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# **20 BRANDS TO WATCH**



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# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

**Fast  
Casual.com**

**NETWORLD  
MEDIA  
group**

**Tom Harper**  
CEO

tomh@networldmediagroup.com

**Kathy Doyle**

President & Publisher

kathyd@networldmediagroup.com

**Cherryh Cansler**

VP of Editorial

cherryhc@networldmediagroup.com

**John Vinson**

Director of Content Marketing

johnv@networldmediagroup.com

The 2020 Fast Casual Brands to Watch.  
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Although most brands in the fast casual industry vie to be part of the annual list of Fast Casual Top 100 Movers and Shakers, which recognizes the industry's leaders in innovation, they may not all know about the Fast Casual 20 Brands to Watch. This list, which is in its second send, focuses on 20 brands that are less than six years old, too new to have graced the coveted Top 100 list.

Whether it is setting trends on the menu, in customer experience, operations or decor and ambiance, the entire restaurant industry looks to fast casuals to set the stage for what's to come. And those unique innovations often come from small, emerging brands, which we are excited to highlight in no particular numerical order. This report reveals 20 of the year's up-and-coming concepts that have the potential to emerge as industry leaders.

Unlike the Top 100, there can be no repeats, so you'll notice that no 2019 winners are on the 2020 list. We wouldn't be surprised, however, to see a couple of these brands on next year's Fast Casual Top 100.

Congratulations to the 2020 Brands to Watch!

Cheers,

**Cherryh Cansler**

VP of Editorial

Network World Media Group



**Cherryh Cansler**  
VP of Editorial,  
Network World Media Group



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# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

1

## ROYALS HOT CHICKEN

Based out of Louisville, Kentucky, Royals Hot Chicken is emerging as a true contender in the world of fried chicken. With a stripped-down and simple menu of tenders, poppers, fried chicken and sandwiches, the chain busted onto the scene, winning FastCasual's 2019 Perfect Pitch competition with its "Best fried chicken in the land of fried chicken." It beat the competition with a perfect recipe of fun, atmosphere and a lot of heat; guests, of course, may choose their heat level ranging from "some heat" all the way to "Gonzo +1."

Fans are often lined up outside both locations, but CEO Ryan Rogers uses it as an opportunity to enhance the customers experience.



"Standing in line really sucks and really, if you stand in line for 30 minutes ... it kind of sets a negative tone for that restaurant, so we've tried to activate that line experience and make it a little bit more fun," he said. "So we'll come through with a tablet and sell shakes or wine and beer ... and some days when it's hot outside, we roll up a little snow-cone machine and give out pickle juice snow cones to customers."

# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

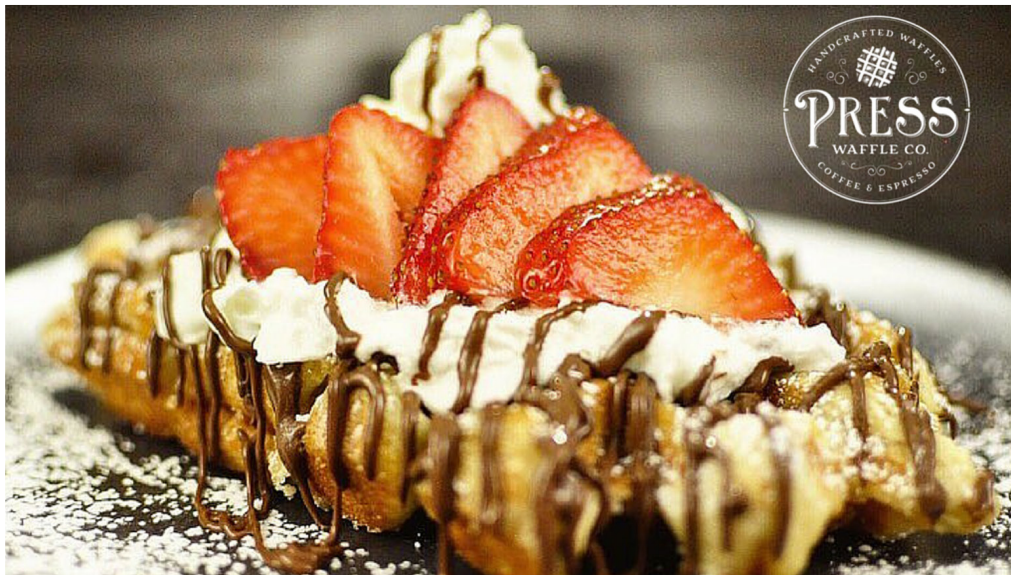
2

## ***PRESS WAFFLE CO.***

Press Waffle Co. is proving to its customers in Texas and Oklahoma that waffles aren't just for breakfast. They also make great desserts as well as savory lunch options. The Monte Cristo waffle sandwich, for example, is a customer favorite.

