

**2021 fast casual**  
**TOP 100**  
**MOVERS & SHAKERS**

*Innovative restaurant brands and executives shaping the fast casual segment*



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# EXECUTIVE REPORT

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Since its creation 16 years ago, the Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers list has recognized the industry's most successful brands.

And just like in our daily lives, people measure success in different ways. For some, it's about having the most money or power. Others base it on how happy their relationships make them, while some feel compelled to strive for specific career or charitable goals.

The Top 100 is similar in that it's not always looking for the most profitable or fastest-growing brands. Sure, those elements are important and often come into play, but companies also make this list for their dedication to innovation, leadership and resilience.

That last quality -- resilience -- has never been more important than in this past year as the global pandemic forced companies to change everything from their operating models and menus to store layouts and labor plans, while still managing to take care of the people in their communities.

You'll see several familiar names on this year's list as well as a few smaller, up-and-coming brands that impressed judges for their abilities to quickly change direction in order to stay afloat.

As in past years, we received hundreds of nominations, which a panel of judges studied and debated before choosing the 2021's top 75 brands and 25 executives.

We are honored to feature their stories of dedication, innovation and community spirit.

Congratulations to all our winners.

Cheers,  
Cherryh Cansler  
VP of Editorial  
Networld Media Group



**2021 fast casual  
TOP 100  
MOVERS & SHAKERS**

## #1 BURGERFI

After seven straight years of being named to the Top Movers & Shakers, Florida-based BurgerFi tops the list this year for its continual innovation and rapid growth.

In a year of uncertainty caused by COVID-19, BurgerFi didn't shy away from innovation. Instead, the Florida-based burger brand added curbside pickup ordering and training procedures and implemented a new [kitchen prototype design](#) with dual assembly lines to increase speed, capacity and efficiency. It also innovated its menu and added [Martha Stewart](#) to its board of directors.

But that's not all.

The chain, which has over 125 units, opened its first drive-thru in Hamburg, Kentucky, and launched 10 ghost kitchens by partnering with [REEF Kitchens](#) and [Epic Kitchens](#) to bring burgers to Portland, Austin, Miami and Chicago. At least 10 more are in the works for 2021, along with 15 brick-and-mortar restaurants and a food truck. The 24-foot truck will feature online ordering, digital menu boards, LED lights and a stereo sound system.

Although most people will forever associate 2020 with the pandemic, for BurgerFi, it's the year it went public. [BurgerFi International](#) was born in December 2020, as part of a \$100 million deal with OPES Acquisition Corp., a Miami-based special-purpose entity.

"The OPES team's capital market experience and real estate expertise, in combination with our existing framework for excellence in everything we do — from procurement, to operations, and our high-performing teams — will accelerate our expansion opportunities and significantly enhance our go-to-market plan," said BurgerFi President Charlie Guzzetta.



## #2 &PIZZA

Since its inception in 2012, &pizza has prioritized the wellbeing of its employees, and Founder and CEO Michael Lastoria has proven that it is possible to create a sustainable, profitable business model while paying employees a fair wage. He's vowed that by 2022, all employees will make at least **\$15 an hour**, more than double the federal minimum wage of \$7.25.

&pizza has accomplished this all while continuing to grow, opening 11 units in 2020, emphasizing the use of quality ingredients and introducing initiatives such as paid time off for activism and shop closures on Election Day. All of these initiatives launched while the company was managing the effects of **COVID-19**. They added immediate health-care options, subsidized transportation via partnerships with Lyft, added a company-wide \$1 raise, donated free pizzas for any employee in need, and implemented the Hero Pie Program, which saw over 100,000 free pies distributed to frontline hospital workers across the East Coast.

The company continues to place the wellbeing of its employees and customers at the core of its operations. In 2021, &pizza will open more than 25 new units, essentially doubling the store count pre-COVID.

# &pizza®



## #3 CHICKEN SALAD CHICK

From the brand's earliest days more than a decade ago in Founder Stacy Brown's home kitchen in Auburn, Alabama, to now more than 175 locations in 17 states, Chicken Salad Chick has been serving Southern-inspired chicken salad and isn't slowing down. On the heels of the most successful year recorded in company history in 2019, the brand was positioned for further growth in 2020 with 50 restaurants slated to open throughout the year. Up until the nationwide shutdowns in mid-March, Chicken Salad Chick had opened 11 of the 50 restaurants in its pipeline, averaging one grand opening per week.

Enter COVID-19. As a result of the mandated closures, the chain placed its opening schedule on hold and quickly shifted focus to mobilizing its operations and pivoting to an off-premises dining model. These swift actions, along with the brand's ongoing transparency, innovation, philanthropy and grit, helped to fuel its recovery and contribute to its overall success in an unprecedented year. It opened 37 locations in 2020, including its first in **Indiana**, and signed nine franchise agreements to develop 23 restaurants in the coming years.

Chicken Salad Chick has more than quadrupled in system size since 2015 and is on track to add 50 restaurants per year by 2022. The ultimate goal is 500 locations open by 2025.



## #4 WOW BAO

2020 was the year of the “dark kitchen” for Chicago-based Wow Bao, thanks to [President Geoff Alexander](#) creating a new way to do business. The program allows any restaurant in the country to offer Wow Bao’s signature menu items via third-party delivery, a ground-breaking initiative that is growing top-line sales and increasing bottom-line profits.

“We believe that every kitchen can be a third-party kitchen for Wow Bao,” Alexander said.

Wow Bao ended the year with nearly 150 locations and expects to have more than 300 before the end of Q2 2021.

While the idea of the dark kitchen wasn’t inspired by COVID-19, Alexander said the timing was perfect to help operators needing to fill in revenue gaps.

“We didn’t create this for what’s going on in the world now; we started in November (2019), but it just happens to be that now is when so many are going to delivery-only,” he said. “Now, we see it as something that might assist those brands, too.”

Wow Bao’s plan for 2021 is to more than double the number of dark kitchen locations to end the year with 500 sites.



hot asian buns

## #5 SWEETGREEN

Sweetgreen’s first proactive response to the COVID-19 crisis involved dedicating its entire [Outpost team](#) to support those on the front lines of the pandemic. Using the in-house system that offers free Sweetgreen delivery to office buildings around the country, the eco-friendly brand delivered meals at no cost to hospital workers and medical personnel in the cities they serve.

With overwhelming support, it evolved into the Impact Outpost Fund, created with world-renowned chef and activist José Andrés’ World Central Kitchen, with a goal of donating over 100,000 meals together. To date, they’ve served over 380,000 meals to more than 400 hospitals across the country.

In addition, Sweetgreen released a new menu category based on evolving customer needs. “Plates,” which launched in May, was the 121-unit chain’s first menu category in over a decade. It caters to guests wanting warm, satisfying options at home around the dinner table.

[Sweetgreen](#), which is now headquartered in Culver City, California, has pledged to be carbon neutral by 2027, and co-founder Nicolas Jammet said the company will meet that goal by focusing on sustainable sourcing, developing more plant-based products and changing how it builds restaurants.





## #6 DOG HAUS

In addition to its new brands and expansion efforts created under the Absolute Wurst brand, 2020 marked [Dog Haus](#)' 10-year anniversary. Throughout the year, the brand raised the bar on culinary innovation through its Chef Collaboration Series and [Mixologist Collaboration](#), which served as an opportunity for Dog Haus to level-up its menu with new creations.

Dog Haus showed how strategic and nimble the brand can be by pushing the boundaries of how it operates its restaurants. In March, Dog Haus partners Hagop Giragossian, Quasim Riaz and André Vener launched The Absolute Brands – a restaurant group composed of Dog Haus and multiple unique concepts, inspired by Dog Haus' one-of-a-kind menu.

Through the Absolute Brands, Dog Haus began offering delivery-only brands – Bad Mutha Clucka, Plant B and Bad-Ass Breakfast Burritos. The delivery-only brands are available at its virtual kitchens inside existing Dog Haus restaurants. The brand created the “host kitchen” model and plans to launch four additional delivery-only concepts in the coming months.

Looking to 2021, the Pasadena-based chain plans to accelerate its growth, with 15 new locations already in the pipeline throughout Arizona, California, Colorado, Maryland, New York, Texas and West Virginia. The brand also plans to test smaller footprint restaurants to operate for carryout- and delivery-only.



## #7 SALADWORKS

Started in 1986, Saladworks is the first and largest franchise salad-centric concept, with over 120 franchised and company-owned locations in the United States. Saladworks offers a wide variety of fresh, hand-crafted and made-to-order entrée-sized salads, warm grain bowls, wraps, sandwiches, paninis, soups, rolls, beverages, snacks and desserts.

Under the powerful vision and inspiring leadership of CEO Kelly Roddy, Saladworks is not only surviving amidst adversity, but thriving. At the end of 2020, Saladworks had 128 restaurants in operation, a net increase of 27% in locations from the prior year.

On top of the 40 restaurants Saladworks opened in 2020, it signed deals for 17 traditional locations that are scheduled to open in 2021. In addition, Saladworks boasts a robust franchise sales pipeline that includes 30 known locations in 2021 with the potential for several additional locations. In addition, [WOWorks](#), the parent company of Saladworks, acquired Centennial, Colorado-based Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh as well as Frutta Bowls.

Saladworks is also testing three new ‘Virtual’ Brands (SoupWorks, SandwichWorks and PizzaWorks) for 2021 expansion within its third-party delivery partners among both existing Saladworks franchise and company locations as well as REEF Food Truck and Ghost Kitchen locations in both the U.S. and Canada to expand its digital footprint and sales growth opportunities.



## #8 CHIPOTLE

For 28 years, Chipotle has worked to cultivate a better world by serving responsibly sourced, real food free of artificial colors, flavors and preservatives. Since its first restaurant opened in Denver, the brand has understood the connection between how food is raised and prepared and how it tastes.

Despite the challenges that the pandemic brought, Chipotle remained focused on its purpose. The company, for example, created the Gloves to Bags campaign in March as an upcycling solution to the industry's disposable plastic problem. So far, 1.4 million gloves have been turned into trash bags.

Cultivating a Better World also means focusing on Chipotle's community. In addition to launching access to mental health benefits for employees and their families, in 2020, Chipotle expanded the [Debt Free College Degree program](#). During the pandemic, Chipotle was able to keep locations open and team members employed. In 2020, Chipotle paid out more than \$40 million in bonuses and assistance pay to restaurant employees and promoted nearly 11,000 employees.

Chipotle's 2021 plans include opening 200 new locations, of which 70% would include a Chipotlane, the digital drive-thru developed in November.



## #9 DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN

COVID-19 stalled the growth plans of restaurants all over the world, but Los Angeles-based [Dave's Hot Chicken](#) isn't one of them.

The brand's founders, four longtime friends who started frying chicken in a parking lot in 2017, have a passion for serving the hot chicken and honed their skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. After a slight dip, the company's sales rebounded to higher than pre-pandemic levels, despite not having a drive-thru location or in-house delivery. Lines still stretched around the block at each location.

The brand has inked over 250 franchise locations approximately one year since it began franchising, putting it on track to become one of the fastest-growing restaurant concepts in history. All of this while sticking to a simple menu of hot chicken tenders, sliders, fries and minimal side options, keeping the operations team and guests happy with its excellence.





## #10 DICKEY'S BARBECUE PIT

Coming off the heels of a tumultuous year for restaurants, Dickey's Barbecue Pit recorded its highest day ever in sales on Christmas Eve, surpassing last year's record by a staggering 45%.

The year also saw digital accomplishments for the family-owned and women-led franchise with last December going on record as the Dallas-based brand's best month-to-date in digital sales. They were up 42% in November, for example.

The success can be attributed to continuous investment in technology platforms, according to CEO Laura Rea Dickey, who has led the 80-year-old brand into 2021 with incredible resilience.

Digital sales at Dickey's are exceeding pre-COVID performance by over 200%, and restaurant sales for the entire system have been same-store sale positive for seven straight months. In addition to sales and technology advancements, Dickey's also launched an [At Home Delivery](#) subscription model, where fans can receive a curated box of quality meat delivered right to their doorstep.

Dickey's debuted a non-traditional [ghost kitchen model](#) last year and has since opened 14 ghost kitchen locations. The fast-growing model maximizes delivery coverage without the upfront investment that a traditional brick-and-mortar location requires.



