a deal to add 31 locations in the Middle East.

The California-based brand, which now has 599 committed locations, also brought on multi-platinum music artist Drake as an investor, joining a star-studded lineup of other celebrity investors, including Samuel L. Jackson, Maria Shriver, Tom Werner and Michael Strahan.

Growing fast and maintaining its position during the pandemic was possible because of its cloud-based, digital-focused technology stack. Revel, for example, manages the POS, kitchen display systems and credit card processing, while Olo aggregates third-party delivery companies and online ordering. Givex handles gift-card processing, and Restaurant365 tracks back-office operations and accounting. Harri allows for applicant tracking, onboarding employees, scheduling and time clock/payroll compliance, while Restaurant Analytics Delivered is the company's data warehouse and business intelligence tool.

"There have been so many important milestones for our brand this year that have helped to cement ourselves as a leading fast casual concept," CEO Bill Phelps said. "It's important that we keep this momentum going as we kickstart 2022, so that we can continue to grow and bring our craveable Nashville hot chicken to legions of new fans."



#5 DICKEY'S BARBECUE PIT

Dickey's ended 2021 on a high note, reporting a 16.5% increase in same-store sales and 22 months of consecutive same-store sales growth.

The 80-year-old Texas-based chain also introduced a digitally focused user experience for mobile ordering after learning that 90% of guests were visiting its website via mobile devices.

In less than 35 days, the company completely redesigned its e-commerce site to enhance speed, which led to fewer abandoned carts, fewer clicks, less scrolling and easier-to-follow navigation. The improvements led to a 42% increase in digital sales and a 122% increase in site traffic. In addition, online ordering increased 391% to about 2,500 checks a day, and the average check size saw an increase of nearly 27%.

Dickey's executives also revamped internal reporting and resource channels and integrated all third-party delivery partners into Chowly to streamline the online ordering process. That integration resulted in a growth of off-premise sales of over 400%.

Although the chain focuses on creating and owning all of its technology platforms, developing its team and internal operations are also priorities. Dickey's, for example, continues to upgrade the online training platform at Barbecue University, which features virtual classroom experiences.

It also spent the last year upgrading its loyalty program and developing its own USDA craft sausage facility in order to solve supply chain issues triggered by the pandemic.

COVID-19 also led to the creation of several virtual brands -- Wing Boss, Trailer Birds, Big Deal Burger and BBQathome.com. Each business has provided Dickey's with increased revenue opportunities without sacrificing health and safety measures.



Top 75 Brands

#6 WOWWORKS



WOWorks, which is made up of Saladworks, Frutta Bowls, Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh and The Simple Greek, spent 2021 wowing the industry with major growth. It opened 60 restaurants and signed 28 franchise agreements.

“With our restaurants having the ability and flexibility to work in a variety of locations and footprints, we are attracting new entrepreneurs looking to get into the fast-casual industry and multi-unit operators looking to expand their portfolio and diversify with our proven, profitable concepts,” said CEO Kelly Roddy.

Among its 60 openings in 2021, nearly 48% were in non-traditional settings; 15 were in Canada, 17 were ghost kitchens and 18% of its non-traditional openings were in grocery stores, including the first franchisee-owned store-within-a-store Frutta Bowls restaurant in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

The company also signed a 90-unit deal with Combo Kitchens and unveiled co-branded units of Saladworks and Frutta Bowls, including one inside a New York Walmart.

By the end of the 2021, six co-branded restaurants were thriving, with 13 in the development pipeline for 2022.

“By sharing a front and back-end, co-branded restaurants can build-out more efficiently to open quicker, have lower operating costs, and cover more dayparts to attract more guests and generate sales,” Roddy said.

In addition to growth, Saladworks introduced a new menu in 2021, allowing guests to create customized salads, warm grain bowls or a mixture of both. It also added six global and regional flavor profiles, including Asian, Mediterranean, Greek, Southwestern Chipotle, Smoky BBQ and Farmers Market.

#7 FAZOLI'S



Although it's not one of the largest brands in the industry, Fazoli's proved it can hang with the big guns. Papa John's and WingStop, for example, were the only two brands that outperformed the 220-unit Italian chain on the two-year sales trend, said Carl Howard, the brand's CEO, who retired this year.

“We finished the year up 22.7% in sales and 15.7% in traffic,” he said. “While we do not have the firepower to drive the performance of the large national brands, we continue to be nimble and swift to leverage our brand as an industry leader.”

The brand's reputation led to FAT Brands acquiring it in November 2021 for \$130 million, a move that will help it open 20 locations and sign 40 franchisees by year's end.

With double-drive-thru prototypes, smaller footprint restaurants, an attractive conversion incentive, a lower barrier to entry as well as the option to franchise through virtual concepts -- Wingville and Macaroniville -- the brand is providing prospective franchisees with multiple ways to join the Fazoli's family.

The drive-thru, however, is where the brand really shined in 2021, as nearly 50% of sales came from that channel, inspiring the team to also test kiosk cash machines and a thinking mobile app.

Fazoli's kicked off 2022 by reinventing its lifestyle menu and launching a partnership with a ghost kitchen brand, proving it's on a mission to reach its goal of 300 locations by year's end.



#8 BLAZE PIZZA



Over the past year, Blaze Pizza has been committed to building off the momentum the company created in 2020 in more ways than one. It kicked off the year reporting an 18% increase in systemwide sales and signing seven deals to develop 34 locations across Tennessee, Florida, Alaska and California.

The chain has continued to invest in building a strong leadership, hiring a CTO, CFO and an SVP of Development – all of whom have worked with nationally recognized restaurant brands and bring years of industry experience to Blaze.

Blaze, which has 340 locations in 38 states and six countries, also paid close attention to the consumer's growing demand for greater convenience, which led to the revamp of its mobile app to add a seamless ordering process. Today, its digital business accounts for 40% of sales, which is supported by the use of a QR code for contactless menus.

The app's targeted marketing function allowed the company to drive new reward members – surpassing the 3 million mark in 2021.

Beyond the consumer-facing technology, Blaze employs numerous tech solutions for franchisees to better operate and manage their restaurants. One example of this is Labor Guru, which integrates into Blaze's labor management system to forecast labor needs. Additionally, Blaze leverages guest experience apps such as Tattle and Birdeye, which are monitored at the support center level, and an upcoming food management system to help best forecast and control food cost.

Additionally, the company made changes to the back-of-house operations after hiring an outside consultant to run a labor study that identified ways to make operations at Blaze more systematic and effective.

#9 MOUNTAIN MIKE'S PIZZA

Although it was founded in 1978, Mountain Mike's doesn't operate like an old company.

Under the leadership of Principal Owners and Co-CEOs Chris Britt and Ed St. Geme, the brand had its best sales year, ending 2021 by surging past \$250 million in total system sales.

The 250-unit chain also surpassed \$1 million in systemwide AUV, and sales across its digital platforms (mobile web, mobile app and third party) have tripled over the past two years and account for over \$100 million and 40% of Mountain Mike's system sales.

During the year, the California-based brand opened 18 restaurants and signed agreements for over 60 locations.

Other key achievements included the introduction of the Mountain Rewards mobile app and loyalty program, which should have 250,000 members by year's end. The brand also renewed its partnership with the San Francisco 49ers and will soon announce a similar partnership in Major League Baseball.

"Our brand's franchise opportunity for both existing and new franchise partners has never been more exciting as we accelerate the introduction of Mountain Mike's Pizza to more territories throughout the Western U.S.," Britt said. "We are finding scores of valued and enthusiastic guests in every new market who serve as brand evangelists as we author an incredible growth story more than four decades in the making."



Top 75 Brands

#10 SMASHBURGER

Smashburger, which ended 2021 with a nearly 20% comp sales, took an aggressive approach to menu innovation, launching The Scorchin' Hot Crispy Chicken Sandwich, The Chorizo Cheeseburger By Chef Rick Bayless and collaborating with General Mills and Ghirardelli to release limited-time milkshake flavors, including Cinnamon Toast Crunch Churro and Ultimate Chocolate Chip made with Ghirardelli.

"We've seen that many guests crave different flavors and options, and 2021 proved that focusing on food quality and taste is crucial in driving further growth for the brand," Smashburger President Carl Bachmann said. "In a competitive landscape where brands are in a race to win over guests, we'll continue to elevate our offerings and leverage consumer insights to prioritize Smashburger's aggressive menu innovation into 2022, with an emphasis on taste and quality."

Another one of Smashburger's top priorities over the past year was to ensure customer accessibility, which inspired it to relaunch its SmashClub Rewards loyalty program. With data-driven and AI-powered campaigns, Smashburger was able to generate a more profitable campaign structure, while also providing rewards that aligned with guests' individual preferences.

The Denver-based chain also expanded delivery offerings, including the quick implementation of curbside pickup, which contributed to a 436.7% increase in digital and call-in orders. The company relies on a blend of in-house developed and licensed technology and is planning to add automated-voice ordering, social media ordering and AI-based ordering.



#11 &PIZZA

Washington D.C.-based &pizza, which has opened 24 shops since the start of the pandemic, is no stranger to the Top 100 list, claiming a spot for the past several years for a variety of reasons, including its commitment to innovation and technology.

Last year, for example, it built a tech system -- &OS -- to provide guests with frictionless experiences across delivery, pick-up, and in-shop ordering. Its SMS-based loyalty program delivers benefits, and the in-shop digital menu boards, combined with tokenization, allow the company to tailor menu displays.

Its order management and routing system uses demand assessment and geo-fencing to route online orders to the right shop, and in-shop tablets that allow staff to prioritize orders, track pie progress and communicate with guests.

Employees, however, are just as important to &pizza as its customers. The business began 2021 with a \$15.02 average wage and ended the year with an average wage of \$16.81 — a 12% increase. And all locations have a \$15 minimum wage.

During the pandemic, &pizza provided employees with hazard pay as well as free pizzas and a \$500 vaccine incentive. It also expanded paid sick leave to all employees, offered unlimited paid sick leave related to COVID and rolled out telehealth.

"&pizza is proud to be leading the industry by showing a clear path to doing well by doing good, advocating for a future where employees and companies can win together," said President Andy Hooper.

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 POKEWORKS

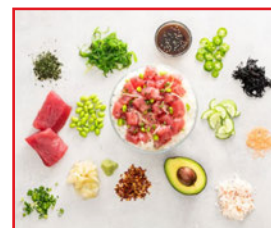
Irvine, California-based Pokeworks, which plans to have nearly 90 locations open by year's end, has spent the past year making strides in leadership, franchise development, menu innovation and restaurant design.

As the chain grew its corporate leadership team by hiring a CEO, COO and CDO, it welcomed 11 locations and took a chance on a new format to provide more convenient service. The Cruise-Thru Lane, for example, which opened last year in Tennessee, allows customers to skip the line and grab their orders from a window. The prototype will be used in the chain's future suburban locations.

The design followed upgrades to Pokeworks' digital and in-store experiences, which included the opening of two non-traditional restaurant spaces, as well as entering the virtual kitchen space via a partnership with Epic Kitchens in Chicago and the delivery-forward arena in Redwood City, California with DoorDash Kitchens.

With sustainability as well as providing healthy food options as core goals of the brand, Pokeworks recently introduced cauliflower rice to its menu, creating a keto-friendly option. It also added a 100% plant-based pork protein and is now working with Wildtype, a startup creating sushi-grade cultivated salmon, to test and help the company refine the cultured salmon into a premium, preferred alternative to fresh salmon.

"As the leading fast casual poke brand in the world, we're focused on innovating, growing and delivering the highest quality seafood and poke experience," said CEO Steve Heeley. "In the past year, Pokeworks has done just that through new menu innovations and sustainability partnerships, improving ordering possibilities and accessibility for consumers and maximizing profitability for our franchisees."



#13 CRAVE HOT DOGS AND BBQ

Crave not only added 29 locations and three food trucks to its roster in 2021, but it also introduced ax-throwing in some locations, proving the customer experience is still one of its most important focuses. Several of its locations, for example, also feature patios with games, trivia nights, karaoke, live music, bingo and family nights as well as self-pour beer and liquor walls.

"Being able to socially distance while at a bar is something that has had us continuously pushing our sales successfully throughout the past 22 years," CEO Samantha Rincione said.

The chain, which hopes to sell 50 brick-and-mortar locations as well as 25 food trucks by year's end, reported a 12% increase in same-store sales and is committed to meeting customers where they are most comfortable. For example, guests may interact with the brand via the mobile app, self-ordering kiosks or the website and may pick up their food via drive-thrus or walk-up windows, or they can always choose delivery.

While guests are important at Crave, franchisees aren't left behind.

"We have a franchisee first attitude," Rincione said. "In our 'Crave Family,' our franchisees sometimes need assistance in different areas and our entire team makes ourselves available to them 24/7. We have also founded a non-profit organization called 'Crave Saves,' where we work to eliminate and bring awareness to child trafficking throughout the U.S."



#14 MOOYAH BURGERS, FRIES & SHAKES

Riding the wave of a strong 2020, Mooyah continued the momentum in 2021, ending the year with an 18% increase in restaurants' year-over-year sales in 2021, with 51% of restaurants exceeding the \$1 million sales mark, almost doubling its prior record.

The Texas-based company also signed seven deals to open 39 locations, remodeled five stores, and launched a drive-thru prototype.

"Mooyah has outperformed the industry and fast casual segment in sales, according to Black Box, and unlike many systems that shrunk during the last 2 years, we have continued to grow and open more units," said President Doug Willmarth. "Due to our strong pipeline of signings the last few years, we are on pace to have our biggest growth year ever in 2022, with over 20 new restaurants planned to open this year."

Technology has also helped Mooyah's growth curve. For example, membership to its rewards app increased 18% in 2021, and the chain added kiosks to 10% of its stores, with plans to add more. Digital menu boards are now in 85% of the restaurants, and the app began offering Olo-powered dine-in ordering mode to assist with staffing shortages and contactless ordering and payment.

By year's end, the chain will complete 19 agreements to develop 53 units, open 22 stores and remodel 13 locations.



#15 SLIM CHICKENS

Although it has over 150 locations, Slim Chickens was able to turn on a dime during COVID-19, transforming its parking lots into dining rooms, boosting digital channels, investing in marketing and operations, adding safety protocols, and continuing to sell franchise locations.

Since March 2020, the Arkansas-based fast casual has sold over 450 units, opening 20 in 2020 and nearly 40 in 2021. Despite a global pandemic, comp sales continued to grow and were up 14% in 2020 and up over 25% in 2021.

During the dining room shutdowns, the company invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into marketing for its franchisees, and most are still in place today. The company created online ordering platforms, boosted social media posts, added signage and shade tents to parking lots for curbside pickup and revamped to-go procedure.