Press Waffle Co. began when Brothers Bryan and Caleb Lewis took their passion for waffles and channeled it into a successful business model. With no culinary experience, the brothers worked hard to create the perfect recipe and then looked for a way to bring it to the masses. Specializing in authentic Liege waffles, dough-based waffles with a brioche-like texture, loaded with caramelized clusters of Belgian pearl sugar. Press began as a food truck in 2016 following a successful Kickstarter Campaign, and opened its first permanent location in 2017.

Bryan and Caleb are now looking to expand the brand across the country after landing a "Shark Tank" deal with Barbara Corcoran in 2019. Since then, they've opened inside Union Hall, an 18,000-square-foot food hall in downtown Waco, Texas.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## THE DOLLY LLAMA

The Dolly Llama is a Los Angeles dessert concept founded by real estate leader Eric Shomof and French restaurateur and entrepreneur Samuel Baroux, who wanted to bring his passion for food and dessert to the states. Since its inception in 2017, The Dolly Llama has dominated LA's waffle scene with its own unique take on the Bubble Waffle, Hong Kong's No. 1 street food in addition to Dolly Llama Shakes, Waffle Sticks and OG Waffles.

The menu begins with "Top Picks" waffle & ice cream desserts like the Sugar N' Spice, which can be ordered in a bubble waffle or OG Liege waffle, and features horchata ice cream, speculoos cookie, Cinnamon Toast Crunch cereal and a caramel sauce drizzle. Other options include ice cream sandwiches, waffle sticks, and a build-your-own menu. The Dolly Llama's signature shakes are another over-the-top menu staple.

The Dolly Llama, which operates two locations in Downtown Los Angeles (611 S. Spring St) and Koreatown (273 S. Western Ave), will double its Southern California footprint with the addition of a Sherman Oaks brick-and-mortar and Northridge kiosk model, both which are set to open this summer.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## ***CULTIVATION KITCHEN***

Cultivation Kitchen is a fast casual housed in a greenhouse and built on the importance of mindful eating. Located in Anaheim, California, it is Orange County's first greenhouse eatery and offers dishes made from "picked-with-a-purpose" ingredients for breakfast, lunch and dinner. From the food and drink offerings to the innovative design and aesthetic, this concept provides guests with a natural and unique experience. Cultivation Kitchen's goal is to strengthen the human connection through a full sensory dining experience, while also giving back to the planet.

Cultivation Kitchen sets itself apart from other fast casuals by offering a menu that reflects the concept's philosophy by utilizing organic and locally sourced ingredients whenever possible through relationships with Southern California-based farmers and ranchers who practice clean and sustainable methods.

Cultivation Kitchen uses less than half the amount of ingredients than the average restaurant and places a large emphasis on Ayurvedic and healing ingredients like ashwagandha, turmeric and more. All menu items are cooked with avocado oil, and to accommodate dietary preferences, there are many gluten-free, vegetarian and vegan options.

Cultivation's atmosphere encourages communal dining and supports human connection.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## SQUARE PIE GUYS

Square Pie Guys first opened last year as a weekly pop-up inside Vinyl Wine Bar in San Francisco but launched its first brick-and-mortar location last summer.

“Our first store was a complete gem,” co-founder and COO Daniel Stoller said. “We are located in a transitional neighborhood with a huge underserved population of urban professionals and spitting distance from some of the biggest tech unicorns.”

While there are many pizza brands in the fast casual space, Square is unique in that it has a square shape and a crispy Detroit-style crust with locally inspired and chef-driven toppings.



“There are plenty of pizza places doing California cuisine, a few places now embracing Detroit-style outside of Detroit, and some serious players in the fast casual pizza world,” he said. “None of them have distilled those parts into the greater sum that is Square Pie Guys.”