## #11 TROPICAL SMOOTHIE CAFE

Tropical Smoothie Cafe reported a record-breaking year in 2020, delivering its [ninth consecutive year](#) of positive same-store sales, with 2020 same-store sales coming in at +7.5 percent. The Tallahassee-based brand had a momentous year, hitting its 900th cafe opening in Fort Benning, and is projecting to open 130 cafes by the end of 2021, including its 1000th unit.

The company, which ended 2020 with 99 openings and 254 new franchise agreements, recently launched branded delivery, powered by [DoorDash](#), to accommodate guests who frequently order through their mobile app. In September, the brand launched a refresh of its Tropical Smoothie Cafe App, implementing enhanced experiences to drive engagement across various platforms.

Tropical Smoothie Cafe is ramping up for a POS rollout in 2021 and is working with SynergySuite – an operational tool to enhance inventory and labor management – to make the brand's cafe operations more efficient and effective.



## #12 IKE'S LOVE & SANDWICHES

Bold, audacious and sometimes flirty, [Ike's Love & Sandwiches](#) knows how to push the envelope while managing a nimble, strategic team that has successfully navigated through the pandemic. The San Francisco-based sandwich shop rebounded after only three weeks of initial shutdown at the onset of the pandemic and ended up hitting double-digit comps in 2020. With 72 locations in operation, Ike's Love & Sandwiches has aggressive growth planned with 21 locations on deck for 2021, after having opened 23 locations in 2019.

Last spring, Ike's immediately updated safety protocols across all stores, including plexiglass at all counters, launched free delivery while encouraging guests to stay safe, and offered countless promotions to keep guests excited and increase brand loyalty.

One of the biggest hits with its fans was the weekly one-day \$5 Social D. Sandwich – where Founder Ike Shehadeh created a new sandwich in honor of the [“Social D. TV”](#) that he was bingeing. [Those offerings included the “Tiger King” sandwich as well as “The Alexis,” in honor of “Schitt’s Creek.”](#)

Shehadeh was one of the nation's first restaurateurs to offer a mobile ordering app, which he introduced at his second location in 2008 at Stanford University. In late 2017, he deployed his first self-order kiosks, and has been able to continue to innovate ever since. Ike's has opened eight new locations in the first half of 2021 and is ready to face whatever is to come with strength and creativity.



## #13 TERIYAKI MADNESS

Teriyaki Madness is committed to unconditionally satisfying guests by offering made-to-order, healthy (or not) bowls, apps and sides, prepared with all-natural ingredients served quickly and at a reasonable price. The brand is constantly innovating to meet customer needs, whether it's through incorporating drive-thrus and curbside pickup for safety or the recent release of its Mad Sauce, to consistently stay ahead of customers' tastes.

Seattle-based [Teriyaki Madness](#) carried huge momentum into 2021, and has a goal to sign 50 deals for 125 locations this year. Although COVID-19 presented many obstacles for restaurants in the fast casual space, Teriyaki Madness adapted and thrived, with 2020 revenue increasing by 48% across the franchise system compared to 2019.

Teriyaki Madness also grew its corporate team by almost 50% by bringing on 27 new hires to support its system growth. Restaurant Sherpas, its affiliate restaurant management company, will play a key role in growth strategy this year, as a turn-key solution to property owners looking to fill vacancies and turn a profit.





## #14 FAZOLI'S

After its most successful summer and fall in brand history, and an overall extraordinary 2020, Fazoli's is prepared to scale new heights in 2021. The Lexington, Kentucky-based brand known for serving premium Italian dishes at a great value didn't just break records, it shattered them.

The 220-unit chain closed out seven straight months with double-digit month-over-month sales and traffic. In December alone, Fazoli's set 45 sales records in company and franchise locations and experienced its all-time busiest sales day and week. From June through December, the seven-month average company sales at Fazoli's increased nearly 15%, and traffic was up 14%.

When the pandemic forced dining rooms to close nationwide, Fazoli's implemented an off-premise strategy and created popular family meal packages. The commitment to culinary innovation continued with the expansion of its menu offerings to a new category, when it launched [Wingville](#). It now offers wings as part of its core menu at all company locations.

The brand also opened its first-ever [ghost kitchen](#) last year in Atlanta. The successes of these virtual concepts have contributed to the brand's success and it is looking to expand.



## #15 MCALISTER'S DELI

For McAlister's Deli, 2020 was a year of evolving from an on-premise to an off-premise concept. Although it is committed to exceptional customer service and community connections, it needed to evolve its model to meet changing consumer preferences sparked by the pandemic. It did just that by expanding curbside to over 350 units in a matter of weeks during the onset of COVID-19. This business change became a survival tactic for many franchisees, and the brand's new app allowed for the quick pivot. Largely credited to this digital investment, digital sales from first-party and third-party channels more than doubled from 2019 to 2020, showcasing the huge benefit of the brand's recent [digital transformation](#).

Atlanta-based McAlister's is planning to exceed 500 locations in 2021 by targeting areas within its core markets in the Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Texas and Upper Midwest, where it plans to sell 100 units over the next year. It also plans to add 40 additional restaurants, including its 500th location, by year's end.



## 16. FAT BRANDS (FATBURGER)

Fatburger's parent company, FAT Brands, is known for a lot more than just burgers. The Los Angeles-based global franchising company, which acquires, markets and develops fast casual and casual dining restaurant concepts, owns nine restaurant brands: Fatburger, Johnny Rockets, Buffalo's Cafe, Buffalo's Express, Hurricane Grill & Wings, Elevation Burger, Yalla Mediterranean and Ponderosa and Bonanza Steakhouses, and has more than 700 units worldwide.

During the ongoing pandemic, President and CEO Andy Wiederhorn led the acquisition of [Johnny Rockets](#) for approximately \$25 million - nearly doubling total store count and expanding his company's presence into many new countries.

In late 2020, Wiederhorn merged FAT Brands with [Fog Cutter Capital](#), sending the NASDAQ stock on a run and earning the title of 'Best Performing Restaurant Stock of 2020.' FAT Brands' goal is to increase enterprise value from \$200 million to \$500 million by the end of the year.

While Wiederhorn has certainly made waves in the restaurant space as an impactful and forward-thinking business leader, what stands out most is his commitment to community and giving back. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, he launched a health-care heroes initiative where, via the "Fatmobile," staff delivered 35,000 meals to hospitals around Los Angeles and Southern California.

## 17. PITA MEDITERRANEAN STREET



PITA Mediterranean Street Food's proficient response to COVID-19 last year led to improved operations and profitability, priming the company for continued growth in the new year, according to Nour Rabai, founder and CEO of the Georgia-based brand. At the end of 2020, the brand had 36 locations, and is looking to continue to expand.

Growth plans, for example, include opening locations in Alabama, Chicago, Florida and Georgia, which will happen as the brand streamlines online ordering through the launch of a new app.

"Providing fresh, authentic Mediterranean cuisine without the long wait continues to be our priority, and we're excited to bring our delicious, fast casual fare to new markets while also providing a more convenient process for mobile ordering," said Rabai.

In an effort to be more to-go friendly, Rabai and his team remodeled the menu to feature profitable items that travel well, including family meals, Street Wraps, rice bowls and more. The company is now in the process of developing a mobile app that provides guests with convenient options for ordering in addition to loyalty rewards.

The [new mobile app](#) will launch this spring and will be available for Android and iOS.

## 18. COOLGREENS

In a year that forced restaurant brands to adapt and evolve quickly in order to survive, Oklahoma-based Coolgreens faced its challenges head on, thought outside of the box and experienced a record-breaking year that has positioned it for an extraordinary 2021. The healthy lifestyle eatery executed innovative business strategies that brought its signature salads, sandwiches, wraps and grain bowls straight to its guests, even at home, and resulted in systemwide sales increasing 19% in 2020.

Despite a global pandemic, Coolgreens continued its growth in Dallas-Fort Worth by opening one location and entered a new market with two restaurants in Omaha, Nebraska, doubling the number of franchised locations. With new eateries experiencing record-breaking opening sales, the Coolgreens team continued their preparation for monumental growth and announced a [50-unit area development](#) agreement to expand Coolgreens across Texas, with 10 locations forecasted to open in the next 18 months.





## 18. COOLGREENS

Along with its impressive expansion plans, Coolgreens also remained committed to menu innovation. The brand launched its Sunshine Bowl in June and Ham & Jam sandwich in September; both were highly popular with the Coolgreens guest base.

It finished 2020 by designing and building out its first-ever [ghost kitchen](#), located in a multi-functional shared kitchen facility in Central Orlando.

## 19. MOUNTAIN MIKE'S



Founded in 1978, California-based Mountain Mike's is a fast casual family-style pizza chain known for its crispy, curly pepperoni and mountain-sized pizzas. Acquired by Britt Private Capital LLC, Jupiter Holdings LLC and Levine Leichtman Capital Partners in April 2017, the brand has experienced record sales, momentous growth and major milestones for the now over 230-unit chain.

In 2020, under the leadership of Principal Owners and Co-CEOs Chris Britt and Ed St. Geme, Mountain Mike's had its best sales year ever, beating out 2019, which held the previous record. The brand ended its fiscal year 2020 with total system sales up 13.3% and same-store sales up 7.3% over 2019.

Remarkably in 2020, Mountain Mike's had a handful of franchised restaurants break the \$2 million annual sales barrier for the first time in the brand's history, with the average sales of the top 50% of restaurants achieving close to \$1.2 million in annual sales.

Amidst the pandemic, Mountain Mike's Pizza opened 15 locations and signed agreements to expand into new western states, including a 60+ unit development deal in Arizona and Utah. With approximately 25 Mountain Mike's Pizza restaurants planned to open in 2021, the pizza brand is primed to continue expansion throughout the western U.S.

## 20. CRAVE HOT DOGS AND BBQ

Crave started off the year 2020 with four units open and four additional sold. Throughout the year, the New York City-based chain opened seven stores, launched a [food truck model](#) and sold 22 units, showing massive growth during a year when many struggled.

Three food trucks hit the road and Crave is now located in 12 states. The innovation of the menu, the corporate team's efforts and the CEO's leadership make it a brand that franchisees want to be a part of.

The addition of food trucks to its traditional brick and mortar units proved to be a great move. Catering has been a very successful part of Crave's business, and it found that having food trucks and food carts allowed the brand to travel to customers rather than them having to go to Crave.



The company has sold the rights to 25 franchises. By the end of 2021, Crave will have 30 units and five food trucks, with another 30 stores in development.

Additional innovations in 2020 include strongly emphasizing its mobile app, which allows curbside pickup, delivery, ordering ahead, loyalty points, rewards, free food and updates about the locations.

## 21. STARBIRD



Starbird's mission is to push the envelope of what a fast casual, chef-driven, tech-focused, crispy chicken concept can do. Not only was its business able to survive in the most tumultuous year for restaurants on record, but it thrived via a concerted investment in its people, community and business.

## 21. STARBIRD

The California-based chain posted same-store positive comp sales of 37% in 2020 and launched two virtual brands (Starbird Salads and Starbird Bowls), one brick-and-mortar location in Campbell, California, and a virtual kitchen in Oakland. It also raised over **\$4 million** in investment capital to continue its growth.

With the help of the surrounding local community, Starbird was able to send over 3,500 meals to Bay-area frontline health-care workers. The chain also matched every \$10 meal donation made on its online ordering platforms to help fuel those on the frontlines.

Throughout the year, the brand raised wages for hourly employees, allowed an extra free meal for employees to take home to their families, and launched its Employee Enrichment Program. This includes the Language Learning Program and the Starbird Educational Fund, which helps employees with tuition assistance.

## 22. RISE SOUTHERN BISCUITS AND RIGHTEOUS CHICKEN

Rise Southern Biscuits and Righteous Chicken went through a total brand revamp over the last year. Since first opening as a single storefront in 2012 in Durham, North Carolina, **Rise** has continued to expand across six states. In 2020, sales were up more than 50% from last year, and profits were up more than 30%.

At the beginning of COVID-19, the chain, which signed a five-unit deal this



year, scaled back on startup costs and operation costs, minimized its footprint, reduced staffing and equipment needs, and focused on creating a menu that was consistent at all locations.