Another focal point was pushing the chain's mobile app by deploying bag stuffers at the drive-thrus to instruct people how to download the app and the newly created curbside and delivery button.

"The exec team made a decision the first week of the shutdown that they would not be laying off or furloughing any employees," according to Sam Rothschild, COO and partner, who said the chain also gave franchisees royalty relief.

"We have one of the most passionate and talented groups of franchisees and support center staff that teams up together to drive the performance of the Slim Chickens system comp store sales and grow average unit volumes sales along with strong new restaurant openings," he said.



SLIM CHICKENS



Top 75 Brands



16. Dog Haus

After sales increased nearly 32% in 2021 over 2020,

Dog Haus has raced into 2022 with plans for its Absolute

Wurst year to date. Acclaimed for its gourmet hot dogs, sausages and burgers, Dog Haus' lineup has expanded to include The Absolute Brands, a restaurant group composed of Dog Haus as well as several virtual brands and a bar stocked with unique cocktails created by some of the industry's top mixologists.

In 2021, The Absolute Brands expanded its portfolio of pickup- and delivery-only concepts with the introduction of Jailbird and The Impossible Shop, joining Bad-Ass Breakfast Burritos, Bad Mutha Clucka and Plant B. Far from typical menu additions, over the past year, The Absolute Brands represented roughly 20% of Dog Haus' total sales – a percentage that continues to grow – with Bad-Ass Breakfast Burritos setting the pace as the top-performing virtual concept.

Essentially, all of Dog Haus' locations in 2022 will offer The Absolute Brands and The Impossible Shop.

Over the past year, the Pasadena-based brand has laid the foundation for growth by executing six area development agreements that will begin to bear fruit in 2022. Nearly 25 restaurants are under construction or in the pipeline, including several in new states such as Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, Washington and Wisconsin. It also plans to grow its



virtual kitchen presence through its alliances with Kitchen United and CloudKitchens, and its partnership with Live Nation is projected to grow from 10 licensed concert venues to 20 by the end of the year.

Overall, Dog Haus expects to jump from 51 current locations to more than 75 in 2022.



17. Juice It Up!

Juice It Up!, which is on track to open 13 franchised locations throughout the western U.S. by year's end, is also continuing to remodel its existing stores to its refreshed store design. With over 100 locations open and in different stages of development, Juice It Up! is on a mission to uncover ways to bring value and convenience to guests.

During the pandemic, the chain implemented in-store health and safety protocols and launched curbside pickup and tamper-free packaging. With many of those strategies still in place, several other factors also contributed to the brand's success in 2021, which saw a nearly 24% increase in same-store sales over 2020. They included enhanced digital marketing programs and expanding third-party delivery partnerships with Door Dash, Uber Eats, and GrubHub.

Among the brand's loyalty members, orders placed via Juice It Up!'s mobile app outpaced in-store orders 51% to

49%, signaling a significant digital uptick. In fact, digital orders in 2021 grew by more than 70% to account for 19.26% of all orders – nearly twice the rate in 2020 – which amounted to 11.26% of sales.

On the product innovation front, the chain introduced a variety of menu items and limited time offers, both seasonal and functional, with a focus on immunity-boosting and vitamin-packed ingredients. From protein-infused smoothies to antioxidant-rich açai bowls and immunity-enhancing raw juices and shots, guests may easily make educated menu choices based on what matters most to them.



18. Velvet Taco

Since its inception in 2011, Velvet Taco, which has over 30 locations, has been offering over 20 taco varieties, as well as creative sides. The result is a new food category featuring a range of diverse and international tacos such as the Cuban Pig, the Fried Paneer, the Spicy Tikka Chicken and the Fish n' Chips tacos.

In addition to its food, the brand has a strong focus on digital techniques that make operators' jobs more efficient. Over the past year, for example, many of the stores maximized their space with dedicated windows to offer contactless pick-up methods for digital pre-orders made through the Velvet Taco app and website. As a result, off-premise sales are nearly double what they were in 2019, accounting for over 50% of overall sales.



Top 75 Brands

To handle those increases, Velvet Taco reconfigured its kitchen into separate production lines, with one line dedicated to delivery and takeout orders. The company also overhauled some of its food preparation processes to cut average ticket times by more than half, raising sales by 15% in restaurants that have implemented the new processes.

The company believes that along with its loyalty program, its advancements in digital ordering will help entice guests to order directly, rather than from third-party delivery channels, which have been problematic for restaurants since the onset of the pandemic. CEO Clay Dover predicted that growth in direct ordering versus third-party would mean hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings from commission fees.

“Our relentless innovation with our menu, our chef-crafted tacos and the unique atmosphere we’ve created in our restaurants have set us apart from others in the fast-casual space,” he said. “You can go anywhere and get a taco, but you can’t go anywhere to get the Velvet Taco vibe and philosophy.”

19. Schlotzsky’s

While many restaurant concepts had to make significant changes to their operation models to withstand the COVID-19 pandemic, Schlotzsky’s was already in a strong position as the brand prioritized the streamlining of operations and sought to increase consumer accessibility.

Celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2021, Schlotzsky’s focused on its core menu items and reduced the number of unique sandwiches from 18 to 11, reducing the overall menu by 32%. In addition to the cutback of menu items, the chain added



more meat to most of its sandwiches.

In August 2021, it opened an 1,800-square-foot model with a drive-thru and 35 seats, and is now testing a 1,000-square-foot drive-thru-only prototype with pickup windows on two sides and no indoor seating.

The 320-unit chain has also invested in a digital transformation led by its app and loyalty program, which currently has 1.3 million members. Even as people get back to dining in at their local Schlotzsky’s restaurant, the brand continues to see a strong demand for online ordering. In fact, across both first- and third-party delivery channels, mobile ordering accounts for roughly 15% of total sales.

In 2022, the brand is focused on growing the loyalty program and increasing mobile ordering across all platforms.

20. Cowboy Chicken

For over 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 to 17 company-owned and franchised restaurants located throughout Texas as well as Louisiana, Georgia, Oklahoma, and soon, Florida, thanks to a franchisee who will open two stores this year and two next year in the



Orlando area. The chain is also looking to expand throughout Orlando and into Tampa, Jacksonville, Ormond Beach, and St. Augustine, along with adding company-owned locations in Dallas.

Cowboy Chicken has also developed a new store prototype that will debut in Orlando and is now designing a small concept store with limited seating and a drive-thru, focused primarily on takeout, delivery, and off-premise catering.

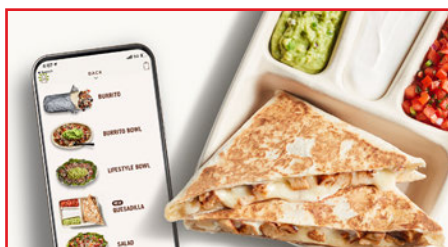
“From the day Phil (Sanders) opened the doors of the very first Cowboy Chicken, our success has come down to the loyal guests who keep coming back week after week, year after year,” Cowboy Chicken president and CEO Sean Kennedy said. “It’s important to all of us at Cowboy Chicken that what we do is all about our guests, because we wouldn’t be here without them.”

21. Chipotle

Chipotle, which has over 2,900 locations, is worthy of a spot on the Top 100 this year for several reasons, including its sustainable business practices and dedication to helping workers.

Its mission to “Cultivate a Better World,” for example, is featured in multiple





22. Island Fin Poke Company

From the inception of Island Fin Poke Company, there has been great excitement among guests and franchisees about the brand's food, service and ease of execution. With its swift growth over the past three years, with 21 locations and 20 more opening in 2022, it is obvious that Island Fin Poke Company is already a top mover and shaker.



Island Fin Poke is launching its first-ever app, which will streamline the ordering process and allow it to engage with guests and community in a more purposeful, consistent and targeted approach.

"This experiential brand and concept was built for these difficult times," said CEO Mark Setterington. "The brand is designed to take our guests from 'the everyday' and transport them to a beach shack where they can eat a delicious and healthy meal.

"For entrepreneurs, Island Fin Poke Company offers the opportunity to open a business with a low cost of entry and quick ROI, helping them to realize their dreams. We are the 'UN-restaurant' with no hood, fryer, etc. Just healthy delicious food, remarkable service and ease of execution."



campaigns, product innovations and initiatives. In March 2021, the company created an Environmental, Social and Governance metric that ties executive compensation to ESG goals and committed to a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030

When it comes to employee needs, the company has not only invested in helping them pursue debt-free college degrees; in 2021, it raised minimum wage and launched an employee wellness app.

Chipotle operates a billion-dollar digital business, which features an app with 24 million members, as well as a website, digital make line, a digital POS and digital training initiatives.

Last year, the chain opened its first Chipotlane Digital Kitchen and walk-up window restaurant, a strategy that will be key to future expansion, said Tabassum Zalotrawala, chief development officer.

"Our portfolio of approximately 300 Chipotlanes perform with the highest margins across the board, so we continue to evolve our restaurant design with formats such as the Chipotlane Digital Kitchen to best suit our growing digital business," she said.

Additionally, the chain is using vision technology to help understand the quantity of ingredients to prep for lunch and dinner. Over time, through machine learning and vision sensors, the brand hopes that employees will be able to better determine inventory needs.



23. Jersey Mike's Subs

Jersey Mike's Subs finished 2021 by opening its 2,000th location and hitting \$2 billion in systemwide sales. It expects to open 300 locations this year, up from 252 last year, showing that the Manasquan, New Jersey-based brand is not slowing down.



The company is exploring a variety of avenues when it comes to expanding by looking for experienced multi-unit operators from around the country, but also from encouraging ownership from within, which is now 83% of Jersey Mike's growth.

It inked deals with franchisees including Sizzling Platter and Checkers/Rally's, while also creating a program to help top managers in the system obtain their own restaurants. And in November 2021, it launched its first ghost kitchen.

Besides completing the new buildings, Jersey Mike's completed several store retrofits, paid for by the company, which included adding a second make line to accommodate heavier digital orders.

Giving back to the communities it serves is just as important to the brand as growth and expansion, however. For example, it raised \$15 million for local charities during its annual Month of Giving fundraising campaign in March. In one November weekend, it raised \$3 million for Feeding America, and has

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helped provide over 75 million meals through the organization's nationwide network of 200 local member food banks.

"At Jersey Mike's our mission is to...Give and Make a Difference," said CEO Peter Cancro. "We like to say it's the 'power of the sub sandwich.' With our recent Month and Day of Giving [March 2022], we supported the 2022 Special Olympics USA Games in Orlando, Florida. Amazing how over 2,000 stores across the country continue to make a difference in local communities."



24. Capriotti's Sandwich Shop

Although it's over 40 years old, Capriotti's is just hitting its growth spurt.

Last year, the Nevada-based chain, which has over 175 restaurants, signed franchise agreements to add 96 shops, which will help it reach its ultimate goal of 500 by 2025.

Sales are also up; in 2021, they grew more than 14.8% from 2020, and the chain opened 35 traditional and 34 non-traditional restaurants.

Even in the midst of its fast-paced growth, Capriotti's is testing robotics and automation, artificial intelligence and other technologies in both the back- and front-of-house operations. Technology initiatives include upgraded mobile app and e-commerce experiences as well as curbside notifications, POS integrations, quality assurance, back- and front-of-the-house automation, sound and scent

strategies and solutions, self-order kiosks and AI telephone ordering systems.

Tech is also a major part of the franchisees' daily lives as the company has a franchise development website with recruitment platforms and onboarding portals, real estate/site-selection analytics, construction management tools and online training modules.

"While sub sandwiches don't exactly evoke an image of bleeding-edge technology, Capriotti's has been pioneers in driving innovation through technology innovation, new product development and partnering with the largest and most successful disruptive players in the restaurant space," said CDO David Bloom. "I believe that we have officially begun the greatest period of opportunity our industry has ever seen, and we are committed to remaining on the forward edge of that change."



25. Big Chicken

Owned by Shaquille O'Neal, JRS Hospitality, and Authentic Brands Group, Big Chicken is growing in an unorthodox way that is quickly building brand aficionados across the United States.

Founded in 2018, the chain's third location is floating on the Carnival Cruise Ship Mardi Gras, and its fifth, sixth and seventh units were in NHL Hockey Arenas. The chain even managed to pop up in

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for the Formula One Race and is growing via multi-unit franchisees and entering more non-traditional venues.

The chain is also giving guests "Big Flavor, Big Food and Big Fun." For example, the menu features the "Big Cookie," which is literally the circumference of an NBA basketball, and its Charles Barkley sandwich comes with macaroni and cheese.

"People will try Big Chicken for the first time because of Shaquille O'Neal, but they will continue to come back for the quality of our food," CEO Josh Halpern said. "We continue to push boundaries on food innovation, while building a really capable and transparent system for our franchisees and partners."

By year's end, the chain will add 10 to 15 more locations and will close 2022 with over 250 units under development and plans to double the store count in 2023.

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.

26. Sweetgreen

Consumers want to know more about **sweetgreen** where their food comes from as well as the impact it has on the environment, and it's an intersection in which Los Angeles-based sweetgreen sits.

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27. Bonchon

Bonchon, which translates to “my hometown,” is a nearly 400-unit global brand known for Korean fried chicken that launched a fast casual model last year to accommodate the demand for off-premise dining options and catering.



The first two opened in Addison, Texas and Towson, Maryland, but 72% of the chain’s development agreements will take on this smaller format. Additionally, Bonchon began a strategic partnership with DoorDash in 2021, which led to a 15% same-store sales increase compared to 2020.

Although its U.S. footprint includes just 110 locations, the company has nearly 400 stores worldwide, including Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, Australia and Vietnam. U.S. growth is top of mind.

“The success we’ve had over the past year is a clear indication that we’re ready to further disrupt the global chicken segment after spending 20 years sharing the joy of Korean food with the world,” said CEO Flynn Dekker. “Looking ahead, we have a goal of opening 400 units in the United States by 2027. With the Korean Wave the United States has been experiencing over the past few years, along with the dedicated multi-unit operators we are partnering with moving forward, I would say we are certainly on track to achieve this. Soon KFC will no longer be synonymous with the Colonel, but with Korean Fried Chicken.”



In February 2021, for example, the 150-unit chain committed to becoming carbon neutral by the end of 2027 by focusing on the three areas that drive the majority of emissions: food sourcing, menu development, and how restaurants are built.

Over the last year, sweetgreen has reduced its carbon emissions by 7% by investing in renewable energy, increased energy efficiency, and cultivated conversations with 27 high-impact suppliers about their carbon footprint to encourage more sustainable farming and food sourcing.