The brand spent much of 2019 working to improve the guest experience, upping its social media presence and focusing on a variety of tech integrations including POS, scheduling, payroll, accounting systems along with digital marketing campaigns, online ordering, third-party delivery and in-store kiosks.

“We are a brand by millennials for millennials and Gen Xers/ boomers that love great food and experience,” Stoller said.



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## LITTLE COLLINS

Named after a street in Melbourne and opened in 2013, Little Collins is a counter-serve cafe in midtown New York offering pour-overs. Owners Leon Unglik and Arnon Magal created this subtle cafe that serves flat whites and piccolo lattes (the latter is similar to a cortado), both Australian specialties. Australian-born Unglik had a career in finance and banking before teaming up with Magal, a former chef in New York.

In addition to delicious coffee, the brand serves a variety of breakfast and lunch options including avocado smash, braised short ribs and the Holy Shishito.

Every aspect of Little Collins has been designed with the customer experience in mind. From the chic, industrial interior to the delicious, no-nonsense menu and the music that fills the space, Little Collins hits all the senses and makes people feel transported and completely at home, all at once.

Little Collins also offers private event catering with trained baristas to serve espresso, pour over and cold brew coffee.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## **CHICK N MAX**

Founded in 2018 by restaurant industry veteran Max Sheets, Chick N Max has perfected a menu of almond-smoked chicken, sandwiches, tenders, wings and house-made salads. Sheets brings more than three decades of restaurant development experience and continues to innovate at his three Wichita, Kansas, locations.

The brand smokes its chicken over almond wood from California, which produces a softer, sweeter flavor than other woods historically used in restaurants like hickory, mesquite or white oak. To finish it off, chefs use secret spice rubs and sauces that are specifically crafted to enhance the gentle smoked flavor of its chicken.

In response to this spring's COVID-19 outbreak, Chick N Max released its Community Support Menu, a trio of healthy, affordably priced meals designed to help those affected by the outbreak and make food more accessible to the whole Wichita community.

“We are heartbroken to see the economic pain caused by the coronavirus,” Sheets said. “Each day, we are hearing about more job losses especially in industries like hospitality, entertainment and aerospace. While we are a small local company, we feel compelled to take action to support our struggling neighbors.”



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## TAFFER'S TAVERN

Taffer's Tavern, is the latest concept from "Bar Rescue" star Jon Taffer. Known for his ability to turn around struggling small businesses, Taffer has signed a multi-unit franchise agreement with Five Guys Taverns to bring five locations to Georgia.

The tavern provides a variety of menu selections including sandwiches, whiskey wings, stuffed meatballs, cheese fries and other Tavern specialties. Signature items include an Onion Tavern Tower and beer battered Tavern Fish and Chips made with house-made lager, according to Taffer.



Taffer's also offers a variety of cocktails and a Chill-Rite draft beer system with an LED temperature display, as well as a Smart Brew System that provides house-brewed signature beers. All drafts are served with a "Beer Chip," a giant potato chip made in-house, and customers may order "Table Infusion Cocktails," which allows them to infuse the cocktail right at the table using a coffee press.

The brand's streamlined kitchen design and advanced food preparation methods requires less space and fewer employees than traditional casual dining restaurants, making it operate more like a fast casual brand, which will offer carryout and possibly delivery through third-party services.

To facilitate growth for the emerging brand, Taffer is partnering with Fransmart and is seeking experienced franchisees to bring the concept to the 50 largest media markets throughout North America.

# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## FLIP'D BY IHOP

Flip'd is the latest concept by IHOP Restaurants, and it is the casual dining chain's first attempt in the fast casual market. It launched its first location in Atlanta last April and is opening additional locations in New York City, Washington D.C., Denver, and San Francisco in 2020.

At Flip'd, customers may order from the in-store counter or digital kiosk or via online in advance. They may then pick up their items from a designated to-go area or have them delivered. Catering is also available with guests choosing large servings of build-your-own pancake bowls, breakfast sandwiches and a burger bar.

"In looking at what exists today in terms of fresh, fast menu options — particularly at breakfast — there's still tremendous opportunity for growth," Jay Johns, president of IHOP, said in a company release. "After talking extensively with consumers in large cities across the country, we designed Flip'd by IHOP to deliver on what folks told us they want and need from a trusted brand like IHOP in a fast casual setting, putting an emphasis on quality ingredients, speed, to-go and delivery."