Rise was ahead of the pandemic, having already embraced technology before shutdowns made them a must for restaurant survival. For example, it was already using ordering kiosks, a mobile app, third-party delivery, food lockers and heated shelving units for fast and contactless pickup. Because of these factors, Rise did not need to add or change any of its service models during the pandemic.

## 23. JERSEY MIKE'S

Despite the pandemic, Jersey Mike's reported double-digit same-store sales increases in 2020. At the same time, the New Jersey-based brand continued with retrofits across the country, adding operational improvements, including a second make line to



accommodate heavier digital orders. Just as important was looking at how the brand could help its communities. The brand was determined to fulfill its mission statement: "Giving... Making a Difference in Someone's Life."

To provide financial relief for its customers, Jersey Mike's offered several promotions for 50% and 25% off subs, as well as free delivery services through its online ordering app during the pandemic.

Growth continued in 2020, with the opening of 210 stores, up from 181 in 2019. Jersey Mike's, which launched the Coach Rod Smith Ownership Program to give managers the opportunity to become store owners with financial and training support, expects to continue its smart growth, identifying and recruiting franchisees that are passionate about the Jersey Mike's brand.

The company expects to open more than 200 locations from coast to coast, including with non-traditional locations such as universities and military bases, bringing total locations to more than 1,850 nationwide.

## 24. PENN STATION

2020 was an anniversary year for Ohio-based **Penn Station**, marking 35 years in business, and the brand celebrated with innovation. It created PS 2020, a new restaurant design and revised menu, which added cold sandwiches, along with a multigrain bread option. It also highlighted wraps and salads.

Launched systemwide in March 2020, new items proved popular with



## 24. PENN STATION



customers during COVID-19, and the format made carryout easier with a designated pickup area maintaining Penn Station's open kitchen.

Despite the pandemic, Penn Station franchisees opened nine restaurants, saw a 5% increase in same-store sales for the year, and many months of double-digit comparative sales since the pandemic began.

Penn Station, which currently has more than 310 locations in 15 states, plans to sign multi-unit deals with new and existing franchisees for a total of at least 20 new locations in 2021, setting the tone for the next several years of more rapid growth than the brand's traditional intentionally conservative growth.

## 25. SHAKE SHACK

With a focus on serving fresh, simple, high-quality versions of burgers and dogs, Shake Shack got creative in 2020 in response to COVID-19 with its digital ordering experience called [Shack Track](#). The enhanced digital order and pick-up solution added a drive-thru experience in 2021 and is rolling out app enhancements around delivery through the Shack App and additional payment functionality.

This spring, [Shake Shack](#) is partnering with well-known chefs and restaurateurs across the U.S. as part of its, "Now Serving: A Collab Series by Shake Shack." The series features exclusive menu items developed by several chefs available at Shake Shack for a limited time.

Portions of net proceeds from each collaboration go to the local nonprofit of the chef's choosing, and each collaboration also includes free exclusive swag with each order.

## 26. JUICE IT UP



Since 1985, Juice It Up has been an innovator in the booming raw juice bar, smoothie, and superfruit bowl category. Acquired by SJB Brands, LLC in February 2018, it has since experienced record sales, momentous growth and major milestones. When the pandemic hit, the brand team went to work finding ways to make it easier than ever to get its juice to guests.

Under the leadership of President and CEO Susan Taylor, along with owners and co-chairmen, Chris Britt and Ed St. Geme, Juice It Up achieved record sales in 2020, its 25th anniversary year. Same-store sales were up 14.75% over the previous year, and they exploded during

the second half of 2020, growing 28% over the last six months of the year.

The successful launch of the brand's updated mobile app, with ["skip-the-line"](#) order-ahead functionality, new rewards and perks for loyalty members, helped Juice It Up to double its number of loyalty club members in 2020; 40% of loyalty member transactions were placed via the mobile app.

With more than 75 locations in five states, product innovation was also at the forefront in 2020 as the company significantly expanded its immunity-boosting lineup of products while adding nutrient-rich superfoods to the menu, all of which resonated strongly with guests seeking functional nutrition.

## 27. TORCHY'S TACOS

Torchy's Tacos, a street taco concept launched as a food trailer in 2006 in Austin, Texas, has grown into a cult-status brand that serves handcrafted tacos, queso and margaritas to its Taco Junkies across 83 locations in seven states.

Despite the unprecedented challenges that came with [COVID-19](#), Torchy's successfully opened 12 locations and expanded the brand into three additional states in 2020.



## 27. TORCHY'S TACOS

The company also recently announced a \$400 million fundraising campaign as Torchy's continues to ramp up its plans to bring its tacos to the masses. It plans to expand to an additional 10 states over the next four years with more than 100 locations.

As a brand, what sets Torchy's apart is its creativity, food quality, and menu innovation. Torchy's offers its popular Taco of the Month, a monthly taco with creative ingredients and an equally creative name (Think: The Fancy Schmancy or The Naughty Santa) that keeps guests returning month after month, with partial proceeds going to local nonprofits.

## 28. SCHLOTZSKY'S



Schlotzsky's was positioned extremely well to weather COVID-19's impact as it had already been reimagining its brand philosophy and menu. By concentrating on core items like pizza and sandwiches, Schlotzsky's could focus on streamlining operations and improving speed of service and accuracy. When COVID-19 hit, like many brands, Schlotzsky's had to close dining rooms and pivot. However, prior to the pandemic, the brand invested in technology that enhanced speed of service, which proved vital.

Schlotzsky's tapped [drive-thru](#) timers to ensure efficiency and consistency, which led to increased sales and helped the brand surpass pre-pandemic sales levels. It also adjusted drive-thru menu boards to suggestively sell menu items that would perform well and that could be produced fast. The drive-thru channel has grown for Schlotzsky's, and many of the locations were comp-positive because of the drive-thru channel and third-party delivery providers.

The Atlanta-based brand is still improving the drive-thru experience, launching two drive-thru [prototypes](#) by year's end. The 1,000-square-foot model will have no seating and is drive-thru only with pickup windows on two sides. The other is an 1,800-square-foot format with a drive-thru and 35 seats.

## 29. MELT SHOP

Melt Shop, which opened in 2011 in the epicenter of New York City, has grown to 14 units throughout New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The team is made up of entrepreneurs at the forefront of leading trends who leaned into their entrepreneurial spirit when the world came to a halt with COVID-19. They pooled resources and developed a virtual concept strategy to help produce sales through different revenue channels and leveraged existing equipment and operating procedures to create sale-driving, trendy and/or seasonal concepts.

Melt Shop was also one of the first brands in NYC to launch an initiative aimed at feeding frontline workers through its "Melt It Forward" campaign.



Within the first few weeks, the brand donated more than 6,000 meals.

Melt Shop plans to open two locations by the end of 2021 but is also spending the year reopening closed locations and rolling out virtual concepts as well as new products.

## 30. VELVET TACO

Dallas-based Velvet Taco has risen to the challenge of last year's pandemic by moving quickly to pivot operations and adjust restaurant expansion plans for more than 10 locations in 2021.

The strength of the brand is adaptability, having a model that allows for nimble flexibility and a strong reception to change. While making safety of guests and team members its top priority, Velvet Taco plans to open 10 locations in 2021, including four new market entries.

In 2020, Velvet Taco opened four locations, achieving new opening day and weekly sales records. Other





## 30. VELVET TACO

innovations include adapting its Weekly Taco Feature (WTF) menu to include team member innovation submissions that were some of the brand's most popular WTFs ever.

It implemented menu changes to optimize labor and food cost as well as rolled out a team member development program with the goal of promoting directors of operations from an internal group.

## 31. BLAZE PIZZA



From its unparalleled growth and guest-centric hospitality, to its scratch-made food and chef-curated ingredients, Pasadena, California-based Blaze Pizza continued to make waves in 2020, leaning into its strong leadership team and franchisees. At the start of 2020, Blaze Pizza was positioned for exponential growth and success, kicking off the year with a focus on strategic initiatives targeting digital innovations and off-premise capabilities.

While every restaurant brand was certainly impacted by COVID-19, Blaze was quick to pivot, embracing operational innovation to meet the demands of a COVID-19 world. As Blaze has historically been a dine-in concept, with 80% of sales in 2019 coming from

on-premise dining, the brand provided its franchise system the resources needed to compete and keep their doors open.

In just three weeks, Blaze launched curbside carryout and developed a unique QR code to deliver contactless menus, as well as expanded its third-party delivery partners. As a result, it experienced a 155% increase in digital sales and 16% increase in curbside.

To continue driving consumers into restaurants, limited-time offers and new culinary innovations were also introduced, including a White Claw pizza that garnered national attention. With more than 340 locations, Blaze continues to show impressive growth.

## 32. FREDDY'S FROZEN CUSTARD & STEAKBURGERS

Freddy's Frozen Custard & Steakburgers, based in Wichita, Kansas, is entering new markets and implementing technology systemwide.

The nearly 400-unit chain, which serves 32 states, boasted significant development in 2020, opening 30 restaurants in key markets throughout the U.S.



Despite a challenging industry landscape, the Freddy's commitment to innovation and customer experience helped the brand maintain strong systemwide sales throughout the pandemic and fuel ongoing growth efforts, reporting AUV growth of 6.5%.

Those numbers helped to spur a surge in franchise development throughout the year, including the signing of six development groups committing to open over 60 units, as well as the signing of 11 development agreements with existing Freddy's franchisees.

## 33. TARKA INDIAN KITCHEN



Tarka Indian Kitchen began 2020 as a well-established restaurant brand, poised to become a national competitor among Indian concepts. Despite unforeseen trials presented by the global pandemic, the Austin-based eatery proved it has staying power and entered 2021 stronger than ever and ready to expand.

Tarka became a leader in the off-premise business due to its fresh Indian food being easily transportable. As an early adopter of off-premise ordering, Tarka leaned into third-party delivery before knowing that it would eventually become the brand's redeeming feature.

## 33. TARKA INDIAN KITCHEN

Delivery made up 20 percent of Tarka's business, and the executive team expects that number to grow even more as society transitions to more on-the-go dining habits. Overall sales were up 13.54% compared to the year prior, solidifying the team's decision to continue growth. With new initiatives, plans to expand the brand regionally and potentially begin franchising, Tarka is set to efficiently reach wider audiences. Tarka will open its ninth store in Houston during the first half of 2021. They are also aiming to accelerate the brand's landscape by expanding in their existing markets: Houston, Austin and San Antonio, and have also set their sights on going north and setting roots in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.



flavorful meals that travel well. Increasing efficiency without sacrificing quality of the product or the guest experience aligns with its core values as a brand.

With 60 locations, Pokéworks is targeting key markets in urban and suburban areas across the country in 2021, with a goal of adding 12 more units.

## 34. POKÉWORKS

Throughout 2020, Pokéworks not only sustained its franchise growth by opening 12 locations but jumped at the chance to innovate in ways that demonstrated its commitment to the guest experience. The brand opened its first ghost kitchen in Chicago and began developing its first "cruise-thru" location in Knoxville, Tennessee.

With these new models, Pokéworks has streamlined its operations with digital ordering through its mobile app and dedicated pick-up lanes for guests and delivery drivers. In 2020 alone, delivery sales doubled from 2019, proving the brand's resiliency, efficient operations and continued innovation ever since it first invented the poke burrito.

Pokéworks has always catered to the on-the-go consumer with its healthy,

## 35. SMASHBURGER

Denver-based Smashburger not only managed to make it through one of the toughest years for the restaurant industry but closed out the year with a positive YTD sales increase while also exceeding growth plans.

Smashburger credits its success to President [Carl Bachmann](#), who implemented a strategic five-point plan focused on the company's long-term emphasis on flexibility. It allowed the restaurant to pivot existing programs to ensure team members and guests



felt safe during the ongoing pandemic. Smashburger also redefined its portfolio, focusing not only on how its stores were designed but also operated, and created a larger digital presence, which contributed to a 436.7% increase in digital and call-in orders.

The chain, which has about 235 units, was able to navigate store-level changes due to a global pandemic, all while launching a new menu item, the Bacon Brisket Burger, with a BOGO \$1 promotion in May. It generated one of the highest single-day promotion sales numbers in 2020, making up 7% of total sales when it was first released.

## 36. CAVA

Washington D.C.-based CAVA is a place for the senses where taste and health are united. The chain, headquartered in Maryland, adapted the customer journey to accommodate COVID-19 mandates.