To garner more attention for its cause, sweetgreen named tennis star Naomi Osaka its national athlete ambassador. With more than 76% of sports sponsorships being tied to junk food, and 65% of Gen Z saying they want a more plant-forward diet, the partnership hopes to change the way brands and athletes speak to future generations about the importance of what they eat. The brand’s average aided brand awareness has significantly increased to 51% in August 2021 from 41% in November 2019.

“The world is at an inflection point in changing the way it wants to eat and grow its food. And sweetgreen is positioned to lead that change,” said CEO Jonathan Neman. “Now is when we are able to take this to communities all across the country and eventually across the world to make a real impact on the future of food.”



28. Tropical Smoothie Café

As Tropical Smoothie Cafe celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, it is looking forward to continuing its 10-year streak of consecutive positive same-store-sales growth. Last year, it reported a 22% same-store sales increase over 2020 and signed 332 agreements, the highest number in brand history. About 70% were signed with existing franchisees.



In an effort to capitalize on that growth, the chain named as CMO advertising veteran Deborah von Kutzleben, who will increase the brand’s digital and national media. The chain is also updating its app and loyalty program, making it even more convenient to order from one of the brand’s 1,050 cafes.

Tropical Smoothie Cafe prides itself on meeting guests where they are, and to execute that experience, it built a strong technology foundation by modernizing its POS by moving to a cloud-based system. This shift in technology allows Tropical Smoothie Cafe to layer in its curbside order mode. In 2021, the chain also introduced customizable online and mobile ordering, which accounted for 76% of its growth in SSS.

Additionally, Tropical Smoothie leverages a digital training platform to educate its franchisees and their more than 15,000 managers and crew members

on technology rollouts, new product promotions and brand culture.

Technology upgrades weren't the only improvements made last year. Tropical Smoothie Cafe also expanded its protein offerings by launching its first shrimp limited-time offering. The Cajun Shrimp Wrap was the most popular food LTO in the brand's history.

29. FAT Brands

FAT Brands, which owns Fatburger and several other concepts, has been growth-oriented over the last several years, but it accelerated the strategy in 2021 by acquiring three concepts. It purchased Twin Peaks for \$300 million, Fazoli's, which cost it \$130 million, and Native Grill & Wings, for \$20 million.

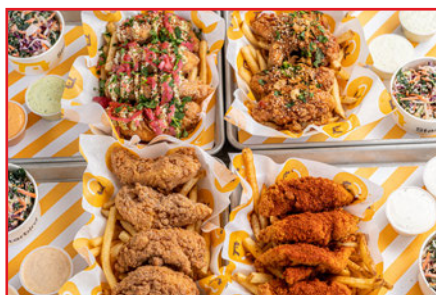
CEO Andy Wiederhorn estimated that the acquisitions would lead to \$45 to \$50 million in incremental normalized post-COVID EBITDA in 2022.

"2021 was a monumental growth year for FAT Brands," Wiederhorn said.

"Despite industry-wide challenges such as labor shortages, supply chain challenges and inflation, we remained laser-focused on adding brands into our portfolio that aligned with our overall growth strategy and existing concepts. While we dealt with the issues that others faced, we didn't let that hinder our plans and we were able to successfully integrate eight brands into our system in addition to building one of our strongest development pipelines to date."

One of the brand's primary initiatives this year is to align the technologies of its 17 brands by rolling out a middleware

solution that is POS agnostic and provides the flexibility to integrate third-party solutions. That will allow the brands to customize messaging for guests and provide marketing teams with insights about their guests and brands.



30. Starbird

Since opening in 2016 in California, Starbird has demonstrated strong qualities in innovation, leadership and resilience, experiencing a 27% increase in same-store sales over 2020 and a 2-year comp at 75% over 2019.

The chain, founded by CEO Aaron Noveshen, has worked to refine its customer experience using tech-enabled solutions, including kiosks that allow it to collect guest demographics through facial recognition.

Similarly, the kiosks provide a solution for guests pinned against longer lines and wait times for their orders. Not only do the devices act as an informative gateway to Starbird's other digital platforms, such as app and web ordering, but they also offer a safer ordering method for guests through their sleek design and placement, as opposed to doing so face-to-face with an employee.

The brand, which has 11 locations and multiple virtual brands -- Starbird Wings, Starbird Salads, Starbird Bowls, and Gardenbird, in Northern and Southern



California, will open additional units throughout the Bay Area and Los Angeles within the next 24 months, hoping to reach 20 locations by 2023.

In January 2022, Starbird made its entrance into Southern California with a pop-up kitchen in the South Bay and is slated to open a pop-up kitchen in Koreatown this spring, with additional streetside locations following throughout the year in Hermosa Beach, Marina del Rey, and other undisclosed locations in the Bay Area and LA.

As part of its growth strategy, the chain raised \$12 million in November 2021, which it will use to open company-owned restaurants and ghost kitchens, increase licensing engagements and launch a franchise offering



31. Freebirds World Burrito

What separates Freebirds from other

Tex-Mex brands is that it uses certified master grillers at every restaurant to ensure its single-cut meats are marinated and grilled to perfection.

Its non-meat items, however, are just as important. In 2021, for example, it expanded plant-based options, adding cauliflower rice to the menu. The year also brought a redesign for each store, which included updated interiors, murals, and seating.



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Behind the scenes, Freebirds is focused on a Texas-only and entirely company-owned expansion plan. With leases already signed, Freebirds expects to double in size over the next five years, if not sooner. The brand, which currently has 57 locations, is expecting 20% growth year-over-year and is adding at least 10 locations in 2022.

Most importantly, Freebirds takes care of its Tribe, which is what it calls its team members. When “Snowmageddon” hit Texas last year, it offered a wage-replacement program covering most shifts for workers, even when they couldn’t work due to store closures. Freebirds further invested in the health of its Tribe by giving everyone paid time off to get vaccinated.

“With an updated tech stack, companywide interior design refresh and incredible Tribe members and Fanatics, Freebirds is taking flight across Texas,” said Alex Eagle, CEO of Freebirds World Burrito. “We’re on our way to becoming the biggest burrito chain in the state.”

32. Freddy's Frozen Custard & Steakburgers

Wichita, Kansas-based Freddy's Frozen Custard & Steakburgers, which has 423 locations in 34 states, is a rapidly



growing franchise that continues to enter new markets, implement technology and serve high-quality menu items.

Freddy's achieved significant growth and success throughout 2021, reporting a 17.8% increase in systemwide sales year-over-year. It added 32 restaurants,



including its first locations in New Jersey and Wisconsin.

In addition to growing its national footprint, Freddy's signed 10 multi-unit agreements, adding 54 units to its development pipeline in North Dakota and South Dakota, New Jersey, Texas, Indiana and Chicago.

The brand's non-traditional footprint continues to expand with its latest additions in the Wichita Wind Surge Minor League Baseball Stadium, at Central Michigan University and in the Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City. Freddy's also continued its ongoing innovation in 2021, introducing a walk-up and drive-thru restaurant prototype in Salina, Kansas.

Freddy's has nearly two dozen restaurants slated to open in the first quarter of 2022. The franchise concept is projected to open over 50 locations nationwide throughout the year, two of which will be in new states, North Dakota and South Dakota. Freddy's will continue its non-traditional expansion in 2022 and currently has a casino location under construction in central California.

33. Coolgreens

Coolgreens' fresh food revolution is growing across the country as



it closed out a year of robust sales and development in 2021. The healthy lifestyle eatery surpassed its total 2019 sales in July of 2021, after nearly doubling its unit count over the past two years.

In 2021, Coolgreens' total revenue increased by 104% compared to 2019, and off-premise sales remained vigorous. Catering sales jumped 296%, online sales increased 720%, and app sales were up 19% compared to the year prior.

Coolgreens capitalized on its vigorous momentum by planting its roots in the South Florida market, opening last year in Delray Beach and in Coral Springs this year. The 1,500-square-foot restaurant features a streamlined store design that allows for expedited service time with the same seating capacity.

“Our team continues to prove that Coolgreens' momentum is only gaining speed as we head into 2022,” said CEO Robert Lee. “We can’t wait to spur further growth and fuel more communities with fresh food.”

The brand plans to open six to 10 total locations in 2022 and is gearing up to sign five to 10 franchisees.

“Our 2021 performance is a direct result of our frontline team's dedication and commitment to the values and goals that Coolgreens is known for,” Lee said. “I’m incredibly proud of everything Coolgreens achieved last year. Our operations team continues to collaborate with our general managers and franchisees, finding ways to improve hourly team member compensation while avoiding extreme or large price increases for our guests to absorb.”

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34. Cheba Hut Toasted Subs

Cheba Hut, a marijuana-themed sandwich franchise, grew by 25% in 2021, increasing sales 55%. Offering over 30 sandwiches, as well as Rice Krispie treats, salads and munchies, along with a full-service bar, the brand continues to expand its toasted subs and drinks with 45 locations across 14 states.



The Arizona-based chain's drink menu includes the Dirty Hippie, Hot Box and Cheba Rita, and its sandwiches are named after cannabis strains. The Panama Red, for example, is a grilled chicken breast topped with marinara sauce. The Acapulco Gold, the chain's version of a barbecue sandwich and Kali Mist, has turkey and avocado.

Since launching Flippy Bird, a game that provides bonus loyalty points that the customer can exchange for grub and gear, on its mobile app in December 2020, founder Scott Jennings said app downloads were up more than 50% and engagement on social media was up 15%. Built from scratch, the app also gives customers 10 cents back for every dollar they spend.

"It's the only game where you can grab bags of Parmesan and weed, fly a blunt through VW buses, all while listening to

the Harlem Underground Band," said Jennings, who also attributed the year's success to adding pick-up windows and to-go order areas. Throughout COVID-19, Cheba Hut was able to keep all locations open, and not lay off any employees in 2021.

"We have been zigging when everyone else is zagging since 1998," Jennings said.

35. Bubbakoo's Burritos

The American-fusion Mexican brand experienced 50% unit growth and 98% system sales growth in 2021. Since its opening in 2008, the Jersey Shore-based fast casual concept has grown to 65 units and expects triple digit sales growth for 2022. It also plans to surpass the 100-unit mark by year's end.



"We are extremely proud of our continued growth and the ability to deliver exceptional financial results for our franchise partners," said co-founder Paul Altero. "Our partners' excitement of the brand and their willingness to continue to expand during the past year really speaks firsthand to our community."

COVID-19 forced Bubbakoo's to focus all its operations and growth on existing franchise partners, which meant Altero had to find a better way to communicate with his team. His answer was implementing the 1Huddle training platform.

"The most important piece to our operations is our people," he said. "We look forward to partnering with 1Huddle as it will allow us to effectively



communicate our culture, reinforce brand standards, and coach product knowledge."

That focus has paid off.

"We have franchisees that are extremely passionate about the brand and they want to continue to grow with the brand given the current tough economic conditions," Altero said.

36. Brooklyn Dumpling Shop

Brooklyn Dumpling Shop is on a mission to bring back the automat concept and has signed agreements to open 150 units. This plan will take the brand from four locations to more than 160 in two years. It's also ensuring customer and employee safety. For example, it recently converted a traditional metal detector into a walk-thru thermometer, which was just one part of a four-step safety plan it created to remain open and keep staff on payroll during the pandemic.

Founded by Stratis Morfogen in 2020, the company is adding locations in Philadelphia, thanks to a multi-unit deal with Nick Sordoni, Stephen Hudacek and Alex Flack of FHG Group LLC. It also has deals to add locations in Connecticut,



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Staten Island and Queens, New York, as well as Florida and Georgia.

"I'm really looking forward to bringing the automat back to its birthplace, and watching it grow in the great City of Brotherly Love," Morfogen said. "Now let's give Philadelphia a taste of our Philly Cheesesteak dumplings and spring rolls."

Building off its success along the East Coast, Brooklyn Dumpling Shop has begun nationwide growth by expanding westward with a series of franchise deals in Texas. In August 2021, it announced multi-unit deals for both the Austin and Dallas areas.

Currently, 10 locations are under development in the Lone Star State, with the brand exploring additional markets for expansion, such as Houston.

37. Portillo's

For nearly six decades, Portillo's has served craveable, Chicago-style food to hungry customers. What began as a small hot dog stand, however, is now a restaurant concept, serving hot dogs, slow-roasted Italian beef sandwiches, chopped salad, cheese fries, and chocolate cake shakes at nearly 70 locations across nine states.

In the past year, Portillo's went public on the Nasdaq stock exchange, expanded

into new markets, unveiled off-premise solutions, and supported team members amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For its launch as a public company, Portillo's offered more than 20 million shares leading to a \$405 million IPO, and its stock rose almost 50% on listing day.

Every salaried person at Portillo's received an IPO grant, making them partial owners of the company, and hourly employees who have been with Portillo's for 10 years or more received a bonus. With new capital, the company is expanding in existing markets across the Midwest and growing into new markets such as Texas.

Portillo's continues to push itself in the area of off-premise innovation, complementing third-party delivery with delivery in-house, partnering with Kitchen United to establish ghost kitchens. It also launched its first pick-up only restaurant, which has three drive-thru lanes.

Expanding the Portillo's restaurant base is a key part of the company's growth strategy. The plan is to increase restaurant numbers by 10% annually. Its 2022 strategy will focus on adding restaurants in established key regions, such as the brand's hometown Chicagoland market, Florida, Arizona, Michigan and Indiana.



38. Wingstop

Headquartered in Addison, Texas, Wingstop operates



over 1,700 restaurants globally and is on a quest to become a Top 10 global restaurant brand. By Q3 of 2021, the chain had experienced system-wide sales increases of 16.7% from the prior year, while total revenues were up 2.8% to \$65.8 million. It's on track for its 18th consecutive year of positive same-store sales growth.

Wingstop has big plans for growth and has invested in tools to support take-away dining as well as its digital customer database, which has over 25 million unique users.

In addition, Wingstop's global presence is growing. The brand recently signed a 100-restaurant development agreement for the Canadian market, which will complement its existing presence in Europe, Asia and Mexico.

"Despite the macro headwinds all of us are facing, Wingstop continues to outperform," the chain wrote in its Top 100 nomination form. "Our focus on our long-term strategy continues to fuel industry leading same-store sales and restaurant development growth for the brand... Our results underscore the strength and resiliency of our brand and the resolve of our brand partners to stay focused on the long-term despite the difficult operating environment."