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## RAVENOUS

Ravenous is a new fast casual brand operating out of Kansas City, Missouri-based Corvino Supper Club & Tasting Room. Known for fine dining, Chef Michael Corvino and his wife, Christina, wanted to make their food more accessible, and their answer was Ravenous. The concept launched in November for lunch via carry-out or delivery but also has an outside patio, where customers can lounge.

“Michael loves this style of food that is fun, approachable and affordable — he wants to feed more people than we can through Corvino,” Christina said. “Also, for financial health, the margins on fast casual are much better than finer dining.”



The menu offers versions of Corvino staples including the cheeseburger and half or whole fried chickens, but it also includes Ravenous-only items, including a crispy grilled cheese sandwich, a mushroom sandwich and cheesy chili butter tots.

In an attempt to offer delivery at an affordable cost to the business, Corvino created partnerships with Doordash and Postmates and has also partnered with Menufy.

The Corvinos hope to eventually open more Ravenous locations but are planning to take it slow.

“We’ve worked really hard to build a great reputation here,” Christina said. “We feel like we can be choosy.”

# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## SLUTTY VEGAN

Slutty Vegan is rockin' Atlanta with its plant-based menu featuring Impossible burgers, fries and vegan desserts. In just over a year, Founder Pinky Cole has transformed her food truck into a thriving business with an awesome social media presence that has attracted visitors including Usher, Snoop Dog and Tyler Perry.

Cole is delivering on her mission of introducing healthy vegan options to urban and underserved communities throughout the country. With a core belief that vegan food can also be comfort food, the menu combines superb taste with plant-based ingredients so customers can remain vegan and get a little naughty.

And in an effort to bring veganism to the masses, Cole collaborated with Rap Snacks last year to produce a vegan potato chip line, inspired by Slutty Vegan's menu.

"Slutty Vegan has been immensely influential in introducing veganism to the culturally rich community of Atlanta and beyond," Rap Snacks CEO James Lindsay said. "It's always exciting to join forces with a brand that shares the same underlying mission as we do here at Rap Snacks — to push culture forward through food."



*Pinky Cole – Slutty Vegan, Founder*

# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## CHICKEN GUY

Celebrity chef Guy Fieri opened his first Chicken Guy, location at Disney Springs in 2018 and quickly followed that up last year with a second location in Tennessee. Resulting from a deal with Face Hospitality, a subsidiary of Face Amusement Group, the agreement includes plans for other openings this year in Knoxville, Gatlinburg and Johnson City.

“I’ve shot (“Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives”) and eaten all over the state and I know how much the great people of Tennessee love their real deal chicken,” Fieri said. “So, to be able to partner with a great local team like Face Hospitality is a perfect opportunity to bring Chicken Guy to Nashville and beyond.”



Fieri has also opened locations at Redskins’ FedEx Field, Aventura Mall in Miami, 49er’s Levi’s Stadium and plans to open outlets in South Florida; the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota; Los Angeles International Airport; Las Vegas and other locations yet to be announced.

The menu features one-of-a kind, all-natural chicken tenders that are brined in fresh lemon juice, pickle brine and buttermilk, hand-pounded and paired with a choice of 22 sauces as well as Guy Fries, Mac Daddy Mac ‘n Cheese, fried pickles and fresh slaw.

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## BLU'S BARBEQUE

Blu's barbeque is a North Dallas-based fast casual brand specializing in Texas Barbecue with a twist. Owner and pitmaster [Zach Bergeholtz](#) perfected his meat smokin' skills while studying psychology, general business and restaurant management at Texas Tech. He taught himself the technique and created his signature rub that Blu's Barbeque specializes in and began catering events. That catering interest grew into Blu's Barbecue.

Blu's menu includes a variety of smoked meats including a half or whole chicken, Akushi sausage, pork ribs, pulled pork and beef brisket. Sides include a local favorite, five-cheese macaroni and cheese, as well as traditional barbecue sides of baked beans, potato salad and coleslaw. In addition, Blu's also offers the vegan-style Impossible Burger for those who are looking for meat alternatives.

Bergeholtz is already looking for ways to grow the business, including a drive-thru breakfast offering and adding new smoked-meat choices to the menu.