CAVA created new menu categories and chef-curated meals in a matter of weeks to meet rapidly changing customer needs. Now, 30% of revenue comes from access channels that did not exist before the pandemic.

CAVA's 2018 acquisition of [Zoës Kitchen](#) provided CAVA with a unique opportunity to expand its suburban footprint threefold, strategically positioning the brand within the industry as one that is not dependent on the office lunch rush.

Its ambitious plans for growth over the course of the next five years include converting a dozen Zoës Kitchen locations to CAVA restaurants in the

## 36. CAVA



first half of 2021. CAVA operates over 110 locations across a strategically positioned national footprint, including suburban and urban locations on the East Coast, as well as in California, Colorado and Texas.

In addition to impressive growth, [CAVA](#) has founded NOW--a Network of Women--that focuses on growing and empowering women through a mentorship program. Since the program's launch, the chain has added three women to fill executive roles: CPO, CFO and SVP of Marketing.

## 37. EVERBOWL

Southern California-based [Everbowl](#) has been helping customers "unevolve" since 2016. With a mission of bringing superfood to the masses, the 30-unit chain is teaching customers to "live and eat the way we were meant to by eating foods that have been around forever."



The idea seems to be catching on as Everbowl began franchising in 2020 and has 26 franchise locations in the pipeline. With a plan to open at least 35 units this year, the brand plans to end 2021 with 90 signed locations.

Everbowl pivoted to a direct-to-consumer option during COVID-19 and partnered with [QVC](#) to bring its products to consumers while stores were closed due to the pandemic. This move proved to be ingenious as it sold out each of the four times it was featured on the famous shopping platform and led to an ongoing contract with QVC that continues throughout 2021.

## 38. PIZZA GUYS

Sacramento-based [Pizza Guys](#) has 71 locations, and Founder and CEO Shahpour Nejad said its flexible model helped it thrive throughout the pandemic.

"Experienced franchise partners who share our passion for providing our communities with high-quality pizzas are what help us continue to expand and serve new customers," he said.

The brand has not only seen an increase in sales but managed to open three stores in 2020, with another seven scheduled to open this year. The brand's business model had an infrastructure in place to succeed in the pandemic as it was easily able to add contactless options. In addition, stores had to hire and conduct interviews differently. Ads were placed more on social media platforms and initial interviews were done through video conferencing.



"Pizza Guysy has proven why it is one of the strongest pizza concepts in franchising," Nejad said. "We have continued to open locations so we can extend our reach and serve our customers throughout this unprecedented pandemic."

## 39. CURRY UP NOW

Over the last 10 years, husband-and-wife co-founders Akash and Rana Kapoor have changed the way Indian food is looked at in the fast casual segment. Building an Indian food brand without the need for Indian-trained chefs and opening restaurants all over the country is not an easy task, but the Kapoors have figured out a bag-in-a box approach to opening restaurants anywhere in the U.S.

They opened five [Curry Up Now](#) units, sold multiple franchise deals in 2020, and the 14-unit chain plans to double in size by the end of 2021.

"We were always a digitally enabled, to-go friendly brand so some of our locations have actually seen same-store sales grow during the pandemic," Akash said. "Apart from curbside or tableside ordering, we already had the technology in place to tackle Covid."



## 39. CURRY UP NOW

Additional menu initiatives in 2020 included to-go cocktails and the addition of LyfeBowls, which had keto, paleo, vegan and Hella' Protein options.

## 40. TACOS 4 LIFE



Tacos 4 Life, an Arkansas-grown taco restaurant that donates one meal to starving children around the world for every meal purchased at each of its 18 locations, now spans five states.

Inspired and driven by the need to help eliminate world hunger, Austin and Ashton Samuelson founded the first unit in 2014. In partnership with Feed My Starving Children, Tacos 4 Life has donated over 16 million meals to starving children around the world. The way Tacos 4 Life works is simple – for every taco, quesadilla, nachos, salad or rice bowl sold, 24 cents is donated to Feed My Starving Children, Tacos 4 Life's philanthropic partner. This cost is equivalent to the cost of one meal for a hungry child.

"Showing our guests gratitude and thanking them for the simple things has always been a priority for our brand since we are **mission-based**, but I think you will continue to see more brands increase this kind of awareness once we are past the pandemic," Austin said.

In the midst of a global pandemic, Tacos 4 Life opened new locations in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Collierville, Tennessee, in 2020. The brand also has plans to open locations in Little Rock, Arkansas; St. Louis, Missouri; and Broken Arrow, Oklahoma in 2021.

## 41. MOOYAH BURGERS, FRIES & SHAKES

Even though restaurants were hit hard during COVID-19, Mooyah Burgers, Fries & Shakes was able to help support its franchise owners with initiatives that drove revenue, ending the year with a 43% increase in restaurants having stronger year-over-year sales in 2020 over 2019.

As the pandemic set in, the Plano-based chain's leadership quickly focused on free delivery promotions, leaned on its loyalty rewards app -- which led to a 32% increase in users -- and rolled out curbside pick-up to drive business. The company also had 18 \$1 million stores. Three of the \$1 million restaurants were in their first full year of opening, and four of the restaurants were \$1 million stores for the first time ever in 2020.

With 86 locations open worldwide, Mooyah plans to complete 12



agreements to add 29 restaurants in 2021. The brand also expects to open 15 restaurants and to reimagine 10 locations with the franchise's updated design.

## 42. MIGHTY QUINN'S

While many restaurants added a variety of groceries to their menus during the onset of COVID-19, Manhattan-based Mighty Quinn's Barbeque started producing and selling its own soap.

Made from leftover beef tallow rendered fat, organic coconut charcoal, peppermint oil and lye, the soap is helping the nine-unit chain reduce its carbon footprint while bringing in a little extra cash. Each bar of soap sells for \$7, or \$35 for a pack of six.

"We butcher a very large amount of brisket everyday and we were always throwing out this organic animal fat and we couldn't really find a way to repurpose it," Co-Founder and co-CEO Micha Magid said. "One of the oldest uses of beef tallow is to make soap...so we came up with a pretty simple soap recipe with four ingredients."

Mighty Quinn's opened its first franchise location in Garden City, Long Island in August 2020, which was also when sales began to rebound after a year of revenue decreases thanks to the pandemic.

"We're super excited about continuing to open up in new markets with franchisees and I think that we are going to be coming into a very strong period in the restaurant economy," Magid said. "What this pandemic did was really just push that takeout and delivery demand forward by about three years and I don't

## 42. MIGHTY QUINN'S

think it's going to go back the other way, I think it's here to stay."

## 43. SQUARE PIE GUYS



Square Pie Guys is a modern Detroit-style pizza restaurant focused on using out-of-the-box thinking, technology and a heavy dose of empathy. In 2020, this meant growing its team, launching a virtual brand called Hetchy's Hots, and harnessing guest feedback to optimize the menu.

The chef-driven pizza brand transformed its dining room into an order-fulfillment center and donated a portion of proceeds to charitable causes, according to [CEO and Co-Founder Marc Schechter](#), who said the team takes careful considerations of their vegan and gluten-free audiences during menu development.

"We understand the increasing need for authentic conversation, guest desire for transparency, and the opportunity for community engagement via social media," he said. "With an ecosystem of tech integrations, and a customer base familiar with third-party delivery apps, our brand was well-positioned to handle the COVID-19 pandemic."

Two days before the shelter in place orders, the brand pivoted operations to be takeout and delivery only.

"Our agility and the forward-thinking brand saw us beat 2020 sales projections by 49 percent," he said.

## 44. HOOTS WINGS

Hoots Wings – the seven-unit little brother to Hooters – used 2020 as a launching off point for its franchise opportunity. ["Why not franchise now?"](#) the brand's leadership team asked itself, in the middle of a global pandemic.

After its founding in 2017, parent company HOA Brands worked to perfect the chicken wing fast casual, and by 2020 the concept was scalable, ready for national growth, and its products were in high demand.

At a time when chicken wings are becoming an increasingly popular delivery option, Hoots Wings offers smoked, roasted, breaded, naked and boneless wings, as well as dozens of rubs and sauce options. For the health-conscious consumer, the roasted, naked wings and smoked wings are half the calories of a traditional wing.

Hoots Wings, based in Atlanta, anticipates opening up to 17 additional



locations in 2021. Key regions for expansion this year include the Southeast, Midwest and Northeast.

## 45. WABA GRILL



WaBa Grill, which specializes in healthy rice bowl chains, experienced its best-performing year yet in 2020, beating out 2019, which held the previous title. The California-based brand ended its fiscal year by setting new records in total system sales, which were up by 3%, with over 25% of all business coming from digital sales channels, compared to 4.5% in 2019.

The launch of the brand's updated mobile app, which amplified rewards and perks for loyalty members, helped to grow its number of WaBa Rewards App members. Also contributing to the strong financials were three Southern California locations that opened in North Hollywood, Colton and Lancaster, with a chain-wide total of 191 units operating in California and Arizona at the end of 2020.

Celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, WaBa Grill's record-breaking sales in 2020 prove that consumer demand for healthy and affordable food served fast is at an all-time high. This strong growth on all fronts is a testament to WaBa



## 45. WABA GRILL

Grill's resilient franchisees, the brand's loyal fans and new guests who are making health and wellness a priority.

## 46. SLIM CHICKENS



After seven years of franchising, [Slim Chickens](#), known for chicken tenders, fresh salads, sandwiches, chicken wings and chicken and waffles, has more than 120 locations in 19 states as well as two international locations. The fast casual chicken brand opened 16 locations in 2020 and has more than 500 stores under development.

The brand, headquartered in Fayetteville, Arkansas, plans to open more than 50 stores this year and is poised to have its best year ever, considering in 2020 it saw 14% in comp-store sales growth and more than 30% revenue growth year-to-year.

"In addition to the openings lined up for this year, we are continuing to sign multi-unit deals with some of the most experienced franchise groups in the industry — adding to our explosive growth," said Vice President of Franchise Development Jackie Lobdell.

Innovations in mobile ordering, enabling curbside pick-up and delivery each contributed to Slim Chickens' success

in 2020. By implementing third-party delivery companies into its POS system, it was able to develop a more efficient business flow.

The brand also redesigned its operating and training systems to deal with COVID-19 and enhanced its online ordering app, growing online sales channels by 30%.

## 47. CAPRIOTTI'S

Capriotti's continues to be ahead of the curve in innovation and technology. With the onset of the pandemic last year, it had all systems in place to pivot marketing to a delivery and curbside focus. Sales figures grew throughout 2020 by more than 7% from 2019, and the brand opened 18 restaurants.

Capriotti's added 24 franchise partners, for a total of 106 restaurants in the pipeline, using primarily social media and paid search campaigns. Support for franchise partners includes webinars, virtual training and above-average hands-on development and training, according to Chief Development Officer David Bloom.

Capriotti's will continue to grow at record levels in 2021, with over 30 shops already scheduled to open throughout



the country, and as many more franchisees being actively engaged in the real estate site selection process.

The brand ended 2020 with 200 shops in the development phase, having added more than 100 shops for the second year in a row. Its [ghost kitchen initiatives](#) and the expansion of virtual brand launches will provide additional development and expansion opportunities for all franchise partners.

## 48. SLAPFISH



Founded as a food truck in LA by Chef Andrew Gruel in 2011, [Slapfish's](#) goal has always been to get people to eat more seafood, and things are looking good. The brand has expanded across the globe to more than 20 locations by making seafood more approachable. Menu items, for example, include street tacos, lobster rolls and housemade pickles.

Since receiving a significant investment and franchise commitment from franchisee and former professional football player [Mac Haik](#) in 2019, the brand had been expanding throughout the United States and into international markets. When COVID-19 hit, however, Slapfish shifted focus feeding first responders and school kids, who were

## 48. SLAPFISH

missing meals while their buildings were closed.

After hearing from many restaurant workers who were struggling to pay their bills due to closures, Gruel launched a GoFundMe campaign with his wife, [Lauren](#), to raise money for struggling restaurant workers. It has raised more than \$350,000.

## 49. THE ORIGINAL HOT DOG FACTORY

With a menu featuring “America’s Best Hot Dog” and a business model geared toward demand for to-go meals, The Original Hot Dog Factory has become a breakout star in the industry.