39. McAlister's Deli

Dedicated to building off its 2020 momentum, McAlister's Deli celebrated a number of milestones in 2021, including enhancing its mobile app and loyalty

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40. Penn Station East Coast Subs

Penn Station experienced rapid growth in 2021 with systemwide sales increasing by over 21% and comparative same-store sales up 20% over 2020. As the pandemic continued, restaurants faced new challenges with an extremely difficult labor market and unprecedented supply chain issues, but Penn Station's 60/40 lunch-to-dinner daypart split has helped it maintain sales.



To keep up with its growth, Penn Station recruited a VP of Strategy and Development and revamped its entire development department. That has led to the signing of agreements with existing franchisees to open 50 locations over the next five years in already developed markets. The chain has also implemented a target growth area development incentive program, which offers 0% royalty for six months and a 50% discount off initial franchise fees for new development agreements in eligible target growth areas.

"2021 brought new challenges to the restaurant industry with the continuing of a pandemic, an extremely difficult labor market and unprecedented supply chain issues," said Craig Dunaway, COO of Penn Station East Coast Subs. "We are very proud of our franchise owners and their general managers for working so hard and leading from the top to help the brand succeed in 2021."



program and launching tableside ordering in early 2021.

With the brand's prioritization of digital technology and building a competitive loyalty program, McAlister's Deli gained over 1 million loyalty members in 2021.

The chain, known for its hospitality, sandwiches, spuds, soups and sweet tea, also hit a milestone in October, opening its 500th restaurant in Tennessee.

Moreover, McAlister's Deli opened 30 locations in 2021 and signed 67 franchise agreements. Its success and strong sales have put it on track to be a billion-dollar brand by 2024.

"The past two years have been difficult on the restaurant industry," said Mike Freeman, chief brand officer.

"Nonetheless, McAlister's Deli leadership and our network of franchisees remained committed to doing what is necessary to keep McAlister's top-of-mind with consumers. We pivoted operations to reach guests in new and creative ways and have made the investments needed to the company's digital capabilities and operations to help positively impact our growth and success. It's rewarding to see our hard work pay off and we look forward to building off this momentum as we strive to be a billion-dollar brand by 2024."



41. Fajita Pete's

Unapologetically designed for takeout, delivery and catering, Fajita Pete's was founded in 2008 on the premise that handmade, premium Tex-Mex could travel better than any other food. Shortly thereafter, "flavor that delivers" was born, and by 2020, Fajita Pete's had exploded across Texas.

Under the leadership of Pedro "Pete" Mora, franchisees are now expanding their footprints across the nation, and the chain is doing its best to help them avoid supply chain issues.

Early in 2021, for example, Fajita Pete's secured favorable long-term protein contracts to help control food costs, while also investing heavily in brand management and marketing, which helped drive 6% same-store-sales growth for the year. With an already streamlined brick-and-mortar footprint of nearly 1,300 square feet, Fajita Pete's also finalized a less-than-1,150-square-foot prototype that should help continue to drive fixed costs down for franchisees long into the future. It will debut this year in Centennial, Colorado.

In 2022, Fajita Pete's has plans to open 15 stores, increasing its footprint by over 60%.

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The pandemic accelerated many trends in the restaurant industry that were already gaining traction in 2020, such as an increased emphasis on off-premise dining and smaller restaurant footprints. As Mora says, the pandemic didn't "make Fajita Pete's a success story, it confirmed its success story."



42. Zoup

Zoup spent 2021 focusing on technology, marketing and culinary innovation as well as leveraging in-house technology to give guests a more efficient ordering experience.

It also launched a virtual brand, MacLove, which created an additional revenue stream for franchisees. Zoup was able to do all of this during COVID-19 because it quickly increased communication with franchisees with frequent webinars to guide them through this unprecedented pandemic.

Additionally, it opened the first "small foot" prototype, to cater to current consumer trends and demands while allowing franchisees to operate a more efficient restaurant. It will open 12 of these smaller units by year's end.

President Jason Valentine said the expansion will be guided by two core values: "Always Better" and "Passion for the Brand."



"These Core Values create a culture of innovation, creativity, and constant improvement," Valentine said. "Everyone associated with the brand is empowered to make change and find opportunities to add value to our business. This results in many initiatives to help move the business forward and sustain Zoup as an active player in the industry."

Besides developing a new model, Zoup also added to its offerings by rolling out an avocado toast grain bowl and alligator gumbo, and added even more meatless soups by partnering with Impossible Brands.

43. Mici Italian

Mici Italian spent 2021 building a strong foundation so it could grow in 2022.



Now that it has solid unit economics, operational efficiencies allowing it to simplify the cooking of its artisanal NY style pizza, and high levels of consumer engagement (over 70% of customers are part of the loyalty program), the chain is embarking on aggressive franchise growth. In just four months, the chain has signed franchise groups to open nearly 60 locations in three states. Coupled with its corporate unit growth in its home state of Colorado, Mici Italian plans to double its unit count in 2022 and grow well beyond in the years to come.

"We are disrupting the \$48 billion pizza business by blending the speed and convenience of the big pizza players with the quality of the artisanal mom and pop pizza places," Partner and Chief Growth Officer Matt Stanton said. "This combination of artisanal food with convenience is the true spirit of fast



casual and resonates with customers like nothing I've ever seen. Once they try our food and experience our speed of service, they are hooked and stay highly engaged with the brand."

Stanton said the brand had to adapt during COVID-19, but due to its flexibility was able to retain all employees and grew sales and units through the pandemic.

"All our dining rooms were closed at one time, but we focused on our off-premise service models (pickup and delivery) to great effect," he said. "We also adapted to fewer touch points, emphasizing online ordering, grab and go stations, curbside pickup, etc. to help with employee and customer safety."

44. Clean Juice

Since it started six years ago, Clean Juice has been proving the demand for healthy, immune-boosting and naturally healthy food. Same-store sales leapt 16% in 2021, and the concept has 120 stores open with over 60 in development.

The Charlotte-based chain, which





declared 2021 as the “Year of the Guest,” focused on raising guest counts and unveiled soups and sandwiches and more center-of-plate initiatives to drive new guests. Additionally, it added digital kiosks in stores, rolled out party catering and web ordering, and also launched its first national advertising campaign as well as a national brand ambassadorship with Tim Tebow.

It upped its game with Franchise Partners, particularly in communications. From weekly emails, to monthly Zoom calls, to a Franchise Partner text message club, the brand focused on providing fluid and helpful information to make sure franchise partners felt loved, supported and equipped with the ever-changing landscape during the pandemic.

This year, Clean Juice created a slushie-style drink called The Refresher by combining two of its best-sellers — smoothies and fresh-pressed juice.

“Menu innovation at Clean Juice is more than just creating something new and exciting for our guests to consume and enjoy, but it’s our collective opportunity to share our passion for living the organic lifestyle,” CEO Landon Eckles said. “At Clean Juice, Core Value #3 says we are all an equally important piece of the puzzle and The Refresher is the result of that equitable collaboration.”

45. WaBa Grill

Since 2006, WaBa Grill has experienced consistent success, and said 2021 was its best year in company history as same-store sales and total system sales surged past the prior year’s record set in 2020. As it celebrated 15 years in business, the chain registered a SSS jump of 23.1% while TSS increased 24.1%.

WaBa Grill, known for its healthy and fresh menu served at super speed, executed a free delivery promotion in response to the pandemic on all orders placed via the WaBa Rewards App or Wabagrill.com. Implemented in March 2020 and running through January 17, 2021, the brand absorbed the delivery charge to ensure WaBa Grill remained accessible and affordable for those seeking healthy meal options.

Also, amidst the pandemic, WaBa’s leadership team finalized a redesign, unveiled over the summer at a new North Hollywood location. It also added digital drive-thru menu boards at select locations and updated in-store menu boards systemwide.

Franchise momentum and expansion also helped to fuel WaBa Grill’s year. The brand opened three locations in 2021 and will open its 200th restaurant in early 2022. On the heels of two 2021 openings in Kern County, WaBa Grill cemented an agreement to open 13 more stores throughout Central California.



46. California Tortilla

California Tortilla took a hard look at its business in 2021



and reimagined the way the brand could interact with guests by perfecting a new service model called ACE (Accuracy, Customization and Engagement). It allows better guest engagement and complete order accuracy as the guest only pays after the food is made instead of before.

If 2020 was about surviving for California Tortilla, 2021 was about thriving. It used crowdsourcing to find a “Saucemollier” to help guide guests through the Wall of Flame, with 75 hot sauces and 14 other sauces available on the line.

In September, Cal Tort launched a fundraising initiative in support of Children of Restaurant Employees, a non-profit group that raises money to help restaurant employees with children when either the working parent or child is navigating a medical crisis or natural disaster.

“At Cal Tort, our philosophy is that food matters. Ingredients matter. Recipes matter,” Robert Phillips, president and chairman of California Tortilla, said in a company press release. “Our people very much matter, and that’s why we’re excited to partner with CORE and let our actions speak loud and clear. With the help of our customers, we can make a meaningful impact in the lives of those who have been serving us day in and day out through our restaurants.”

With aggressive growth plans to open 10% more units in 2022, California Tortillas is poised for another impressive year.



47. Curry Up Now

Although it was begun in San Francisco as a food truck in 2009 by husband and wife duo, Akash and Rana Kapoor, Curry Up Now has 20 units, including three restaurants, one bar and five outposts that opened in 2021.



With a mission of being the biggest and baddest Indian fast casual brand in the country, Curry Up Now is planning to open eight to 10 stores and 10 to 12 outposts this year. Akash Kapoor said despite the unexpected challenges that came with COVID-19, Curry Up Now was able to continue its expansion efforts.

“We’ve always been delivery and catering heavy so with delivery, we were quite prepared for COVID-19,” he said. “We have built parklets at some restaurants. Some stores are even trending higher during the pandemic. We didn’t close a single day during the pandemic.”

In fact, in 2021, Curry Up Now added table-side ordering and implemented robots for food running to help respond to some of the issues that arose during the pandemic.



48. PJ's Coffee of New Orleans

PJ's Coffee of New Orleans, which serves a variety of iced, frozen, hot, cold brew and nitro-infused coffees, along with organic tea and breakfast pastries, has experienced 28.4% unit growth in the past 24 months. Additionally, its system-wide sales increased 22% over 2020, and the brand awarded over 60 franchises representing 120-plus licenses.



With just under 100 franchisees in active development, the New-Orleans based coffee brand is projected to open 40 to 45 locations in 2022.

“The awarding of 60 new franchisees for over 120-plus licenses in a year with as much turbulence as 2021 had is simply an early indicator of our popularity in attracting new franchisees as well as our popularity within our franchise system,” said David Mesa, chief development officer. “Happy franchisees make more happy franchisees.”

With a robust online, digital training platform, PJ's implemented a mobile app that integrates with its POS for mobile order and pay. It also focused on its menu and rolling out the French-inspired fried beignet, which cemented its tradition of spreading the spirit of New Orleans across the country. It provided an

additional revenue stream and raised the average ticket by more than \$1.25.

Due to its drive-thru feature, PJ's had an advantage when dealing with COVID-19. In fact, during the peak of the pandemic, drive-thru locations experienced a SSS increase of 12.1%. Online ordering with contactless pick-up became a very popular way for customers as more people than ever began using the chain's mobile ordering and payment features.



49. Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza & Taproom

The fast casual pizza market is one of the most competitive in the franchise industry, but Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza & Taproom differentiates itself by providing guests with a self-serve taproom wall. In addition to its menu of wood-fired pizzas, sandwiches, starters and desserts, Smokin' Oak guests can start a tab, receive a bracelet, go up to the taproom wall (ranging from 35 - 45 taps), select their drinks, and tap a sensor that activates that tap. They can pour from 1 to 16 ounces at a time.



The response has been overwhelming from a guest perspective and also from new franchise prospects, who are enamored by the technology. During

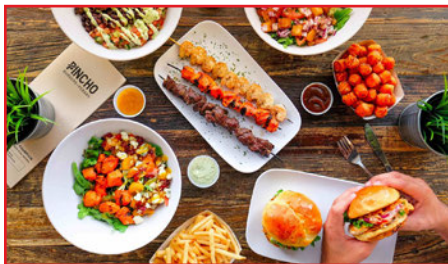
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2020, it also launched a take-out/delivery model and a prototype for a food truck in order to become more available to customers.

“We strive to do the basics right every day,” CEO Matthew Mongoven said.

“We strive for great food, a fantastic guest experience in a welcoming environment. We are the only fast casual pizza franchise now pairing a self-serve taproom wall offering beer, wine and mixed cocktails to elevate that guest experience and to diversify the revenue stream for our franchisees. It’s a win/win and the taproom is now a core part of our franchise offering, with several taproom locations to open in the first half of 2022 alone.

With five locations opening by the end of May, the brand is on track to open an additional five between July and September 2022.



50. Pincho

Last year was a good one for Florida-based burger and kebab concept



Pincho. Experiencing double-digit growth against 2019, it also closed a round of investments from the Savory Fund, which is helping it open six new locations in 2022.

“2021 was by far the best year of the history of our brand,” CEO Otto Othman said. “Through culinary innovation and a deep understanding of branding and

tech, we were able to break records in terms of sales. In addition to that, we received a \$20 million investment from the Savory Fund, which is a testament of the great brand that we have been able to build over the years.”

Although Pincho had to close dining rooms for 6 months in 2020, it leveraged its technology stack to drive sales. In 2021, sales bounced back, and digital orders now account for 55% of its sales.

Also, Pincho deployed hidden menus to diners by tapping Thanx Loyalty 3.0 features, making it one of the first restaurants to offer the vendor’s Hidden Menu capability for customers in March. The feature allows operators to give specific customer segments early or exclusive access to menu items or menu categories, generating engagement and encouraging visits, without relying on traditional discount-based rewards.

“The Pincho brand is all about embracing unique experiences through our food. We are excited that our loyalty program can amplify that experience for our super fans by rewarding them with exclusive access to secret menu items,” Othman said.



51. Wayback Burgers

In 2021, Wayback Burgers had a record-setting year in systemwide sales,



with an increase of 26.2%. Additionally, it completed 124 franchise agreements and launched several limited-time offers to create a buzz around the restaurant.

Despite nation-wide supply chain issues, the LTOs brought new guests into its restaurants and gave loyal guests an opportunity to try new items. These initiatives helped the Connecticut-based brand open 18 locations in 2021, and the chain will add 25 to 30 in 2022.

The biggest pivot during COVID-19 that helped Wayback Burgers was the increase in the takeout and delivery facets of its business, which meant the chain was forced to integrate them into its POS system.

It worked; as other brands cut staff, quite the contrary was true for Wayback. Due to the huge increase in sales, all of its franchisees are adding team members, and staff is increasing at the corporate level to handle the explosive growth of the brand.