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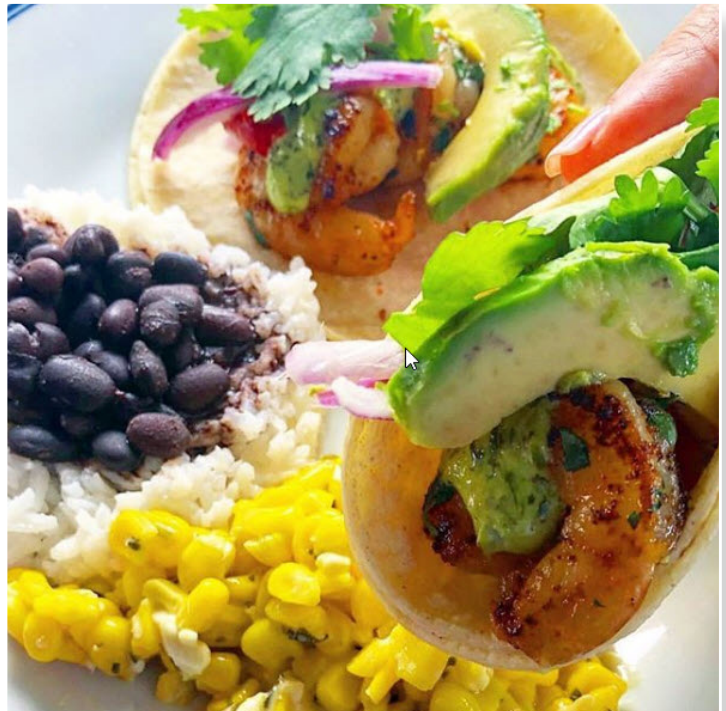
## GROWN

After spending 18 years preparing meals for her husband and NBA player, Ray Allen, Shannon Allen, created Grown, a USDA organic certified restaurant. Shannon had been hosting a television show, *The Pre-Game Meal*, to show others how to cook optimal game-day meals and thought it was time to open a restaurant serving her recipes, which included nutrient-dense farm-to-fork breakfasts, lunches and dinners.

Grown, which opened in 2016 in Miami, also has an extensive farm network delivering organic, local and sustainable ingredients without harmful products like GMOs, preservatives, hormones or processed sugar.

Another thing that sets Grown apart is that the staff is passionate about sustainable practices as well as protecting guests who experience allergies by avoiding cross contamination with the Allergen Saf-T-Zone System.

Every item on the menu can be made vegetarian or vegan, and the restaurant uses pulp-free and compostable paper products, 100% recyclable cups, BPA-free storage containers and plant-able kid's meal packaging that encourages kids to cultivate their own gardens.



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## BIRDCALL

Birdcall was founded in 2017 in Denver's historic 5-points neighborhood with one goal: to make unbelievable food more accessible and affordable while supporting its community. Its chicken is locally sourced from family farms in Colorado and its buns are made fresh at Aspen Baking Company. Spices are created by Denver's own, Spice Guy, and its coffee is a custom Corvus Coffee blend.

Birdcall, which has three locations, has created a new kind of food experience enhanced by technology, service, art and architecture, as well as a dedication to promoting positive community and economic growth in local neighborhoods. It uses custom-built kiosks, POS systems and apps, for example, and features modern architecture and furniture made by local craftsmen and artists. In addition, all locations will incorporate bike repair stations to encourage cycling throughout Denver.

The menu features a variety of chicken sandwiches, salads and tenders, as well as several sauces including Birdcall sauce, buttermilk herb mayo and Sriracha aioli.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## ***SIMSIM OUTSTANDING SHAWARMA***

SimSim's mission is to offer an exceptional blend of Middle Eastern flavors to customers at its two locations in San Diego. The menu pays tribute to the dishes its founders grew up eating, and the concept grew from a tiny seed of an idea. Brothers Ali and Hasan AlMatrouk weren't satisfied with the Arabic dining choices in the United States, so they began brainstorming ways to bring some of their favorite dishes to the US.

They partnered with Sean Zanganeh and Nawar Miri to bring their idea to light. They topped off the plan by adding Chef Igrahim AlSarief to the team, who agreed to move to the US to build the concept from scratch.

The first brick-and-mortar location opened in 2018 in San Diego, California, and a second launched last summer.