All food at the Atlanta-based brand is prepared fresh to order. All hot dogs are served steamed, grilled or fried with globally inspired toppings. The Original Hot Dog Factory serves 100% certified Angus beef hot dogs, turkey, chicken, Polish, Beyond sausages and pork-based Bratwurst and Italian sausages.

In 2020, the emerging franchise concept, which operates 13 units in Georgia, Pennsylvania, Texas, New York, New Jersey and Alabama, opened nine locations amidst the pandemic and has 40 additional stores in development.



It’s also extremely proud of the fact that its franchise community is very diverse, and at least half its franchise owners are women.

## 50. NAF NAF GRILL



Naf Naf Middle Eastern Grill, which has about 40 units, continues to break through the clutter and make its mark by offering a differentiated dining experience where guests may enjoy handmade Middle Eastern dishes either in restaurants or in the comfort of their own homes.

The brand used the challenges from COVID-19 to pivot and lean into digital ordering capabilities, adding curbside pickup. Digital sales have increased more than 25% since last year.

Its focus remains on growth and innovation, however, as it is on its way to explosive growth as a result of a new franchising program that launched in [2019](#).

The chain, based in Chicago, has signed more than 50 deals, which brought it to two new states in 2020, and will open three units this year.

## 51. SPICE WING

Khushal Patel dreamed of developing a low- cost franchise that other millennials, like him, could afford to open. With this dream, alongside his love for chicken wings and international spice flavors, Patel opened his first Spice Wing in 2017 in Atlanta. The wings were an instant hit, and for three straight years, the Spice Wing has won the Taste of Suwanee Wing Competition.

Spice Wing offers all-natural chicken wings, 17 spice and flavor options, four styles of french fries, and chicken and waffles.

The success of the first store, and his family’s franchise experience, led Patel to franchise his business in 2018, and today he has five locations open throughout the Atlanta area, with more coming soon.

Patel said Spice Wing’s mission is to become a game-changing wing experience for its customers, employees and franchisees. The brand prides itself on offering the most economical, flavorful and innovative franchise brand while focusing on an “Always Fresh” approach to food, operations and technology.





## 52. PIADA ITALIAN STREET FOOD



Piada Italian Street Food, a chef-driven concept offering Italian fare via a made-to-order delivery system, first opened its doors in September 2010, in Columbus, Ohio, and has been on a dramatic growth journey ever since.

Over the past decade, the concept has grown to [38 restaurants in six states](#), continuously enhancing its menu with fresh, creative options for all types of diners and diets. Through this innovative mindset, Piada has been able to quickly adapt to the new service conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, pivoting to accommodate additional health and safety requirements while continuing to provide hand-crafted, high-quality meals to guests through take-out, curbside pick-up, drive-thru and delivery.

In 2021, Piada will open five to seven units in Dallas, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Columbus.

## 53. MOD PIZZA

Mod Pizza continues to be a leader in the fast casual pizza segment, opening 29 locations and creating 700+ new jobs in 2020. With its 500th store on the

horizon, the Bellevue, Washington-based brand continues to be an example of how profit and purpose can co-exist in business.

2020 was certainly a year to lean into its purpose of “serving the people of Mod communities.” Through its partnership with Generosity Feeds, for example, the pizza chain provided over 1 million meals to kids facing food insecurity in its communities.

When Mod could no longer gather employees and volunteers to pack meals, the team worked with Generosity Feeds to have the meals packed and shipped to Mod stores and distributed by its Squads, who managed to distribute over 100,000 meals to local backpack programs, school meal programs and food pantries.

As CEO and Co-Founder Scott Svenson said, “I think if a purpose is true and sincere, it can be the path out of a crisis like this. For us, it’s been an opportunity for us to go back and really think about our culture.”

Growth has remained steady for Mod, and the brand expects to cross the 500-store mark before mid-year.



## 54. URBAN BRICKS



As a primarily dine-in establishment, Urban Bricks had to overcome the traffic loss spurred by the pandemic’s shutdown requirements in 2020.

And overcome, it did.

The San Antonio-based brand, which has 27 locations, expanded to Puerto Rico in 2020 and has several openings this year, including entry into Canada and Saudi Arabia.

“Adaptation is key,” CEO Sammy Aldeeb said. “Since the pandemic, we have added several prototypes for our concept including smaller locations, food trucks, food courts, universities, and even delivery/curbside only locations.”

Innovation has also been key to Urban Bricks’ success this year.

“We have wholeheartedly invested in delivery and technology,” Aldeeb said. “We had to think outside the box on how to be proactive and adapt to the circumstances. In thinking this way we were able to develop two virtual kitchens in every one of our brick and mortar locations, helping us to increase our bottom lines by 16 percent.”

## 55. BUBBAKOO'S BURRITOS



Bubbakoo's Burritos has thrived through COVID-19 and is continuing to position itself as a leader in technology and branding. The chain, which launched 13 years ago in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, has opened 15 stores since COVID-19 hit and has awarded 30 agreements. It plans to grow from 47 locations to more than 80 in 2021.

Vice President of Development and Finance Chris Ives said the chain kept all employees as well as all locations operating during COVID-19 due to streamlining delivery and upgrading its mobile app. Its digital loyalty program, which launched in July, already has more than 70,000 users.

"We pivoted to focus on our delivery packaging for our safety of the customers as well as the quality," he said. "We added kiosks to stores, implemented in-house delivery, added third-party integrations to streamline reporting and added pick-up stations for online or third-party drivers. We did not close any locations or lay off employees, and we are positioned to be nimble and quick with in-line centers."

## 56. WHICH WICH

Despite unprecedented global pandemic ramifications in 2020, Which Wich continued to move and shake through its 17th year in the same innovative spirit that it was once founded upon.

In 2020, the Dallas-based brand focused on technology platforms to pivot toward accessibility and off-premise sales, launching or improving mobile payments, delivery promotions, drive-thru and remote ordering kiosks, as well as drive up and curbside.

It also created a "deli" program, offering grocery and pantry items in the spring, and spent the year helping its communities by feeding frontline workers through its annual Flag Your Bag campaign. This promotion was tweaked in 2020 from supporting active duty, first responders and veterans, to focusing on essential workers and health-care providers.

Which Wich also revamped the menu to further stay on top of industry trends and consumer desires, adding a new spin on its crinkle cut french fries and developing an exclusive and proprietary Mountain Dew beverage.



## 57. MODERN MARKET EATERY

Modern Market introduced several business initiatives over the past year, opening its first ghost kitchen in Tempe and creating Honest Pizza, a virtual brand operating out of the Broomfield, Colorado, location.

Honest Pizza, a delivery-only concept, comes from the chefs behind Modern Market and was inspired by the hole in the delivery market for high-quality, chef-inspired pizzas.

"While there is no shortage in takeout food, we noticed that there is a shortage of clean, better for you pizza," Modern Market Co-Founder and CEO [Anthony Pigliacampo](#) said. "While Modern Market Eatery has always had pizza, it is not something we are known for and is only about 10% of our sales. We have a great understanding of how to make amazing tasting, clean pizza and thought expanding that knowledge into a new concept could resonate well with our customers."

In 2020, the Colorado-based eatery also saw digital transformation and accelerated innovation. It introduced new technology platforms that built out a digital/e-commerce platform that not only enables guests to seamlessly place and customize orders (large and small) but integrates directly into all third-party providers.

Modern Market, which has nearly 30 locations, plans to grow through its franchise program as well as expand its footprint in non-traditional locations such as universities, hospitals, military bases and airports.



## 58. UMAMI BURGER



Umami Burger, founded in 2009 in Los Angeles, California, is an international fan favorite with locations around the world.

Conceived by Chief Culinary Officer Martin Heierling, the menu includes the Umami Double Truffle, featuring beef, truffle cheese fondue, truffle aioli and truffle glaze, but the brand was also one of the first fast casual brands to offer the Impossible Burger, a plant-based meat substitute. Additionally, the menu offers a variety of combos that are great for groups as well as shareable sides like Loaded Truffle Fries or Mac n' Cheese.

Umami Burger continues to grow and serve its fan base through dine-in and digital kitchens that allow highly executed burgers to be delivered right to the diner's doorstep.

Since most of its brick-and-mortar locations are in Los Angeles and had to temporarily close due to COVID-19, Umami entered the [ghost kitchen space in 2020](#). By shifting its strategy to deal with the pandemic and opening numerous delivery-only locations, it was able to keep its brand sales flat over the year.

With 22 locations and 18 virtual kitchens, Umami Burger plans to continue its expansion by opening 75 units in 2021.

## 59. VITALITY BOWLS



Vitality Bowls, a superfood cafe founded a decade ago in Northern California but franchising since 2014, has grown to more than 140 locations open or in development. Recently ranked No. 1 in "Entrepreneur's" Acai Bowl franchise category, the chain has redefined the health-food restaurant category through its cafe vibe, taste profile, and the nutritional values of each and every menu item.

"As we reflect on a time full of trials and obstacles, it's important for us to look ahead to 2021 with the persevering momentum that our franchise system has generated over the past year," said Roy Gilad, CEO of Vitality Bowls.

Those trials included creating specials to cater toward takeout/family meals, which increased average ticket price from \$15 to \$18. The brand also modified store layouts to better accommodate takeout service while also implementing curbside pick-up.

Vitality Bowls, which opened nine locations in 2020, is targeting Los Angeles, San Diego, Portland, Austin and Phoenix, planning to open 15 to 20 locations by the end of 2021.

## 60. THE MELT

The Melt has had a complete turnaround since Ralph Bower came on board as CEO in 2016. Sales have increased 250% in the past three years, and the chain, based in San Francisco, doubled down on a training program designed to help employees deliver an experience so great that each guest says, "I Love It Here." It worked; guest feedback was the highest in the brand's history since 2012 (4.5 for 2020, with over 2,400 reviews).

Although the pandemic caused [The Melt's sales to drop 70%](#), the chain guaranteed each team member a paycheck, whether they worked or not.

By partnering with Impossible Foods, Ghirardelli Chocolate, Help Kitchen and Means Database, the chain also did its best to help the community, giving free meals to first responders and families in need.



## 60. THE MELT

It wasn't only a good deed but also helped The Melt earn brand awareness, which led to end-of-the-year growth. Weekly record sales more than [tripled](#). In November of 2020, sales were more than 50% higher than pre-pandemic levels, and the past several months have consistently seen record sales.

## 61. VEGGIE GRILL

In 2020, California-based [Veggie Grill](#) launched Más Veggies Taqueria, a virtual concept offering plant-based and planet-friendly food for delivery only. The menu includes tacos, burritos, bowls and nachos made without animal products, according to T.K. Pillan, Veggie Grill's co-founder.

"Veggie Grill is the industry leader in plant-based restaurants and Más Veggies Taqueria is a natural next step for us to advance plant-based eating nationwide and bring a new and exciting experience straight to people's doorsteps," Pillan said. "The virtual Más Veggies Taqueria helps accelerate the plant-based movement while leveraging existing Veggie Grill kitchens nationwide."

Partnering with delivery platforms, including Doordash, Postmates, Uber Eats, and Grubhub, Más Veggies Taqueria ran a delivery-only operation out of all Veggie Grill kitchens.

In addition, [Veggie Grill's Pillan](#) launched a new brand, Stand-Up Burgers. Instead of beef, Pillan is serving 100% plant-based offerings, including the Freebird Crispy Chickin' Sandwich and the BBQ Bacon Burger, as well as the Falafel Wrap and Save the Animal-Style Fries.

"We've been selling burgers at Veggie Grill since we launched in 2006, and we are confident the world is now ready for a pure plant-based burger stand," said Pillan.

## 62. BEEF SHACK



Beef Shack, a five-unit chain based in Illinois, is doubling its footprint by year's end, thanks to its obsession with fresh food. When it opened its first location in 2012, the brand had a dream of spreading simpler times and legendary meats across the entire continental United States.

That dream is coming true, despite pandemic challenges.

Beef Shack, for example, grew sales by 30% in 2020 by offering better service under the direction of CEO Daniel Perillo. Upgrades included a new app, a loyalty program and a drive-thru timer to keep delivery times down and customers happy.

The brand offers a beefy menu that includes a variety of sandwiches roasted with shack seasoning, burgers, dogs and must-eat fries and cheesy garlic bread, in addition to shakes.