52. PITA Mediterranean Street Food

A favorite for fresh, made-to-order Mediterranean cuisine, Pita Mediterranean Street Food welcomes guests

to an open kitchen boasting rotisseries full of gyro, kabobs flaming on the grill, and the aromas of cumin and olive oil wafting through the air. The menu also features traditional and chicken gyros, street pitas, mezza spread, rice bowls, salads and dessert.



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“Our biggest goal is for guests to experience the smells of freshly prepared foods and the colorful array of foods to choose from, as if you were walking through streets and local public markets in the various communities around the Mediterranean,” CEO and Founder Nour Rabai said. “Home for me is in Beirut, Lebanon, where my extended family gathered together for meals, where we spent time together around great food. This is exactly what I want for our guests at Pita, to enjoy great food, freshly prepared with their friends and family.”

The Georgia-based fast casual brand has worked diligently to streamline operations in response to consumer demands, resulting in off-premise dining sales (including online orders and delivery) nearly tripling. The team enhanced online ordering and added Street Wraps to the menu in 2021 to give guests a customizable option that makes it from tablet to table, quickly and efficiently.

53. Hawaiian Bros Island Grill

Known for its Hawaiian-influenced



offerings, Kansas City-based Hawaiian Bros brings the high-quality food, unique vibe and personable service for which only the best fast casuals are known.

Add in optimizing for speed, drive-thru efficiencies and consistency, the chain has racked up impressive statistics compared to large industry players, including an average unit volume of \$4 million, ranking among the highest in the industry. The concept’s revenue growth was 171% year over year.

The company believes in spreading positivity through the Aloha Spirit. From generous rewards to the members of their One Ohana loyalty program (did someone say a trip to Hawaii given away every month?!), to serious recognition for all employees that put in serious effort, Hawaiian Bros is all about doing well to do good for members of The Ohana, which means “family.”

Adding 17 locations in 2021, Hawaiian Bros is aiming to open 22 stores this year, bringing its total to 48.

The chain relies on technology to help it thrive, tapping Toast as its POS foundation. It also has digital order pods and kiosks for dine-in and carry-out orders. The concept utilizes handheld devices in the lot for drive-thru order taking and wireless radio networks for parking lot traffic flow and curbside pickup. But just as important is what is not used: No freezers. No fryers. No microwaves.



54. Chick N Max

Led by a team of restaurant industry leaders who have



over 150 years of combined experience with world-class brands, Chick N Max, based in Wichita, offers 10 flavors of sandwiches, made with almond-wood smoked pulled chicken or fried tenders. It also serves wings, leg quarters, breast quarters and half chickens. Guests may complete their meals with a range of 10 homestyle sides, including fries, onion rings, mac and cheese, mashed potatoes and smoked white beans, and 11 sauces.

With three locations, Chick N Max recently signed its first franchise agreement for three additional restaurants in Sioux Falls.

“At Chick N Max, we’ve experienced tremendous success serving the greater Wichita area, and we are excited to expand our footprint beyond Kansas and into a market like Sioux Falls,” said Chick N Max founder Max Sheets.

Named the winner of the 2021 Perfect Pitch contest at the annual Fast Casual Executive Summit, the chain is ready for big things.

“Within the restaurant industry, chicken is a long-standing and perennial favorite for customers and investors alike,” Sheets said. “That’s because these days, consumer tastes continue to shift toward fresher and healthier alternatives

to take the place of a burger. Anchored by our innovative take on chicken, and an executive team that boasts more than 150 years of combined restaurant experience, we're perfectly positioned to differentiate ourselves in the thriving segment and look to the future with great enthusiasm."



55. Tarka Indian Kitchen

Tarka Indian Kitchen has spent the past decade perfecting its recipes, streamlining operations, and creating a cult-like following for its authentic dishes across the Lone Star State.

Now, the Indian eatery is poised for expansion, despite unprecedented challenges presented by repercussions of a global pandemic, supply chain concerns and ongoing labor issues. In fact, the Austin-based eatery maintained its record-breaking momentum and finished 2021 with sales up more than 20% over last year and 25% over 2019.

Tarka kicked off the pandemic by opening a restaurant in Houston on time and on budget, and the City West location continues to be one of the highest-performing stores in the system. But the growth is just getting started. The executive team is in the final stages of an agreement to close a deal with a growth

partner that will be instrumental in rapid expansion throughout Houston and into Dallas, with two locations scheduled in 2022 and five to 10 restaurants in the pipeline for the next 12 to 18 months.

The Indian eatery continues to lean into third-party delivery and its off-premise business strategy as well. Delivery accounted for nearly 35% of sales in 2021, comparable to 2020 numbers during the beginning of the quarantine. The team leveraged this channel and collaborated with primary third-party delivery partners to renegotiate the commission rates down further to just under 20%, increasing the potential revenue stream from the dynamic channel.



56. Piada Italian Street Food

Piada Italian Street Food is positioning itself for growth over the next few

years, with plans to not only saturate current markets but enter markets as well.

Catering to both customers who want to indulge with a big bowl of pasta as well



as those looking for healthier options, the Ohio-based brand continues to look for ways to be innovative with food and technology.

With 13 restaurants in the pipeline for 2022, Piada Italian Street Food is expanding into the North Carolina market, with openings planned in Charlotte and Raleigh, as well as Kentucky and Texas.

Technology has been at the center of its plan to change the way it engages and serves guests, especially during the pandemic. As a chain with 43 locations across the country, it had to make significant and accelerated changes to operations during the pandemic.

"We are mentally and physically ready for huge growth in 2022 (and beyond) and are eager to make a big splash in the fast casual restaurant scene as we expand into new and existing markets," said Matt Harding, SVP of Culinary and Innovation. "Our food is not one-dimensional, and I think that's why our guests continue to come back again and again."

57. The Halal Guys

As the self-described pioneers of American Halal, The Halal Guys continues to forge its own niche in the fast casual industry.

Last year, for example, it introduced a partnership with the craft beverage company, Botrista, which led to a nearly 20% increase in average check.

The Halal Guys, which recently celebrated its 100th store opening, also undertook a massive effort to clean up some of its well-known menu items, removing preservatives, reducing sodium,



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and eliminating GMOs from some fan-favorite menu items.

During the pandemic, The Halal Guys introduced a new store design featuring an increased emphasis on pickup and delivery as well as offering additional space and seating to ensure social distancing measures can be effectively followed. This design led to the brand adding over 20 locations since the start of the pandemic, and it anticipates opening an additional 25 to 30 units in 2022.

“Despite the challenges that continue to plague our industry, from supply chain disruptions to labor shortages, we have not only forged ahead, but have found ways to take the business beyond pre-pandemic levels,” said CEO Ahmed Aboueleinein.



58. Original ChopShop

Original ChopShop strives to inspire others to “Just Feel Good” with food for “Every/Body.” The brand’s menu features breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner-time options including protein bowls, salads, sandwiches, breakfast items, juices, protein shakes, acai bowls and more, made with whole ingredients that are always chopped-in-shop.

Founded in Phoenix in 2013, Original



ChopShop expanded to Dallas-Fort Worth in 2018, and opened its first restaurant in Houston in 2021. During the year, same-store sales increased by 47% compared to 2020, and 35% compared to pre-pandemic 2019 sales. Additionally, overall revenue in 2021 increased by 47% compared to 2020. The record sales were largely driven by the brand’s continuous technology and menu innovation, along with data-driven campaigns powered by its new Chops app and loyalty program. By regularly leveraging data insights to seamlessly engage with guests, by the end of 2021, 37% of total checks came from loyalty members.

Original ChopShop will increase its footprint by 31% with five openings slated for 2022, including expansion into a fourth market (Atlanta), a second shop in Houston, and growth within Dallas and Phoenix. Additionally in 2022, the neighborhood eatery will introduce its new Chops Catering Rewards program.

The shop projects an increase in same-store sales of 9% and an increase in overall sales of 25% in 2022 compared to 2021. Beyond 2022, Original ChopShop has seven shops planned for 2023.

59. SAJJ Mediterranean

Mediterranean cuisine is exploding across the fast casual industry, and SAJJ Mediterranean hopes to lead the pack with its healthy, locally sourced offerings and customizable menu. Guests choose their entree format (SAJJ wrap, pita sandwich, salad bowl, freekeh, or turmeric rice bowl, couscous bowl) and pile it high with proteins like chicken



or steak shawarma, the plant-based Impossible Kabob, or SAJJ’s award-winning falafel.

Authentic Mediterranean and Middle Eastern sauces, chutneys, and beverages are also available, made with fresh ingredients sourced from local California farms. While staying true to Mediterranean cuisine, SAJJ also works to stay on top of trends and adapt offerings to meet the demands of consumers. The brand has launched a variety of modern and Mediterranean-inspired dishes such as Chocolate Hummus and Cinnamon Chips, the plant-based Impossible Kabob, freekeh grain bowls, green garbanzo hummus and falafel, and Lifestyle Bowls geared toward keto and paleo diets. It is also continuously innovating in the R&D kitchen to test dishes.

SAJJ’s goal is to reach 20 restaurants by the end of 2022, growing within the digital food hall and ghost kitchen space. In 2021, it partnered with All Day Kitchens, a San Francisco-based restaurant platform, to quickly expand customer reach without the need of opening a brick-and-mortar location. It has also continued to strengthen its foothold in Northern California through a collaboration with digital food hall, Local Kitchens, while expanding in Southern California with Kitchen United. Lastly, it serves customers in an L.A. Kroger supermarket.



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While the focus is primarily on growing within California, SAJJ is looking into metrics in markets outside of the Golden State as possible areas for expansion.



60. Torchy's Tacos

The Torchy's Tacos story began just over 15 years ago in Austin, Texas, with an emphasis on unique flavors and high-quality ingredients. Mike Rypka, founder and CEO of Torchy's Tacos, has always wanted to provide a menu of experimental tacos that were quickly coined by fans as “damn good,” a mantra still used today.

Torchy's has seen tremendous growth over the past two years – having celebrated its 100th store milestone in December 2021. It maintains its core commitment, however, to being Damn Good in all it does: from introducing creative limited-time-offerings such as the Black Pumas Taco to enhancing its digital footprint for a Damn Good guest experience with the launch of its first loyalty program. It also recently upgraded online ordering and its Torchy's App to include one-tap ordering.

Torchy's is planning to carry the momentum from last year into 2022. It's on track to enter several markets in 2022, including Florida and Arizona, as well as its first brick-and-mortar location in Ohio. In 2022 and beyond, Torchy's will also continue to grow the brand in existing

markets such as Texas, Colorado, North Carolina and Virginia, while staying true to its Austin roots.



61. Rise Southern Biscuits and Righteous Chicken

Something special is happening right now at Rise Southern Biscuits and Righteous Chicken.



“We've been making decisions through the eyes of the employee and it has been instrumental in adopting new technology while strengthening our culture,” wrote the brand in its Top 100 nomination. “Everyone just wants to be heard and by opening up the channels of communication and truly listening to our employees on a professional and personal level we have built a team that cares about the future of all its members. This approach has built a strong customer loyalty base and increased our ROI to levels we never expected.”

During the last two years, Rise had to adjust from around 25% online and delivery orders to 75%, which forced it to rework how the orders flowed through its systems.

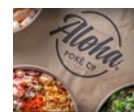
It dropped using a cashier, and added order-ready screens with customer text messaging and heated food lockers.

With 16 locations operating in 2021, Rise is looking to open five to 10 locations this year, and is reworking the store layout to fit the digital kitchen format launching at future openings.



62. Aloha Poke Co.

The Aloha Poke Co. menu features poke bowls made with clean, sustainable ingredients. With a focus



on simple concepts from its dedicated poke menu to store build-outs and back-of-house operations, Chicago-based Aloha Poke Co. seeks to keep execution consistent across all locations while increasing product standards and growing its health-forward concept.

Under the leadership of industry veteran Chris Birkinshaw, the brand is more focused than ever on sustainable food source practices. It can trace each tuna back to the fisherman who reeled it in, for example, and all salmon is farm-raised in the frigid waters of Patagonia, Chile, without harmful antibiotics.

With 18 locations, Aloha Poke is looking to continue its momentum after selling 11 units in Houston, as well as its first Atlanta and Charlotte stores. Combined, it plans to open 20 more stores across eight states, with another 30 development deals.

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“Definitely not by design, Aloha Poke was already positioned as a brand and in its build-out to lean into the COVID-19 pandemic,” Birkinshaw said. “As the pandemic carried on, people emerged with a new found responsibility to themselves to proactively take control of their health and wellness and their family finances. This is where Aloha Poke shined its light with its simplified build-outs and dedicated menu backed by a stabilized supply chain (not that we don’t have our moments as well) but overall, we are lean and mean, strong and ready and able to offer all our customers with healthy fast casual food options.”



63. Taziki's

Taziki's is planning to open its 100th restaurant this year and will debut a new prototype in Indiana. Optimized for off-premises, the design features a drive-thru, a designated pick-up area, outdoor seating with garage doors and digital menu boards.

This past year, Taziki's has focused heavily on the guest experience, which included rolling out QR codes as well as promo codes for online ordering and gift card redemption through the app and online platform. This upgrade not only allowed customers to order e-gift cards and redeem them without having to visit a register, it also resulted in labor efficiency.



SMS Text platform upgrades benefitted repeat guests, which had a positive impact on Taziki's year by giving customer offers on the items and the days of the week that appeal to them most.

“We’ve stepped up our digital marketing, guest experience and tech initiatives to position ourselves as best in class,” CEO Dan Simpson said.



64. Zunzi's

Zunzi's, a 16-year-old fast casual takeout shop known for South African-inspired sandwiches, is anchored by the Conquistador, a zesty combination of baked chicken, lettuce and tomato served on French bread and topped off with Zunzi's creamy Italian dressing and its secret Zunzi's sauce.



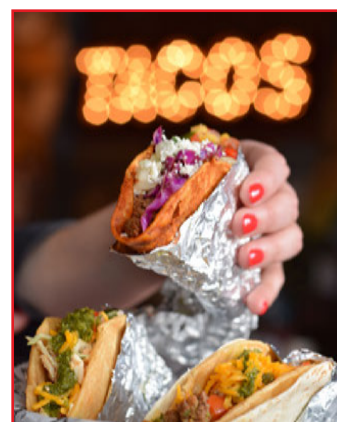
The signature offering has been honored as the best sandwich in Georgia by Mental Floss and People magazine, and was named best sandwich in the Southern region and second-best sandwich in America by “Adam Richman's Best Sandwich in America” show on Travel Channel.