## 63. GREEK FROM GREECE CAFE CUISINE

One could say that Greek From Greece Cafe Cuisine CEO George Drosos is the King of the Deal.

In 2020, he and a few business partners found prime locations to open several corporate units in New York City, New Jersey and Florida. They also acquired their biggest competitor in Manhattan -- [Fornos Theophilos](#) -- as well as the 31-unit convenience store [Dairy Barn](#) chain in Long Island, New York and Stamford. Fornos will become standard GFG locations, and the former Dairy Barn stores will transform to drive-thru GFG Express locations, allowing future franchisees to choose to open kiosk, drive-thru or dine-in models.

GFG closed the year with its first franchisee, who opened in [Philadelphia](#) in January 2021. Franchising wasn't the only type of partnership the chain created, however. It tapped Giannis "Greek Freak" Antetokounmpo, star of the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks, as well as his brothers and mother as brand ambassadors.

GFG hopes to open 31 new drive-thrus and five storefronts by year's end.



## 64. PINCHO

Pincho CEO Otto Othman couldn't be happier with how his team muscled through the challenges of COVID-19.

"We are proud to say we did not furlough any team members across all of our locations during the pandemic," he said. "Our brand comped positively in July, and we increased our digital sales by 500 percent."

Pincho, based in Miami, also launched an entirely new way to order its kebabs, known as Pincho Plates, which quickly became one of its top categories. These plates let customers personalize their own entrée, allowing them to choose from a variety of fan favorites as well as lighter, healthier options.

Other 2020 innovations included launching a new way of ordering, expanded delivery and increased use of digital signage. Additionally, the brand created the Chicken Peace Summit, which went viral and led to national press. The campaign's total budget was less than \$1,500 and it resulted in double-digit sales increases.

Although Pincho has 10 units, Othman's goal is to hit 100 over the next five years.



## 65. ZOUP

Detroit's Zoup spent the past year navigating the pandemic by accelerating certain initiatives, including remodels and menu updates. The good news was that pre-pandemic, the nearly 100-unit chain was well-situated to leverage its technology, marketing and menu development. It used those assets to increase communication to the franchise community as well as its remote support center staff.

In addition, Zoup leveraged third-party delivery, direct delivery, curbside pick-up and soup meal kits to continue serving customers through the pandemic. The chain benefitted from its natural ties and connection to comfort, warmth and wellbeing, when people needed it most, and offered freebies to health-care workers and those in need.

To ensure its core values were being met, Zoup also increased its support team to include a director of culinary, a social media specialist, and a training and support director.

## 66. BONCHON

COVID-19 proved that Bonchon is nimble and innovative. The New York City-based chain's quick pivot to delivery and take-out service showed that it could not only sustain its normal business through those two channels, but actually grow sales to record levels.

When dining rooms closed due to COVID, the brand seamlessly moved the business to delivery and carryout with no loss of sales or quality. Its own channels now account for more than 20% of



sales; online sales, including third-party, account for over 50% of sales.

Bonchon, which rolled out an online ordering platform to capture more revenue and provide contactless ordering and pickup, continued to redesign its store layout to give franchisees greater flexibility while capturing more carryout and delivery revenue.

All of this was accomplished while increasing restaurant counts by 10%, and posting positive comp sales in 2020.

The chain has 108 locations and more than 20 in development for 2021.

## 67. CORNBREAD

Founded in 2017 by Adenah Bayoh and her partner, Zadi B. Smith, [Cornbread](#) offers farm-to-table soul food. With a focus on freshness, the New Jersey-based restaurant's employees prepare meals using ingredients from local farmers.

While the brand specializes in cornbread (obviously), it also obsesses over every detail of each meal. From the first ingredient and the right combination of seasoning, to the final product, Bayoh and Smith have developed the flavor profiles of each dish.



## 67. CORNBREAD



The duo has expanded Cornbread to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with locations in Walmart stores in West Mifflin, Tarentum and Greensburg.

While they continue to strive for success, Bayoh and Smith also realize the importance of helping other women reach their full potential, which earned them FastCasual's [Women in the Lead certification](#). This honor recognizes brands doing their best to ensure that women are fairly represented on their leadership teams.

"We do hire female and male employees; however, as two empowered women in today's society, we do influence and mentor other women to become female entrepreneurs as we are," Bayoh said.

## 68. THE HUMMUS & PITA CO.

During a year of so much uncertainty that required innovative changes, The Hummus & Pita Co. pivoted from its traditional business models in many ways. The NYC-based Mediterranean fast casual concept integrated new POS systems -- including a revamp of its in-house app to decrease the hit to its bottom line. It also began partnering with Goldbelly to ship products nationwide, as well as offering curbside pickup and

pre-orders, all while continuing growth by way of franchise expansion, with three new units opened in 2020.

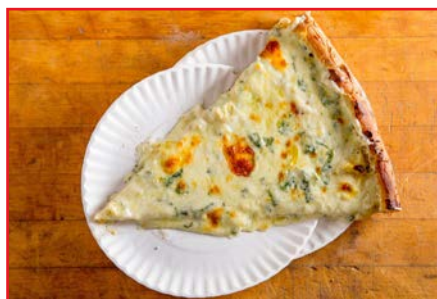
The Hummus & Pita Co., which has eight units, also took on partners to make it available on most third-party platforms in order to bring in as much business as possible. It still, however, supported employees and communities by giving back to charitable organizations and avoiding many staff cuts by offering employment with lesser hours during the pandemic.

The 2021 growth plan includes opening one franchise in Huntsville, Alabama, two in Columbus, Ohio, and two in Southern California.

## 69. ARTICHOKE BASILLE'S PIZZA

Artichoke Basille's Pizza exploded onto the NYC pizza scene in 2008, and has since been making its mark with its authentic pies born from fourth-generation New York City pizzaiolos and cousins Francis Garcia and Sal Basille.

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



In 2020, Artichoke opened in Tempe, Arizona, as well as a location in Manhattan's world-famous Times Square, bringing the total number of locations from coast to coast to 15 units.

The chain has three locations underway in Phoenix as well as Red Bank and Jersey City, New Jersey, which are slated to open in Spring 2021.

The concept yields great unit economics, low start-up and food costs, impressive margins, and has national name recognition to boot.

Garcia and Basille have appeared on nationally syndicated TV shows like "The Tonight Show," "Fox & Friends" and "Good Morning New York." They also starred in two of their own shows on The Cooking Channel: "Pizza Masters" and "Pizza Cuz."

## 70. SUPER CHIX CHICKEN & CUSTARD

Super Chix, based in Dallas, provides a fast casual dining experience using fresh ingredients, along with first-class preparation methods and recipes in a fun and welcoming dining environment.

In addition to its never-frozen crispy and grilled chicken sandwiches, tenders and fresh hand-cut and seasoned fried Idaho spuds, Super Chix specializes in fresh salads and in-store churned, hand-dipped premium frozen custard.

"Since March of 2020 (during the COVID period), we have signed agreements with eighty different franchise developers for total restaurant commitments exceeding 90 locations," said Dustin Carrut, VP of

## 70. SUPER CHIX CHICKEN & CUSTARD



Development for the chain, which has eight locations.

Innovations in 2020 included rebranding through an interior redesign for customer areas and the kitchen layout. The interior redesign helped improve the customer experience through an upgraded dining setting, and the kitchen layout helped to improve ticket times to 6-7 minutes from ordering time.

Super Chix also improved its branding and reach by extending menu offering to include more healthy options for grilled products, tripled the salad offerings, and created vegetarian-friendly options for sandwiches and salads.

## 71. PJ'S COFFEE OF NEW ORLEANS

PJ's Coffee of New Orleans was founded in 1978 by Phyllis Jordan, but in 2008, The Brothers Ballard -- Paul, Scott and Steve -- acquired it and continued to serve a variety of hot, iced and frozen coffee beverages using only the top 1% of Arabica beans, as well as organic tea and fresh breakfast pastries.

With 42 years as an established brand, it continues to remain an authentic coffeehouse with a New Orleans spirit, operating both nationally and internationally.

Despite the complications and concerns stemming from the current COVID-19 pandemic, the New Orleans-based coffeehouse has sustained impressive growth momentum throughout 2020 -- opening 20 locations.

PJ's Coffee has experienced exponential growth and has no indication of stopping, owing its optimistic future to the southern-born hospitality that it continues to provide not only through its cafes (where allowed) but through its drive-thrus across the country.

PJs will add 45 units in 2021.

## 72. COWBOY CHICKEN

For 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.

Inspired to offer more to-go options during the pandemic, Cowboy Chicken created a \$20 family meal deal, available two days per week, that drove additional traffic, which even exceeded performance on those days compared to 2019. Sales were positively impacted late in 2020 by new fall menu items and



a strong Thanksgiving promotion utilizing EZCater integration.

The brand's COVID-19 response also included curbside service, which helped the 17-unit chain keep all company-owned locations open and from laying off workers.

In addition, the Texas-based chain launched a website in 2020 that incorporated a [custom menu page](#) and new online ordering, which requires guests to make fewer clicks to order. Purchases may also be tied directly to a customer's loyalty program.

The brand will open one to two corporate locations and two to three franchised locations by year's end.

## 73. FARMER BOYS



Farmer Boys has been offering farm-to-table burgers since 1981, but this past year was like no other.

COVID-19 forced the Southern California-based chain to adjust its business model to 100% off-premise. Instead of laying off workers, the brand redistributed labor, adjusted product and packaging inventory levels, managed changes to menu mix and daypart sales levels and adjusted operational training and coaching.

## 73. FARMER BOYS

Farmer Boys also established a \$200,000 Farmer Boys Hardship Program, enabling team members at corporate locations to apply for immediate assistance. Additionally, Farmer Boys implemented a Farmer Boys Appreciation Pay Program at all corporate locations whereby all restaurant-level team members received a \$1 per hour increase in pay.

The brand finished 2020 with 98 restaurants, five of which were new in 2020. In 2021, it plans to open six to eight restaurants.

## 74. GARDEN CATERING

Despite many challenges that popped up due to COVID-19 in 2020, Garden Catering was able to stay true to its brand's values. Well-known for its chicken nuggets and potato cones, the New York-based company donated more than 64,000 meals to food pantries and to front-line and essential workers.

That act of service led to the company creating a non-profit organization, "Nugs Not Hugs," to formally help feed 500 families during the holiday season.

"Giving back has always been a part of who we are as people and a company, but in 2020 we elevated it to a level that made us feel whole during a time where the world was falling apart," Owner Tina Carpenteri said.

In addition to its charitable innovations, Garden Catering started two pop-up locations to help supplement revenue streams.

"We are in a beach town, and we did a Clam Shack over the summer and then a BBQ Pop up for Fall/Winter," Carpenteri said. "We also developed an app and the implementation of the app has been helpful in winning back third-party guests."

open that store for them so they can continue paying their bills and feeding their families."

## 75. TOASTIQUE



With its unique concept of gourmet toast, Toastique thrived through 2020 despite the pandemic.

After opening its third location in July 2020, Toastique added its first franchise in April 2021 and is gearing up for a fourth corporate location to open in the fall.

Founder and CEO Brianna Keefe said she made the culture of Toastique one of her top priorities and it has shown to be true with the retention, productivity and happiness of her employees. In 2020, it became THE top priority.

"It was a scary time for everyone and my goal was to keep the team close, boost morale and show them that I am here for them and care for them and their wellbeing," Keefe said. "Opening the third store in the pandemic was risky, and I knew that but I believed in the brand and my team. I needed to



## 1. GEOFF ALEXANDER CEO, WOW BAO

Not even a pandemic could get in the way of Geoff Alexander's innovative and money-making ideas.

In fact, one could say it was a challenge he was already on the way to conquering, considering he began testing a "[Dark Kitchen initiative](#)," shortly before the onset of COVID-19.

His idea was to allow other restaurants to offer Wow Bao's signature menu items, growing top-line sales and increasing bottom-line profits for their brands as well as his own.

In less than eight months, Alexander led Wow Bao to launch nearly 150 locations across the country and he plans to have more than 500 operating by the end of 2021.

"Our goal is for the third-party operator to do \$2,000 a week in sales," said Alexander, who believes the food and packaging costs will be under 40%.