In addition to its tasty food and drink offerings, Zunzi's serves a generous helping of positive attitude and uplift via its guest promise, which is encapsulated in two words: “Shit Yeah!”

“Here at Zunzi's, we want you to have such a great experience that you can't help from saying, ‘Shit yeah!’,” CEO Chris

Smith said. “If at any point you don't feel that way, let us know and we'll make it right...we promise.”

After 16 years of refining its model, Zunzi's is awarding franchises via multi-unit development agreements in 10 Southeastern states. It also relocated its original store in Savannah to a larger location, expanded to include a full-bar sister concept (Zunzibar), and positioned itself to franchise in 2022.



65. Condado Tacos

Featuring GMO-free tacos, dips, margaritas and tequilas, Condado Tacos' simple menu and execution strategy has set up the Columbus-based taco brand to double its unit size by the end of 2023.



With 29 open locations, The “Come as You Are, Be Who You Are” vibe of the taco joint makes its guests and staff feel comfortable, and the graffiti-style art, painted by local artists from that market, gives each store a local feel.

Last year, the chain launched its loyalty app, and will enhance it this year, and saw a 16% increase in same-store sales over 2020.

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Like many other brands, Condado had to shift its business practically overnight during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and almost exclusively moved to to-go and online ordering for delivery and pickup. Both have become a major revenue growth center for the company as its food travels well and the price point is perfect for B2B growth.



66. Which Wich

Which Wich has come a long



way since it opened its first location in downtown Dallas in 2003. In 2013, it officially went global and now has over 300 restaurants open or in development. The brand has also enjoyed industry recognition for its menu innovations and landed many a top spot in national, regional and local publications.

“We live by The Vibe — the positive energy that’s at the heart of our culture and courses through the veins of the Which Wich system,” Founder Jeff Sinelli said. “When I founded Which Wich, I really wanted to build a special company where every member of the team would feel like they were making an impact in their local community, on the world and in people’s lives. That’s more important today than ever before.”

During the disruptions brought on by a global pandemic over the last two

years, Which Wich has leaned into its long-established causes, including Project PB&J and [Flag Your Bag](#), to benefit struggling communities, front line workers, healthcare professionals, essential personnel and more.

Its growth plan for 2022 is to grow with existing partners while leveraging technology to build brand awareness, attract new customers, reward customer loyalty, motivate customers to spend more, and build its social and digital media presence.



67. Balance Pan-Asian Grille

With a focus on clean eating, menu



transparency, authenticity and tech integration, Balance Grille has been turning heads since 2010.

In addition to its four locations, Balance Grille has an 8,600-square-foot urban aquaponic farming operation dubbed “Balance Farms,” which provides produce year-round for Balance Grille restaurants, as well as other local restaurants, grocery stores and food distributors.

The brainchild of best friends and University of Toledo graduates HoChan Jang and Prakash Karamchandani, Balance Grille’s menu includes buildable bowls, Asian tacos, snacks and bubble tea and an array of signature sauces.

The food-forward concept is also dead-set on authenticity and transparency. The entire kitchen, from the production line to the walk-in cooler, is encased in glass so customers can see every step of the process and every delicious ingredient that goes into their meal.

The focus for the brand in 2022 is to employ a targeted, phased growth and development plan, working with strategic investment and growth partner Pivotal Growth Partners, in order to position it as the “preeminent Asian fast casual concept nationwide.”

The brand is adding one location in 2022 and an additional six in 2023, with an ultimate goal of 55 locations over the next five to seven years.



68. Hopdoddy

Hopdoddy started the year off strong with the acquisition of [Grub Burger Bar](#)



in January 2022, paving the way for the better-burger pioneer’s expansion into new markets and increasing its presence in existing markets. As one of the original better-burger brands, [Austin-based Hopdoddy](#) was founded on the

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idea of elevating burgers with the best ingredients possible.

In 2021, it took significant steps to upgrade its supply partnerships in order to provide guests with ingredients that not only taste better but are also better for them and the environment. Some of those companies included Beyond Meat, Force of Nature Bison and Red Bird Farms.

Hopdoddy currently has 32 restaurants in Texas, Tennessee, Arizona, California and Colorado, and with the Grub Burger Bar acquisition, will soon own and operate 50 restaurants and expand to new markets including Georgia and Florida.

At the close of 2021, Hopdoddy relaunched its mobile application and loyalty program. The revamped app allows customers to place orders at their leisure and offers daily promotions that are only available through the app to the restaurant's most loyal customers. Hopdoddy is also working to roll out exclusive menu items and events to loyalty customers.



69. Native Foods

The 100% plant-based Native Foods, a vegan fast casual brand headquartered in Chicago, is ready to grow. With 11 locations in Chicago, Denver, Boulder,

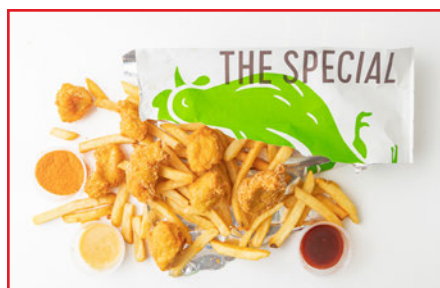


Los Angeles, Orange County, Palm Springs and San Diego, the brand spent 2021 improving its unit economics and rebranding its concept and online presence to prepare for a big 2022.

"We are so excited to finally be back in growth mode..." CEO Carin Stutz said. "We can't wait for community members to experience the 'original' plant-based fast casual restaurant — after all, we were plant-based before it was cool. This has been a year of innovation and change to reposition our brand. We are a mission-driven company ready to grow."

Being an urban-based company, the pandemic was rather challenging for Native Foods, so its first goal was to take care of its managers and as many team members as possible.

"With our guests working from home, this was a challenge," Stutz said. "We are a people-first company, so we found a way forward. We did everything including limiting hours and menu, family meals, grocery items, third-party delivery, etc."



70. Garden Catering

For Connecticut-based Garden Catering, 2021 piggybacked off of an already strong 2020. With a year-to-year sales increase



of 15%, it launched with Uber Direct for last-mile delivery fulfillment.

With eight locations, the brand is actively looking at several second-generation locations and will soon roll out a retail line, featuring its Secret Seasoning and Honey Mustard.

One of the core values at Garden Catering is "Community Matters," which has been its north star. Through its "Nugs Not Hugs" program, for example, it has donated over 120,000 meals to families in need since the beginning of COVID and recently launched an integration with Beam Impact to supercharge giving through online ordering and a native app (powered by Lunchbox).

Garden Catering is also working toward retaining employees through its newly developed training department. The brand hired a training director and a training coordinator to facilitate learning and growth throughout the organization and in addition to a \$15-plus hour starting wage, free shift meals and a 50% discount off-the-clock, it also began offering a 401K with a generous employer match and offering robust health, dental, vision and life insurance to full-time employees.

71. Jamba

When Jamba joined forces with Focus Brands, the strategy was to transform the concept to better serve a broad range of guests. It has since evolved by prioritizing menu innovation and making significant digital investments to increase accessibility and convenience. As part of Focus Brands' co-branding initiative, Jamba is seeking opportunities to team up with other brands across the Focus Brands



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portfolio that complement the brand's fresh smoothies, juices and bowls.

Last year, Jamba introduced "fuel-good menu items," featuring the IMPOSSIBLE Handwich, the Classic Sausage, Egg & Cheese Handwich, and the Veggie Egg Bake as well as iced beverages, Gotcha Matcha and Bold 'n Cold Brew.

Checks with the food items were over 35% higher than standard checks, and those featuring Bold 'n Cold Brew or Gotcha Matcha are over 25% higher.

Jamba has continued to identify ways to make it easier for guests to access their favorite Jamba menu items. In 2019, it launched a mobile app and loyalty program, which led to the chain surpassing the 2.5-million-member mark in 2021.

As a direct response to consumer preferences shifting to increased accessibility and convenience, Jamba is adding drive-thrus to at least 50% of new locations.



72. Bread Zeppelin Salads Elevated

Bread Zeppelin is reinventing the traditional salad and sandwich with its signature Zeppelin, a hollowed-out, fresh-baked artisan baguette, filled with the customer's choice of chopped salad. Nothing goes to waste, however, as the insides of the hollowed-out baguettes are used for house-made croutons as well as a bread pudding.



The Texas-based brand offers an array of house selections with something for every taste. Customers have access to six green and grain bases and nearly 40 veggie, fruit, crunch and cheese items, as well as 22 house-made dressings and a variety of proteins.

With seven total locations, including the first franchise that opened this year in Houston, Bread Zeppelin plans to unveil four units in 2022.

"There's essentially nothing quite like the Zeppelin in the fast casual space, and we were thrilled to just pass a major milestone by selling our two millionth," said co-founder Andrew Schoellkopf. "We feel incredibly fortunate with the trajectory of our sales, reinforcing how the brand, offerings and experience are resonating with customers, and our first franchise location has well exceeded

expectations in a new market. We're extremely excited for the year ahead as we grow both our corporate and franchise restaurant count."

73. Smokey Bones The Wing Experience

Smokey Bones launched its virtual concept, The Wing Experience, in 2019, before the pandemic started. Offering the ultimate in customization, it has three preparation styles of jumbo wings (smoked, traditional and boneless), and maintains at least 50 flavor varieties on the menu, with three new flavors rotating quarterly. Additionally, The Wing Experience is piloting a vegan wing offering this spring.



The Wing Experience has achieved significant success in the marketplace, and is a key driver of Smokey Bones' comp sales performance in 2021. The Wing Experience has 61 virtual restaurants, each operating out of Smokey Bones physical restaurants.

The brand plans to open three physical locations in 2022, out of which The Wing Experience will operate and be available for take-out and delivery. A digital drive-thru in its Bowling Green location will allow guests to quickly pick up their favorite items from The Wing Experience, in addition to the core Smokey Bones menu.

"The success of The Wing Experience demonstrates how significant investments in technology, branding, and culinary execution with a commitment to truly differentiated brand building, can create value in the restaurant industry," said

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Smokey Bones CEO James O'Reilly. "Smokey Bones is proud to have built a virtual brand capable of transcending toward becoming a full-fledged fast casual restaurant company in its own right."



74. Peru Mix

Peru Mix, a Peruvian restaurant chain, opened in Latin America in 2012 with a small location and a big dream. Now operating in three countries and nine cities, it recently launched in the U.S. under a franchise model. Besides its brick-and-mortar units, Peru Mix is also using digital kitchens to expand.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the brand had to close down 50% of its units but quickly added digital locations. In 2022, the brand plans to open 10 units in the U.S. and 20 more internationally.

Peru Mix locations are designed to maximize the guest experience, providing a focus on excellent food quickly in an

inviting and relaxing atmosphere. Its honest kitchen concept gives guests a transparent view of how their food is being prepared.

CEO and Founder Juan Luis Vera couldn't be more excited about the progress his company has made in the last decade and will continue to carve out a name for the brand.

"It's time for Peruvian food to rock the fast casual world," he said.

75. Shawarma Press

Shawarma Press, which offers Mediterranean cuisine in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, was so well received that it landed a landmark deal last year to operate in Walmart stores throughout Texas and other states.

The 5-year plan is to open an additional 100 stores nationwide, while also serving its communities by donating food to local non-profit organizations committed to helping those in need.

"We are truly committed to bringing authentic, healthy, fast casual cuisine to the masses," CEO and Founder Sawsan Abublan said. "When my family first moved to Texas 15 years ago, we could not find the foods we craved anywhere.



We realized this was an opportunity, and after years of market research and testing recipes, we opened our first restaurant in Irving and discovered that Texans really do appreciate diverse flavors and spices. With our current partnership with Walmart, we will soon be one of the fastest growing fast casual restaurants in the country. We are moving AND shaking very quickly."

The master lease agreement with Walmart will allow the brand to expand exponentially. In order to prepare for this expansion, Abublan hired a team of industry professionals led by Dr. Ehap Sabri, co-founder and an expert in supply chain management.

COVID-19 definitely strained resources, but the brand survived by keeping its doors open at all costs. It retained all employees except those who chose to stay home, shifted its focus to online ordering for pick-up and delivery, and never stopped marketing efforts.

Top 25 Executives



Geoff Alexander, CEO, Wow Bao

After two decades of working with multiple Lettuce Entertain You concepts, Geoff Alexander took over as president of Wow Bao in 2009 and has literally changed the way diners interact with restaurants. He was not only one of the first to implement self-ordering kiosks and mobile and desktop ordering, he pioneered a mobile gift card and loyalty program, added bicycle delivery, as well as domestic shipping, launched a food truck, and turned Wow Bao into a well-respected social media influencer.

This past year, he developed a dark kitchen model to allow restaurant brands all over the U.S., Mexico and Canada to add Wow Bao's bao, bowls and dumplings to their own menus. The strategy has not only made Wow Bao available in over 650 locations, but it's also served as a second revenue stream for its partner brands.

He also launched a plant-based concept, [Skinny Butcher Crazy Crispy Chick'n](#), which received a \$10 million investment from Valor Equity Partners to help it expand. Skinny Butcher will be available in 150 locations by year's end.



Stacey Kane, CMO of multiple brands

If 2020 was about surviving, 2021 was about thriving.

In her role as a fractional CMO, which allows small brands to hire her as needed, Stacey Kane has helped her brands grow in big ways.

"Helping small brands grow is the key to national economic recovery and they deserve senior-level marketing support regardless of budget," said Kane, who spent 2021 helping Mamoun's Falafel celebrate its 50th anniversary with an all-day COVID-friendly soiree and leading California Tortilla's efforts in finding a "Saucemollier." Under her direction, Wolfnights, a gourmet wrap concept based in New York City, has doubled in size, Maryland-based Fresh Baguette saw unprecedented sales increases, and [Garden Catering](#) made huge impacts on the community in its footprint. On National Chicken Nugget Day, for example, the Connecticut-based company gave 1 ton of nuggets to fans.

Kane is also committed to helping the industry through her work with CORE:Children of Restaurant Employees, a non-profit that makes grants to operations employees when a crisis occurs, and her years spent on the National Restaurant Association's Marketing Executive's Group steering committee.

Top 25 Executives



Adenah Bayoh, CEO, Cornbread and IHOP franchisee

Adenah Bayoh embodies the American dream. At age 13, she escaped the civil war in her native country of Liberia, immigrated to the United States, and is now one of the most successful entrepreneurs in her home state of New Jersey, owning seven restaurants including four IHOP franchises in northern New Jersey.

In late 2017, Bayoh launched Cornbread, her first independent fast casual, farm-to-table, soul food restaurant, which she co-founded with fellow entrepreneur, Zadie B. Smith. They recently opened their second Cornbread in downtown Newark. Additionally, in keeping with Adenah's mission of bringing high-quality food and services to urban communities, in late July she launched her latest restaurant concept, Urban Vegan, in downtown Newark.

In addition to her restaurants, Adenah is a successful real estate developer with a portfolio of several major residential and mixed-use urban redevelopment projects across northern New Jersey. After attending a public high school in Newark, New Jersey, and putting herself through Fairleigh Dickinson University with a degree in Business Management, she secured a job in banking and began purchasing multi-family homes as investments. In 2012, she decided to focus on transforming disadvantaged communities and took the bold step of transitioning to full-scale real estate development by partnering with two other developers to purchase the former Irvington General Hospital site, which had been vacant for nearly a decade. Since then, they renamed the site 280 Park Place, completed a 114-unit residential building on the property, and have a second building under construction as part of multi-phase development that will transform the property into a vibrant mixed-income residential community. In addition to 280 Park Place, Adenah recently broke ground on 722 Chancellor Avenue, which will become affordable housing for seniors.



Josh Halpern, CEO, Big Chicken

Big Chicken CEO Josh Halpern leads with a partnership approach, which he refers to as "The 4 Wins," meaning he understands that he needs to have solid relationships with guests, franchisees, suppliers and the company to achieve his goals.

He has also been disruptive in his approach to public relations, which has generated way more industry interest than a normal start-up chain would generate and led to a [Big Chicken story](#) being the No. 1 most-read article on Fastcasual.com in 2021, ahead of features on the

Restaurant Revitalization Fund, COVID-19 and many other key topics.

He's also worked with the team to grow a supply chain and franchise sales capability that allows Big Chicken to go anywhere in the world, from [Los Angeles](#), Chicago, [Seattle](#) and on [cruise ships](#), to its recent pop-up in Jeddah behind the Formula 1 race.

Before taking the lead at Big Chicken, Halpern served as chief sales officer for FIFCO USA, the eighth-largest U.S. brewing company, where he was responsible for commercial operations and building top- and bottom-line results for off-premise, on-premise, and company-owned brewpubs. Prior, he led the Anheuser-Busch InBev on-premise and small-format channels in the U.S. and the shopper marketing globally.

Top 25 Executives



Bill Phelps, CEO, Dave's Hot Chicken

Since Bill Phelps joined Dave's Hot Chicken in 2019, the chain has experienced significant growth, thanks to his addition of an experienced franchise team to grow the Nashville Hot Chicken concept into a major player in the segment.

With over 599 units in development, Dave's Hot Chicken has exploded into one of the fastest-growing fast casual concepts in the industry. What started as a parking lot pop-up now has locations in development across North America and worldwide. Phelps continues to attract high-profile, celebrity investors to the brand, such as multi-platinum recording artist Drake, strengthening its credibility and differentiating it from similar concepts.

Phelps' success, however, comes as no surprise, considering he co-founded Wetzel's Pretzels, where he served as CEO and helped grow it to over 350 locations. He was also an early investor in Blaze Pizza and a key part of that brand's rapid growth.



Laura Rea Dickey, CEO, Dickey's Barbecue Pit

Dickey's CEO Laura Rea Dickey has taken another difficult year for restaurants and turned it into an opportunity for the world's largest barbecue chain. While most brands were continuing to fight for survival, Dickey's finished 2021 with record sales and new revenue streams, including virtual concepts and the creation of a craft sausage company, which hand-makes Dickey's proprietary kielbasa sausage. The sausage is available for purchase at BarbecueAtHome.com and is helping supplement supply chain shortages.

Under her leadership, the brand harnessed the power of technology to drive data-backed decisions, fueling the brand's record growth and expansion. In fact, the company has experienced 22 straight months of same-store positive sales, including recording the highest day ever in sales during the brand's 80-year history, surpassing measures by 45%.

"At Dickey's, we take our mantra of 'Evolve or Fail' very seriously," she said. "We will find a path or make one through our challenges to reach success. In 2021, we showed that our brand innovates and adapts to meet guests' ever changing needs."

In corporate America, male executives outnumber female executives seven to one, but thanks to Dickey, the company is advancing female leaders at an above-average pace. In fact, it has seven executive-level positions held by women, and last year Dickey created two support and mentorship groups for women and veterans in restaurant ownership.

Top 25 Executives



Stratis Morfogen, founder, Brooklyn Dumpling Shop

Stratis Morfogen, a third-generation restaurateur, is on a mission to transform the automat concept made famous in the 1950s into a thriving fast casual business.

Brooklyn Dumpling Shop, which opened in 2020 in NYC and began franchising before its flagship store opened, is the state's first contactless restaurant in NYC. Dubbed the "Tesla of automats," Morfogen said customers control the entire process – ordering, payment and pick-up -- from their phones, which helps keep them safe from germs.

The brand also has a robot-making dumpling lab in the store front and will soon add a thermal-temperature scanner converted from a metal detector upon arrival for added safety during the pandemic. Lastly, it is working to allow Bitcoin payments through a BTM, which can convert a customer's cash.

"The Automat was single handedly the greatest fast food distribution equipment ever designed," Morfogen said. "The technology we've brought to Brooklyn Dumpling Shop is unlike anything seen before, which will allow us to create an Autoflow from a customer's cell phone, to our POS ordering kiosks, right to our lockers, to bring quick serve restaurants into the 21st century."



Michael Lastoria, CEO, &pizza

Although Michael Lastoria may be best known for creating and running Washington D.C.-based &pizza, he's also garnered a lot of attention for leading the industry toward raising minimum wage, and his company pays its workers an average hourly wage of \$16

He's appeared on Fox Business, CNBC, MSNBC, and Yahoo, and has been featured in Forbes, AdWeek, the New York Times, and the Washington Post as a distinguished entrepreneur and thought leader in the industry. Speaking on topics including the value of design-based thinking, innovation, and entrepreneurship, Lastoria has talked at Harvard Business School, George

Washington University, and Georgetown to inspire the next generation of business leaders.

All that attention, however, has not stalled him from expanding &pizza, as the chain has grown to 57 locations and reported 16.5% on same-store sales growth. The company will open 35 units in 2022, representing 61% unit growth.

"We developed a smart, meaningful growth strategy building on our existing strength, grounded in market fortressing, market-by-market growth, and mobile kitchens to cut down on delivery times and to be closer to the customer," Lastoria said. "We aren't just the future of pizza — we're the future of food service."

Top 25 Executives



Donnie Upshaw, chief people officer, Wingstop

Four years after he joined Wingstop as SVP of People, former CEO Charlie Morrison named Donnie Upshaw in December 2021 as chief people officer, where he will continue in his mission of instilling The Wingstop Way, the chain's differentiating cultural values defined by Service-Minded, Authentic, Entrepreneurial and Fun.

"After nearly four years of transformational leadership and growth, I'm thrilled to congratulate Donnie on this wonderful achievement," Morrison said. "People are the foundation of our strategy and Donnie has made a tremendous impact on our talent framework and culture,

which has propelled us forward with industry-leading growth."

Referring to himself as a "champion of diversity and inclusion," Upshaw also led the process for the purchase and complete renovation of Wingstop's Global Support Center in Addison, Texas. Fully wind-powered and spanning more than 75,000 square feet, the building features areas that promote collaboration and deliver an enhanced office environment while supporting Wingstop's mission to Serve the World Flavor, according to a release.



Prakash Karamchandani & HoChan Jang, co-founders, Balance Grille

Prakash Karamchandani, also known as PK, and HoChan Jang, aka CJ, are the driving force behind the success of Balance Grille. And in the few areas where one is weak, the other is strong.

With a background in marketing, finance and technology, PK, for example, is responsible for the brand's development of a peer management operational model, creating proprietary technology to rival those of some of the industry's biggest brands.



His powerful branding of Balance Grille allows the company to keep a minimal marketing budget. Community involvement, seasonal menu fare, content driven by stories such as providing livable wages for employees, word-of-mouth, and free mediums such as social media keep the brand top of mind. The Balance Grille loyalty app, also created by PK in partnership with an app developer, is one of the company's main streams of marketing.

Growing up in the family business, CJ is a self-taught chef and mastermind behind the menu of bowls, tacos, snacks and bubble tea and an array of signature sauces.

A large part of the menu's influence also comes from HoChan's previous career in personal training and education in nutrition and his personal commitment to showing both returning and new guests the impact of a macro-conscious Asian diet.

Recognized by Michael Simon from Iron Chef, and featured as a top chef by Stella Artois, HoChan has become an innovative leader in his own right.

The Toledo, Ohio-based entrepreneurs are also known for taking care of their employees, vowing since the inception of the concept in 2010 to pay employees above minimum wage. They have also created a "managerless" form of restaurant operation. They focus on building valuable skills and instilling confidence and purpose within all their trainees as they pass through the set stages of employee development, each of which they have given affectionate names, like Ninja and Samurai.



Mandy Shaw, CEO, Blaze Pizza

As president and CEO of Blaze Pizza, Mandy Shaw has not only contributed greatly to the company's explosive growth since joining over two years ago, but has also participated in numerous panels to share her experiences on how the industry as a whole can pivot despite adversity.

Under her leadership, Blaze kicked off 2021 stronger than ever, as systemwide sales returned to what they were prior to the pandemic. Her investments in operational efficiency helped the brand overcome the challenges of COVID without slowing down its aggressive growth efforts, opening restaurants in new markets and signing multi-unit agreements with new and existing franchisees.

This success fueled a surge in franchise development and positioned the company for explosive growth throughout 2021. In addition to signing new deals, Shaw helped franchisees battle labor shortages by providing clear messaging and unique tactics to attract new talent. She also encouraged franchisees to be transparent with potential new hires and embrace their differences. Being your authentic self is celebrated at Blaze, as is enforcing a casual dress code and accepting those with tattoos and piercings.

Shaw and her team also completed several initiatives including working with an outside consultant to reveal ways to make operations more systematic and effective, and launching a mobile app.



Scott Deviney, CEO, Chicken Salad Chick

Since May 2015, Scott Deviney has served as president and CEO of Chicken Salad Chick and by 2019, he had tripled the number of stores and then oversaw its sale to Brentwood Associates. The brand, which achieved over \$255 million in systemwide sales in 2021, now has over 200 restaurants in 17 states. Deviney attributes the success to the remarkable team he has built as well as its vision of "spreading joy, enriching lives and serving others."

In 2021, CSC opened over 30 restaurants, including its 200th location in LaGrange, Georgia. Deviney believes that with Brentwood Associates' support, CSC will have 500 restaurants open by the end of 2025.

"2021 was not without challenges, but our brand grew right past them by expanding and renewing our focus on the Chick experience," Deviney said. "Our sales and development momentum are a true testament to our resilience throughout the year. Looking at the year ahead, as our brand is poised for another year of significant growth, we're energized to continue our accelerated expansion plans to bring more Chicks to communities across key regions in the U.S."

Top 25 Executives



Nour Rabai, CEO, PITA Mediterranean Street Food

Nour Rabai, founder and CEO of PITA Mediterranean Street Food, has led his team to streamline operations in response to consumer demands. The Georgia-based fast casual brand has seen off-premise dining sales (including online orders and delivery) nearly triple, thanks to Rabai's decision to enhance online ordering and add street wraps to provide a customizable option that makes it from tablet to table, quickly and efficiently.

"With fewer guests demanding dine-in service during the height of the pandemic, our faster operations and menu items allow us to get food out the door more quickly for delivery or curbside pick-up," said Rabai. "We want to provide a fresh product that shows our passion for Mediterranean cuisine without the long wait."

One of his biggest goals is for guests to experience the colorful array and the smells of freshly prepared foods as if they were walking through streets and local public markets in the various communities around the Mediterranean.

"Home for me is in Beirut, Lebanon, where my extended family gathered together for meals, where we spent time together around great food," said Rabai. "This is exactly what I want for our guests at PITA: to enjoy great food, freshly prepared, with their friends and family."

CMO Michael Carino, who's a longtime friend of Rabai, said he admires Rabai's vision.

"The PITA concept was built on the knowledge of these traditional cuisines and cultures of the Mediterranean that have a far greater influence in larger cities such as Chicago and New York City but are unique and flavorful to the South," he said.



Patrick Renna, CEO, President and CFO, BurgerFi and Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza & Wings

Patrick Renna is ready to make a few changes now that he has taken over as CEO of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza & Wings and BurgerFi, following a 5-year tenure as president and CFO of Wahlburgers.

At Wahlburgers, he simplified the operational model to improve efficiencies and execution at the restaurants, a strategy he now brings to BurgerFi with digital technology testing and innovations designed to optimize the guest experience.

He's also leaning into non-traditional growth strategies. With a focus on unit growth and vast brand expansion plans, Renna hopes to continue building corporate restaurants in and around the brand's home market in Florida, while attracting best-in-class franchise partners and restaurant operators to grow the brand both domestically and overseas. As part of his commitment to bring BurgerFi's fresh favorites to more mouths, he's exploring new channels to reach customers, including ghost kitchens, delivery-only, smaller format, and non-traditional channels such as airports or Air Force bases.

Top 25 Executives



Samantha Rincione, co-founder, CEO and COO, Crave Hot Dogs and BBQ

Samantha Rincione has pushed her company toward improving the customer experience, including the development of curbside ordering and a mobile app as well as a redesign of the restaurants in an effort to keep it COVID-safe while driving revenue. The restaurants, which include self-pour beer walls, allow for optimal flow to the customers and staff, keeping them separated but well served.

Under her direction, the NYC-based brand expects to sell 50 additional brick-and-mortar units and 25 food trucks in 2022. It also has 52 total franchisees sold, of which 40 will open by year's end.

Rincione, who co-founded Emerging Franchises, a franchise development firm, is also a multi-unit franchisee with Red Mango and Smoothie Factory and Café, owning and operating 10 stores on Long Island.

Holding all those roles hasn't stopped her from giving back to the community. She founded and oversees Crave Saves, a non-profit organization that helps bring awareness to child trafficking.



Akash Kapoor, Curry Up Now

Like many restaurant executives, Akash Kapoor had to make decisions to keep the business going over the past year, but he's done his best to approach each one with his team and customers top of mind.

"Akash's approach to executive leadership stands out in that it is driven by the people who surround him and happens in the direction of truth and love for the business and for the people who make the business great," said Gill Gosal, VP of operations. "His steadfast approach in

disrupting the status quo in the industry has created an incredibly unique dynamic in our workplace communities all over the country, which are fun, playful, engaging, and approachable for the staff and as a result."

San Francisco-based Curry Up Now, which has 20 locations, will open up to 10 stores in 2022 along with 10 to 12 non-traditional or virtual locations.