The Chicago-based brand has multiple company-owned stores and non-traditional venues, including airports, universities and a food truck, as well as partnerships with stadiums, hotels and music festivals and its own retail CPG line.



## 2. KELLY RODDY CEO, SALADWORKS AND WOWORKS

Under the leadership of CEO Kelly Roddy, Saladworks has thrived over the past year. Roddy, who is also CEO of [WOWorks](#), has been maniacal about gathering information about COVID-19 since its arrival and communicated daily with his franchise community from mid-March through all of April 2020.

In addition to daily written updates, Roddy recorded weekly Zoom videos with personalized updates to help his teams not only ensure the quality and safety of the food and dining experience but to help franchisees request deferrals on rent and other fixed costs as well as apply for government assistance.

Roddy, a staunch believer in the importance of advocacy, is known for lobbying U.S. government officials to ensure they are paying attention to the restaurant industry.

For example, he personally reached out to congressmen and participated in the lobbying efforts of the National Restaurant Association to make sure the government understood how the pandemic was devastating the industry, CMO Mark Mears said.

"Kelly worked tirelessly to ensure they felt 100% supported by their franchisor – especially important during a time of crisis as many had to make the difficult decision to layoff loyal team members and close their doors or fight to remain open faced with significant hardship both personally and financially," he said. "As a result, Kelly enacted a plan to help navigate the Saladworks franchise community through this crisis on many important levels."



## 3. STACEY KANE

**FRACTIONAL CMO, MULTIPLE BRANDS**

In her role as a fractional CMO, Stacey Kane's mission is to help small, emerging brands that can't yet afford an experienced marketing guru.

As these brands, including Garden Catering and Wolfnights, have never had a marketing discipline, she comes in as a member of the brand team, rolls up her sleeves, and sets them up for growth. The brands end up getting C-suite-level advice for less than an entry-level marketing employee would cost.

The 25-year marketing maven has an uncanny ability to understand the ever-changing marketplace and has created a variety of campaigns this year, including Mamoun's Buy One Feed One campaign benefitting local food banks and Wolfnights' launch of the first Full Moon Wrap - the decadent Wolf of Wallstreet, featuring gold-infused dough.

While doing her best to keep her restaurant brands thriving during the pandemic, Kane's other passion relates to her consulting work with Children of Restaurant Employees — CORE — a national non-profit organization that supports food and beverage service employees with children when they are faced with a financial crisis due to a medical diagnosis or impact from a natural disaster.



## 4. LAURA REA DICKEY

**CEO, DICKEY'S BARBECUE**

As a female leader in an industry dominated by men, Laura Rea Dickey has taken a difficult year and turned it into an opportunity for the world's largest barbecue chain.

While most brands were fighting for survival, Dickey's finished 2020 with record sales and new revenue streams by using technology to drive data-backed decisions and to fuel the brand's growth.

Just this year, Dickey was instrumental in recreating the new [At Home Delivery](#) subscription model, launching the ghost kitchen model and a redesign of the digital portal to provide enhanced speed and performance, leading to a 42% increase in digital sales and a 122% increase in site traffic.

Dickey's Barbecue will celebrate 80 years in business this year and the brand has not slowed down, with new technologies and culinary innovations.



## 5. MICHAEL LASTORIA

CEO, &PIZZA

Michael Lastoria is committed to challenging his team to recognize new opportunities in which &pizza can better serve its communities.

From a partnership with the Make a Wish Foundation to provide free pies to children and families whose wishes were affected by the pandemic, to offering employees paid time off for activism, to prioritizing a company-wide \$15 minimum wage, Lastoria is a trailblazer and industry leader in the fight for a more equitable workplace.

By 2022, &Pizza's 40-plus locations will each have a \$15 minimum wage, which Lastoria hopes will "light a fire under legislatures," while educating the public about "systemic inequalities affecting America's essential workers."

"2020 knocked us all on our asses, but these essential workers showed up," he said. "In most cases, they had to for the paycheck — for their livelihood and families — and in all cases, because they are the best of us — caring and committed — as we now need to be even more so for them.

"We must make the minimum wage in this country a living wage, and if Congress can't figure that out quickly, &pizza will show them how. Our goal is simple: to unite the working class around this issue."



## 6. CHARLIE GUZZETTA

CHIEF DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, BURGERFI

As brand president Charlie Guzzetta led the brand last year in its [\\$100 million merger with OPES Acquisition Corp](#) that took it public under the name BurgerFi International Inc.

Of course, an IPO was the least of Guzzetta's worries as the pandemic was also in full effect. To stay afloat, he added curbside pickup and training procedures and put in a new kitchen prototype design with dual assembly lines, increasing speed, capacity and efficiency.

Guzzetta, 29, recently took over as chief development officer, where he leads all real estate, construction and development deals, including non-traditional locations at airports, military bases and other captive- audience locations.

The millennial leader is also known in Florida for his philanthropy efforts. He's a board member of the Titus Center for Franchising at Palm Beach Atlantic University and led the Ditka-Jaws Gridiron Greats Super Bowl Fundraiser, as well as the Big Heart Brigade, which fed 300+ firefighters during the pandemic.

He also partnered with the Marcum Foundation, feeding nearly 20,000 hospital workers on the frontlines of COVID-19, and supported #thegivebackcommunity, helping the homeless in West Palm Beach.

But that's not all. He was named the Feeding South Florida Corporate Partner of the Year and distributed South Florida Teacher of the Year \$1,000 grants for school supplies.





## 7. MICHAEL HAITH

**CEO, TERIYAKI MADNESS**

The best movers and shakers are innovative, and Michael Haith is just that.

In addition to the leadership he provided during the pandemic, he created [Restaurant Sherpas](#), a turnkey management program that runs Teriyaki Madness shops for absentee investors.

Once a franchisee signs the agreement, their shops become the responsibility of the perfectionists who developed TMAD from the beginning. Together, they construct, fill and run Teriyaki Shops for absentee investor franchisees, treating the investment like their own.

Haith is confident that no other initiative in the restaurant industry can benefit both franchisees and franchisors as much as Restaurant Sherpas, as it handles real estate selection and construction, training, marketing and financial analysis.

Since its inception in February 2020, Restaurant Sherpas has opened nine shops for absentee owners, six of which opened over a five-month period. As for existing shops, the team increased year-over-year sales in locations formerly run by franchisees by as much as 42%.



## 8. AARON NOVESHEN

**CEO, STARBIRD**

If you ask Founder and CEO Aaron Noveshen's team about his leadership style, they describe it as "positive and empathetic."

"His commitment to the people of his organization and the local community is what sets him apart as a leader," said Nick Falco, operating partner. "This is why Starbird has seen success even in this difficult time. His relentless approach to product quality, culinary and technological innovation, and his strong commitment to the Starbird team, are his guiding principles."

With industry-leading same-store year-over-year comparative sales, Starbird is poised for tremendous growth under his leadership.

Noveshen also serves as the founder and CEO of The Culinary Edge, a food and beverage innovation agency. During the pandemic, he dedicated that team's resources to help the industry by creating "Open for Business," a series of articles to support restaurants with the tools and best practices to pivot, survive and thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## 9. MIGNON FRANCOIS

**FOUNDER AND CEO, THE CUPCAKE COLLECTION**

After years of drowning in debt and brokenness in the early 2000s, 33-year-old Mignon Francois spent the last \$5 she had on ingredients for cupcakes. That decision would eventually become a family legacy, with over 5 million cupcakes sold.

The Cupcake Collection launched in 2008 from Francois' Nashville home, but after lines snaked from her house, the bakery eventually moved into its own location. A second location, funded by Francois' sister, is now open in New Orleans, where Francois grew up.

Francois' business savvy has since earned her the titles of "Woman of Legend and Merit" by Tennessee State University and "Emerging Business Leader of the Year." She's also earned Black Enterprise Magazine's "Family Business of the Year Award."

Along with growing her business, Francois is committed to helping other small business owners. She serves on the board at the Nashville Entrepreneur Center, works with Corner to Coner, a grassroots organization for budding entrepreneurs, and funds scholarships at Tennessee State University.

"I am particularly aware of the challenges women entrepreneurs face, having lived through many challenges myself, so I serve as a mentor and board member at Pathways Women's Business Center, which provides resources for women-owned businesses," she said.

"I promised God that if He made me successful, I would tell anybody about what they could do if they believe."



## 10. AKASH KAPOOR

**FOUNDER, CURRY UP NOW**

Building an Indian brand in the fast casual world, without the need for Indian-trained chefs, may seem impossible, but Akash Kapoor, known as "chief troublemaker" has developed a bag-in-a-box approach to allow him to open Curry Up Now restaurants anywhere in the U.S.

During the pandemic, for example, the 14-unit chain, which began as a food truck, opened five units, sold multiple franchise deals, and will double in size by the end of 2021.

Kapoor, who lives by the motto, "If you don't get better, you get worse," is always looking for new ways to increase his business, which is why he developed Mortar & Pestle bar, a craft cocktail bar located within several Curry Up locations. Since launching the brand, he's made sure to stay ahead of trends and recently developed a [low-proof cocktail menu](#).

"We are constantly listening to our guests' feedback and looking for ways to expand our menu," he said.



## 11. SAMANTHA RINCIONE

**FOUNDER, CEO AND COO, CRAVE HOT DOGS AND BBQ**

Samantha Rincione has been in the restaurant business since she was a teenager. At age 19, she became a franchisee of Red Mango and eventually owned 10 units before founding a franchising developing company. That led to the creation of Crave Hot Dogs and BBQ, a chain that has a presence in 12 states just three years after it first opened.

Under Rincione's leadership, The NYC brand, which will have 30 units by year's end, implemented a food truck program in 2020 to ensure franchisees additional income during COVID-19.

The CEO doesn't only help her own company, however. Last year, for example, she gave a presentation on conquering [social media](#) during the Fast Casual Executive Summit and was also recognized by Franchise Dictionary magazine as one of the 50 "Women of Wonder."



## 12. ADENAH BAYOH

**FOUNDER, CORNBREAD**

Although the restaurant industry wasn't Adenah Bayoh's first step up on the career ladder, it has certainly been profitable. Escaping the civil war in her native country of Liberia at age 13, she immigrated to the United States and is now one of the most successful entrepreneurs in her home state of New Jersey.

Not only does she own several individual IHOP franchises, she also owns a real estate development portfolio with several major residential and commercial urban redevelopment projects.

In 2017, she realized her dream of opening her own signature fast casual, farm-to-table, soul food restaurant, Cornbread, which she co-founded with Zadie B. Smith in Maplewood, New Jersey. She's since landed a partnership with Walmart to expand the restaurant chain to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with locations in Walmart stores in West Mifflin, Tarentum, and Greensburg.

The mother of two is also a sought-after public speaker and made NJBIZ' list of Top 50 Women in Business and serves on the advisory council for the Federal Reserve Bank of New York Small Business and Agriculture. In 2015, she was named to Ebony Magazine's Power 100 and in 2019 won the National Restaurant Association's Face of Diversity Award.





## 13. PAUL BROWN

**CO-FOUNDER CEO, INSPIRE BRANDS**

Running a successful restaurant company is hard work, but imagine overseeing 32,000. That's Paul Brown's reality as CEO of Inspire Brands, which owns Arby's, Baskin-Robbins, Buffalo Wild Wings, Dunkin', Jimmy John's, Rusty Taco, and SONIC Drive-In restaurants.

In 2020 and during COVID-19, Brown led those brands to earning \$27 billion in global system sales, making Inspire the second-largest restaurant company in the United States.

Prior to founding Inspire, Brown was CEO of Arby's Restaurant Group, where he took the struggling brand to a sector leader by launching a new brand purpose -- Inspiring Smiles Through Delicious Experiences -- unveiling a restaurant design to increase energy efficiency; launching a training program centered on goal setting, and fostering a unique approach to product development.



## 14. SUSAN TAYLOR

**PRESIDENT AND CEO, JUICE IT UP**

A successful restaurant industry veteran with 30 years of experience, 14 of which were with Jamba, Susan Taylor joined the Juice It Up family in 2019 as VP of Operations, and less than a year later was promoted to president.

Under her leadership, Juice It Up launched initiatives to improve the guest- and franchisee-facing experience, including an updated mobile app with "[skip-the-line](#)" order-ahead functionality that allowed the brand to thrive during COVID-19.