"Sometimes being a 'mover and shaker' means making radical changes that have substantial impact on the industry as a whole, yes...but in the grand scheme of things, it means making the day-to-day decisions which fuel continuous quality improvement, and the ones which are necessary to encourage and foster a growth mindset in our people, and the ones that push us daily to question if our modes of operation are sound enough to fill the shoes of being named the largest and fastest growing Indian Fast Casual in the country, and ultimately, the ones which allow us to be human along the way," Gosal said.

Kapoor's ability to navigate all of that certainly makes him a "mover and shaker," and being a "mover and shaker" has allowed Curry Up Now to grow into what it is today.

Top 25 Executives



Chris Smith, CEO, Zunzi's

While many restaurants struggle with complex operational structures and tight margins, Zunzi's CEO Chris Smith set out to create a different approach for his 16-unit chain specializing in South African-inspired sandwiches.

He developed a hybrid model that incorporates a fast casual takeout model with a full bar featuring signature cocktails and craft beer. By using QR codes and kiosks, for example, the brand minimizes the number of servers needed and allows them to focus on the guest

experience as opposed to taking food orders.

Once orders are placed, chefs handle the food, and the bartenders handle the alcoholic beverages. By separating the operational flow, the company benefits from the margins on alcohol, runs with fewer staff members, and still provides speed and menu simplification, while providing what Smith refers to as the “Shit Yeah” experience.

“We want our guests to have such a great experience that they leave saying ‘Shit yeah,’ and if they don’t, let us know and we’ll make it right,” said Smith. “When they leave saying that, it means they’re definitely coming back, they’re telling other people about it, and it means that they get it—they identify with what Zunzi’s is.”



Kelly Roddy, CEO, WOWorks

Thanks to Kelly Roddy, Saladworks moved under the umbrella of WOWorks when it launched in 2020 and now includes Frutta Bowls, Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh and The Simple Greek. The family of restaurant brands added 60 restaurants in 2021, including 42 Saladworks, 10 Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh and eight Frutta Bowls locations.

Despite a tough year for most of the industry, Roddy focused on franchisee support by hosting the brand’s first National Hiring Day, adding an online hiring inquiry and developing menu innovations by adding family meals, shareable sides, catering options, and LTOs to drive revenue without increasing staff.

Roddy also worked to keep supply chain issues at bay, developing a National Support Master Service Agreement with Sysco and hiring a supply chain director to work through shortages, provide equal-quality substitutions, and negotiate item pricing with vendors. He also partnered with Food Buy and Spendifference, which helps the company negotiate pricing and provide buying power from other restaurant vendors that share the same products.

As a result of the support, WOWorks was up 30.4% vs 2020 for Saladworks, up 26.8% vs 2020 for Frutta Bowls, up 21.2% vs 2020 for Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh, and up 15.3% vs 2020 for The Simple Greek.

Updating the stack for all brands has also been a huge initiative for Roddy in 2021. He updated all brands to Qu POS systems, tapped Punchh to provide a single sign-on in-app experience, added Olo Rails, Olo Dispatch and implemented Google Ordering to allow guests to order their meal by just searching “Saladworks near me.”

Top 25 Executives



Betsy Hamm, CEO, Duck Donuts

For Duck Donuts CEO Betsy Hamm, taking care of her community is just part of the business.

“We never lose sight of the importance of our weaving our core values including delight, innovation and community into everything we do,” said the former COO who took over as CEO last year when NewSpring Franchise acquired the 100-unit shop. “We also focus on the importance of keeping it simple by providing a quality product and superior customer service that our guests have come to expect when visiting Duck Donuts.”

Hamm’s goal is to expand the Pennsylvania-based company to 300 locations by 2025, and she’s well on her way, opening 12 locations in 2021. Plans include adding 40 locations by the end of 2022.

Under Hamm’s leadership, Duck Donuts thrived during the pandemic as she implemented curbside pickup and heavily promoted ordering ahead and delivery through the chain’s mobile app.

In addition, franchise partners focused on sprinkling happiness through donations supporting front-line workers while also expanding its product line, most recently with the rollout of milkshakes, donut sundaes, a donut breakfast sandwich and espresso beverages.

“At NewSpring Franchise, we seek out multi-unit brands with a loyal customer base and a fast-growing geographic footprint. Duck Donuts perfectly fits that model,” said Patrick Sugrue, NewSpring general partner and former Saladworks CEO. “Duck Donuts is differentiated by its customer experience and CEO Betsy Hamm has done a tremendous job expanding the company’s presence in communities across the country to position the company for future growth into new markets.”



Tina Carpenteri, COO, Garden Catering

If you ask Garden Catering CEO Frank Carpenteri who has been the most instrumental person in helping the Connecticut-based chain to thrive, he says his sister, COO Tina Carpenteri.

“She has been the driving force behind Garden Catering’s initial survival, then subsequent thrive, during the pandemic,” he said. “She has worked tirelessly to ensure that our staff have every measure in place to feel comfortable coming to work.”

“We strive to provide the best nugget you’ll ever have - despite increasing pressure from inflation, we doubled down on the quality of chicken we source, because we are 100% committed to serving the best nuggets you’ll ever have,” Tina Carpenteri said. “We are proudly partnered with Freebird, and are using their humanely raised, No Antibiotics Ever chicken in 100% of our chicken nuggets, crispy OG chicken and grilled chicken menu items.”

Under Tina Carpenteri’s direction, the company initiated a giveback program that has donated over 100,000 meals, and Garden Catering offers all employees health, dental, vision and life insurance as well as a matching 401K program.

This year, it’s introducing an Uber rides program for all employees to help defray the cost of transportation, and its TIPS program puts anywhere from 30 cents to \$1 more per hour into hourly workers’ paychecks, which is at least \$15 per hour.

“We also have a strong commitment to our communities and our core purpose is to make the communities in which we operate a better place,” said Tina Carpenteri.

Top 25 Executives



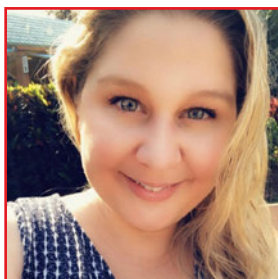
Susan Taylor, CEO, Juice It Up

Susan Taylor, who joined the Juice It Up leadership team in 2019 as VP of Operations and Business Development, took the CEO position a year later.

With 30 years of restaurant franchise experience to her credit, half of which were spent with Jamba, she has led Juice It Up to record sales. Last year, for example, was the California-based chain's best sales year in brand history with total system sales climbing over \$42 million and same-store sales up 26.3% over 2020.

From exponentially increasing its base of loyalty members, driving digital sales and continuing to emphasize menu innovation, Taylor's efforts are paying off in dividends, with 2022 projected to be the brand's biggest growth year ever in terms of units signed and opened.

Recent initiatives under her direction include the unveiling of a [new store design](#), including one flagship corporate location used for training and product testing. She also oversaw the completion of the launch of [skip-the-line mobile ordering](#), plus the continued growth of third-party delivery with partners such as DoorDash and Postmates. These strategic brand initiatives, plus numerous others in her purview, are fueling success for the brand by growing sales, unit count and profitability.



Beth Kanupp, pitmaster and manager of Learning and Development, Sonny's BBQ

Looking back to the very first class of pitmasters, a program designed by Sonny's BBQ to hone the skills of team members to become masters at the art of barbecue, it was mostly men, [said Beth Kanupp](#), a pitmaster and the chain's manager of Learning and Development.

Kanupp, who started at Sonny's when she was 16 as a server, has had a profound effect on the chain's growth as a leader in the barbecue industry. She was there, for example, in 2013 at the beginning of the masters program, helping to develop it alongside a small group of Sonny's leaders. She quickly realized that her presence was just the start of changing the face of barbecue and introducing more women to the field.

"I always tend to look up to the women in BBQ, since it seems to be a bit of an anomaly," Kanupp said. "I love Diva Q, she is no nonsense and obviously very passionate about BBQ. I also love Deborah and Mary Jones of Jones Bar-B-Q's story; they are the epitome of the work ethic, passion, and dedication it takes to be amazing Pitmasters."

Kanupp's goal is to see even more female pitmasters, which is why she continues to teach the craft to numerous employees. Sonny's, based in Florida, has nearly 100 locations.

Top 25 Executives



Brian Krause, CDO, FOCUS

Since joining FOCUS Brands as CDO during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brian Krause has helped Moe's Southwest Grill, Auntie Anne's, Carvel, Cinnabon, Jamba, McAlister's Deli and Schlotzsky's set a development record, selling 561 franchise agreements in 2021 and opening over 175 units in the United States and Canada.

Krause, who formerly worked for Jimmy John's and Wyndham Hotels, oversaw the May 2021 development of a Jamba and Auntie Anne's co-branded drive-thru location in Wylie, Texas, featuring the first Auntie Anne's drive-thru in the brand's history. This milestone opening came after Krause and the FOCUS Brands team conducted extensive consumer research to identify ways to enhance accessibility. The team leveraged the research to evolve development capabilities and to provide its franchisees with additional development and real estate opportunities to help enhance revenue.

In addition, Krause has guided the brands' expansion across non-traditional venues, opening inside convenience stores, travel plazas, airports, amusement parks and colleges. The company now boasts 972 non-traditional units in the U.S., with an additional 270 units in the pipeline.



Anchal Lamba, President, Gong Cha Tea, LLC

A 2019 recipient of Forbes magazine's prestigious 30 Under 30 accolade, Anchal Lamba grew up in New York and developed a passion for bubble tea after visiting Gong Cha in Hong Kong on a trip with her father.

A couple of years later, she secured the franchising rights and brought the nearly 2,000-unit chain to the United States, opening her first location in 2014 in Queens, New York.

The first-generation Indian American has since added 79 locations throughout the Northeast and Texas, and is now the largest U.S. franchisee. She plans to add 30 more locations by the end of 2022.

Lamba cites her father's entrepreneurial spirit and encouragement as the confidence boost she needed to introduce such an established, reputable international brand to the U.S. market at such a young age. Since then, she has led the charge in all aspects of operations for the fast-growing business — from scouting locations and recruiting sub-franchisees to hiring and training new employees as well as menu development, marketing the brand and growing her internal team.



Jim Metevier,
president and COO, Mountain Mike's Pizza

With nearly 30 years of experience in the restaurant industry, Jim Metevier is moving mountains – literally and figuratively. He arrived at Mountain Mike's Pizza in 2018, having held several executive positions with YUM Brands, including COO of KFC U.S., and has since been a catalyst for driving growth in system and franchisee sales and profitability, operational systems and processes, brand marketing and development, restaurant excellence and the overall guest experience.

Under his watchful eye, Mountain Mike's has grown to nearly 250 restaurants, opening 18 restaurants in 2021 and projecting 30 locations to open in 2022. In 2021, it eclipsed \$250 million in annual sales for the first time, proving its adaptability.

Other 2021 achievements included the introduction of the Mountain Rewards mobile app and loyalty program, which was designed to reward loyal guests and build more meaningful connections with fans with personalized offers suited to their individual needs. Membership quickly grew after its mid-year introduction and the company expects to have as many as 250,000 loyalty members by year end.

The brand also renewed its partnership with the San Francisco 49ers, proudly celebrated the team's 75th anniversary, and remains the "Official Pizza" of the iconic NFL franchise. Soon, Mountain Mike's is expected to announce a similar partnership in Major League Baseball.

&pizza

Adenah Bayoh, CEO, Cornbread & IHOP franchisee

Akash Kapoor, Curry Up Now

Aloha Poke Co.

Anchal Lamba, President, Gong Cha Tea, LLC

Balance Pan-Asian Grille

Beth Kanupp, pitmaster and manager of Learning and Development, Sonny's BBQ

Betsy Hamm, CEO, Duck Donuts

Big Chicken

Bill Phelps, CEO, Dave's Hot Chicken

Blaze Pizza

Bonchon

Bread Zeppelin Salads Elevated

Brian Krause, CDO, FOCUS

Brooklyn Dumpling Shop

Bubbakoo's Burritos

BurgerFi

California Tortilla

Capriotti's Sandwich Shop

Cheba Hut Toasted Subs

Chick N Max

Chicken Salad Chick

Chipotle

Chris Smith, CEO, Zunzi's

Clean Juice

Condado Tacos

Coolgreens

Cowboy Chicken

Crave Hot Dogs and BBQ

Curry Up Now

Dave's Hot Chicken

Dickey's Barbecue Pit

Dog Haus

Donnie Upshaw, chief people officer, Wingstop

Fajita Pete's

FAT Brands

Fazoli's

Freddy's Frozen Custard & Steakburgers

Freebirds World Burrito

Garden Catering

Geoff Alexander, CEO, Wow Bao

Hawaiian Bros Island Grill

Hopdoddy

Island Fin Poke Company

Jersey Mike's Subs

Jim Metevier, president and COO, Mountain Mike's Pizza

Josh Halpern, CEO, Big Chicken

Juice It Up!

Kelly Roddy, CEO, WOWorks

Laura Rea Dickey, CEO, Dickey's Barbecue Pit

Mandy Shaw, CEO, Blaze Pizza

McAlister's Deli

Michael Lastoria, CEO, &pizza

Mici Italian

Mooyah Burgers, Fries & Shakes

Mountain Mike's Pizza

Native Foods

Nour Rabai, CEO, PITA Mediterranean Street Food

Patrick Renna, CEO, President and CFO, BurgerFi and Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza & Wings

Penn Station East Coast Subs

Peru Mix

Piada Italian Street Food

Pincho

PITA Mediterranean Street Food

PJ's Coffee of New Orleans

Portillo's

Pokeworks

Prakash Karamchandani & HoChan Jang, co-founders, Balance Grille

Original ChopShop

Rise Southern Biscuits and Righteous Chicken

SAJJ Mediterranean

Samantha Rincione, co-founder, CEO and COO, Crave Hot Dogs and BBQ

Schlotzsky's

Scott Deviney, CEO, Chicken Salad Chick

Shawarma Press

Slim Chickens

Smashburger

Smokey Bones The Wing Experience

Smokin' Oak Wood-Fired Pizza & Taproom

Stacey Kane, CMO of multiple brands

Starbird

Stratis Morfogen, founder, Brooklyn Dumpling Shop

Susan Taylor, CEO, Juice It Up

Sweetgreen

Tarka Indian Kitchen

Taziki's

The Halal Guys

Tina Carpenteri, COO, Garden Catering

Torchy's Tacos

Tropical Smoothie Café

Velvet Taco

Wingstop

WaBa Grill

Wayback Burgers

Which Wich

Wow Bao

WOWorks

Zoup

Zunzi's