She also helped franchisees navigate the pandemic by cutting royalty and marketing fees relief for seven weeks in March and April and offering them extra support in operations, development and marketing at the brand's Franchise Support Center in Irvine.



## 15. TINKU SAINI

**CEO AND PARTNER, TARKA INDIAN KITCHEN**

When the quarantine began in March 2020, CEO Tinku Saini and his team were ready.

While most restaurants were dipping their toes in off-premise dining channels, Saini had correctly predicted that consumer needs were already shifting and had previously implemented take-out and delivery procedures.

That foresight meant that Tarka only saw a slight decrease in sales for a few weeks and then quickly saw a spike. Under Saini's leadership, Tarka added curbside pick-up to its carry-out options. Also, throughout the pandemic, the Austin-based chain introduced promotions to highlight national holidays and the election, and added vegan menu items that quickly became bestsellers.

Saini's understanding of providing quality food inside and outside of his four walls led to a 30% increase in sales YOY for many locations.

Another big win for Saini was partnering with ATX Specialty Foods to outsource Tarka's sauces in order to prepare for rapid expansion efforts in 2021.



## 16. CHARLES WATSON

**CEO, TROPICAL SMOOTHIE CAFE**

It's safe to say that Charles Watson knows everything to know about Atlanta-based Tropical Smoothie Cafe. He joined the brand in 2010, where he spent six years as VP of Franchise Development until he was promoted to CDO six years later and then again to CEO in 2018.

Since he transitioned to the CEO position, TSC has grown to 915 locations and hit its ninth consecutive year of positive same-store sales, with 2020 same-store sales increasing 7.5% despite the pandemic.

The brand also opened 99 cafes and signed 254 franchise agreements in 2020, which included 70% from existing franchise owners.

When the pandemic began to impact the industry, Watson's immediate response was to support his franchisees by adding curbside, third-party delivery, and its own TSC Branded Delivery.

He also offered 50% royalty relief for eight weeks and supported franchisees in securing more than \$29 million in PPP funds across the system and \$1.8 million in rent relief for approximately 250 cafes.

That dedication paid off, considering that the company currently boasts an average unit volume of more than \$768,000 – the highest in the company's 23-year-history – with the top 50% reporting an AUV of more than \$982,000.

Watson aims to continue propelling the brand's growth, with a goal of having 1,500 cafes open by 2025 with an average AUV of \$1 million.



## 17. TONY DARDEN

**PRESIDENT, MOOYAH**

Although Tony Darden has only been leading Mooyah since April 2019, he quickly led the leadership team in implementing initiatives that drove franchise sales and increased unit-level volumes that resulted in year-over-year positive sales.

Darden, however, wasn't only focused on the bottomline of his 86 locations. He also had his franchisees' backs by launching a royalty abatement program allowing them to preserve cash when they needed it most. Despite abating royalties, Darden recognized immediately that furloughing corporate team staff would not be in the best interest of franchisees, who desperately needed the support.

Instead, he worked with the whole team to ensure all needs were being met. Daily Zoom alignment meetings, for example, ensured that the brand was in lock step while launching a pantry menu, curbside delivery, digital menu board installation, kiosk test, a limited-time menu promotion, new restaurant openings, restaurant reimaging and remote training and more.

Darden's strategy has paid off as Mooyah will add 29 restaurants in 2021.



## 18. LAURIE SCHALOW

**CHIEF CORPORATE AFFAIRS AND FOOD SAFETY OFFICER, CHIPOTLE**

Chipotle was recovering from food-safety issues when Laurie Schalow first joined the brand in 2017. Chipotle's past issues had decreased consumer trust, but in less than a year, Schalow secured a cover story in TIME titled "Inside Chipotle's Plan to Make You Love It Again," which set the tone for the brand's comeback.

And come back, it did. In 2020, Schalow's team drove over 36 billion media impressions with overwhelmingly positive sentiment in nearly 13,000 articles. With the pandemic and events of 2020, transparent communication has never been more important, and Schalow has helped to ensure constant and clear communications were delivered internally and externally to all stakeholders. Her efforts were rewarded in June when Chipotle was named as the top restaurant brand for COVID-19 safety compliance, according to data by Ipsos' Consumer Health and Safety Index.

Schalow also uses her position to further drive Chipotle's dedication to important social matters. Immediately following civil unrest and the death of George Floyd, she rallied with the executive leadership team to create "listening sessions" to better understand how Chipotle could evolve as a company and provide equal opportunities for all.

She's also a founding member of The HUSTLE employee group, which supports the development of women at Chipotle, and spoke at the [2020 Fast Casual Executive Summit](#) on a panel about women in leadership.





## 19. CARL HOWARD

**CEO, FAZOLI'S**

The name “Carl Howard” is practically synonymous with Fazoli’s, a 220-unit chain based in Kentucky experiencing record-breaking sales despite the pandemic. After all, Howard was [responsible for saving the brand](#) from extinction when he took over in 2008 and has been growing it ever since.

With Howard at the helm, the Italian brand closed out 2020 with a 14% sales increase, 10% increase in traffic, and 217% increase in online ordering year-over-year, all of which put Fazoli’s in the 99th percentile nationally.

When the pandemic forced dining rooms to close in March 2020, Howard knew the drive-thru would be his bread and butter. He and the team worked to decrease the drive-thru wait time to under two minutes and introduced family meals and value combos. In late September, after tests revealed nearly an 11% increase in sales at select locations, [Fazoli’s added wings](#) to its core menu at all company locations and launched a virtual wing concept under the name Wingville.

Since its full company launch in October, wings have brought in \$350,000 at 56 company locations, and franchisees who are offering Wingville experienced nearly \$100,000 in sales in November alone. By early spring of 2021, Fazoli’s wings will be available system-wide as part of the brand’s core menu.

It looks like another win for Howard and Fazoli’s.



## 20. MICHAEL CHEN

**PRESIDENT AND CO-FOUNDER, POKÉWORKS**

As the pandemic rocked the foundation of the restaurant industry, Michael Chen provided much-needed expertise, composure and agility. Although his decisions prioritized the health and safety of all involved, he found ways for franchisees to continue achieving their entrepreneurial goals. His foresight in adapting digital ordering and off-premise dining, for example, came well before the pandemic necessitated the shift and extends into the new normal with innovations that will apply well beyond lockdown measures.

Chen also led his team in helping their communities during the pandemic. After recognizing the scarcity of PPE materials, such as masks, gloves, gowns, face shields, etc. at the start of the pandemic, the leadership team rounded up funds and materials to help offset the need. Through its GoFundMe campaign, the brand provided more than 170,000 masks, gowns, face shields, and other PPE and raised more than \$150,000 for over 115 frontline organizations.

“At Pokéworks, one of our core values is “Practice Aloha,” meaning we try to spread love, kindness and compassion wherever we can,” Chen said. “We spent many late nights creating ways to get the needed materials over to the states quickly, and the result continues to be extremely rewarding.”



## 21. BILL PHELPS

**CEO, DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN**

Bill Phelps has a knack for picking winning brands.

The former co-founder and CEO of Wetzel's Pretzels was not only instrumental in that brand's development but also in Blaze Pizza's growth. And it looks as if Dave's Hot Chicken may be next.

Since joining Dave's as CEO in 2019, Phelps has turned Dave's Hot Chicken into a major player. Although the brand started in a Los Angeles parking lot just four years ago, it now has 240 locations in development.

After his initial meeting with the four co-founders of Dave's in 2018, he brought in his past business partners -- the same people who helped to incubate Wetzel's Pretzels and Blaze Pizza -- and recruited a group of rockstar investors, including "Good Morning America" host and football hall of famer Michael Strahan, as well as actor Samuel L. Jackson.

When the pandemic hit, Phelps and his leadership team worked tirelessly to preserve jobs and invest in technology to keep employees and customers safe while maintaining a solid experience. The restaurants, for example, brought in PathSpot to scan hands and detect harmful molecules; added take-out windows to locations; and brought on all four major delivery players.



## 22. CHRIS BRITT & ED ST. GEME

**CO-CEOS, MOUNTAIN MIKE'S**

Chris Britt and Ed St. Geme are more than co-CEOs of Mountain Mike's, a 230-unit chain in Northern California. They're also college buddies, owners of their respective private equity firms, and together, led the acquisitions of Mountain Mike's in April 2017 and [Juice It Up in 2018](#).

Since taking the lead at Mountain Mike's, the duo has introduced technologies and digital conveniences, including the addition of third-party delivery apps to attract new customers. They've also been instrumental in creating new opportunities for the 40-year-old brand, such as securing the title as the "Official Pizza" of the San Francisco 49ers.

Under their leadership, Mountain Mike's reported its best sales year ever in 2020, with total system sales up 13.3% and same-store sales up 7.3% over 2019. Amidst the pandemic, it opened 15 locations.

Before Britt and St. Geme took over, the company was opening fewer than 10 locations per year. This year, the brand will add 25 locations.



**CHRIS BRITT**



**ED ST. GEME**

## 23. SCOTT DEVINEY

**PRESIDENT AND CEO, CHICKEN SALAD CHICK**

Since May 2015, Scott Deviney has served as president and CEO of CSC. His speciality: growth. In fact, while it took CSC 10 years to develop 100 locations, the brand has now grown by 70% in just two years.

As a former franchisee, Deviney knew how the pandemic could hurt his franchisees and immediately began meeting with them. As they worked together to develop a community drop-off program and giveback initiatives, franchise owners continued to generate revenue, and corporate was quick to implement their ideas systemwide.

The team, for example, implemented off-premise dining adjustments such as curbside pick-up and pop-up drive-thrus at 60% of locations, which did not have a prototypical drive-thru feature. These efforts drove brand awareness locally and nationwide to help generate sales despite dining room closures.

As a result of the pandemic, CSC placed its opening pipeline on hold after debuting 11 stores by March. While taking time to focus and mobilize adaptations, Deviney's leadership allowed the team to not only rebuild but also push forward. By June, the opening pipeline was back up, and the chain ended the year by adding 37 restaurants.



## 24. MANDY SHAW

**CEO, BLAZE PIZZA**

Previously Blaze Pizza's chief financial officer, Mandy Shaw was in the CEO role just six months before lockdowns and mandated closures went into effect to limit the spread of COVID-19.

At the time of these closures, the company was in the midst of preparing for its annual Pi Day celebrations and deals on March 14, leaving behind about 1,800 pounds of fresh mozzarella and food with nowhere to go. Knowing these circumstances were starting to have a catastrophic monetary effect on working families and communities across the country, Shaw worked with her team to develop and implement the #BlazingItForward initiative, leveraging the company's social media platforms to donate all Pi Day supplies to local shelters, as well as thousands of pizzas to first responders and healthcare workers.

In 2020, Shaw and her team also prioritized the needs of Blaze's restaurant operators. The company provided 100% abatement of royalty fees for five weeks and 50% abatement in the following four weeks. They also supplied financial coaching to help franchisees navigate the complexities of the Paycheck Protection Program process.

Despite the pandemic, Blaze's opened 24 units in 2020, thanks to Shaw transforming the historically dine-in business into a mobile-first, delivery and carryout leader.





## 25. JIM HOLTHOUSER

### CEO, FOCUS BRANDS

Three weeks after Jim Holthouser left behind a 20-year career with Hilton Worldwide to lead Focus Brands as CEO, COVID-19 forced all dining rooms to close.

Holthouser wasted no time ramping up a business strategy to help each of the company's 6,000 locations launch digital enhancements, app evolutions, and an increased focus on off-premise sales.

Holthouser also started pushing the envelope with its internal brand licensing team and direct-to-consumer products to drive additional revenue streams for franchisees. Under his leadership, Focus:



- Invested in new talent and added key roles to Focus Brands' corporate team.
- Executed a two-year innovation pipeline in only six weeks at Moe's Southwest Grill to respond quickly to COVID-19.
- Scaled curbside pick-up at McAlister's Deli from 50 to 350+ locations in just one week amid the pandemic to help drive business to each location.
- Launched tableside dine-in at 240+ McAlister's Deli locations, increasing loyalty app participation by seven times.
- Used "drive-thru timers" at Schlotzsky's to ensure an efficient and consistent guest experience, which helped the brand accelerate drive-thru sales and surpass pre-COVID off-premise sales.