Simsim is the Arabic word for Sesame. For the AlMatrouk brothers, simsim is a name that symbolizes their values of unity and togetherness. They wanted to bring something pure, authentic, simple and purposeful to the United States and decided to focus on the sesame seed as its fundamental ingredient in their sauces, breads and entrees.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## **GREEK FROM GREECE BAKERY AND CAFE**

Greek from Greece continues to raise the bar for Greek food in a comfortable, friendly environment. GFG is based on the vision of providing every neighborhood in which it settles to feel a little bit more like home. Specializing in providing high-quality, homemade food, the cafe is experiencing rapid growth this year. It finalized a deal in February that will take the bakery from 10 locations to 41, and 30 locations will open in Long Island, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

GFG units in New York will be in Dairy Barn drive-thru convenience stores and will retain a drive-thru, with a focus on to-go and grab-and-go foods. The drive-thru feature is a first for the fast casual brand, which has previously focused on eat-in cafes and kiosks, said Dan Rowe, CEO and founder of Fransmart, the company helping GFC to expand via franchising.

“Greece has an amazing and storied coffee and cafe culture,” he said. “GFG sees this untapped segment as the biggest opportunity in the restaurant business. The company invested in a big, big way – buying out competitors and chains like Dairy Barn to quickly convert to GFG restaurants.”

With other deals in the pipeline, the chain will have more than 100 units open or in development by the end of the year.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## PURE GREEN

New York City-based juice and superfood smoothie chain Pure Green has a goal of having 800 units in development within the next five years, and founder Ross Franklin is using his background in fitness and nutrition to build a brand based on high-performance nutrition and unrivaled flavors.

Pure Green has five locations — including its first franchised unit that opened last year — but has gained a cult following thanks to its pure, organic menu options.

“Five years from now, our goal is to have 800 signed franchise locations,” said Franklin, who has stores opening soon in Florida and Chicago. He’s also received franchise requests from two dozen other states, as well as international attention.

“Though we’ve delivered Pure Green products to consumers nationwide through our wholesale division, we’re looking forward to expanding sales operations in the Midwest and Southeast,” he said. “Moving forward, we will continue to open both corporate and franchise locations across the U.S.”

In addition, Pure Green’s wholesale division sells pre-bottled cold-pressed juices to franchisees for less than the actual production cost. This lowers the franchisee’s start-up costs because there is no need to purchase expensive juicing equipment or incur high labor costs from juice manufacturing.



# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN

Dave's Hot Chicken is a Los Angeles-based street food concept that specializes in hot chicken tenders and sliders. Using the fun spice levels ranging from “No Spice” to “Reaper,” Dave's allows guests to customize their tenders just the way they like them. In addition to the tenders, each restaurant also serves house-made kale slaw, creamy macaroni and cheese, and crispy or cheesy fries.



Founded by classically trained chef Dave Kopushyan and three friends in early 2017, the concept initially began as a pop-up in a parking lot, but now has multiple brick-and-mortar locations open in Southern California.

Dave's recently secured a 10-unit franchise agreement with Carl L. Karcher of CLK Inc., who owns over 100 Carl's Jr. and Jamba Juice locations throughout Southern California.

“The hot chicken category has tremendous growth potential and is a logical choice as we seek to expand our portfolio. After doing our due diligence, Dave's Hot Chicken was the clear front-runner,” Karcher said in a company press release. “The simplicity of the brand's operations, along with the passionate and experienced leadership team, booming fan following and delicious food was extremely attractive and made the choice to invest a no-brainer. Our team is eager to grow Dave's Hot Chicken in Southern California.”

# 20 BRANDS TO WATCH

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## WOW WOW HAWAIIAN LEMONADE

Wow Wow Hawaiian Lemonade moved its home base from Hawaii to Arizona in 2019 and has been expanding ever since. With four franchise locations in the Phoenix area, the company is opening 18 additional units via franchise partnerships in the next 18 months, resulting in nearly 200 new jobs company-wide. This move has also helped the brand focus on franchising. It appointed franchisee Tim Weiderhoft, who had served as VP of franchise development at Arizona-based Massage Envy, as CEO.

Although Wow Wow opened in 2012 it was only a farmer's market stand in Hawaii. After growing in popularity, however, the lemonade stand relaunched a few years later as a brick-and-mortar restaurant offering locally sourced, healthy food options like superfood acai bowls, avocado toast and overnight oats. Wow Wow has always shown a strong commitment to sustainability, using Mason jars to serve its lemonade and smoothies.

The chain has five Arizona locations in different stages of development, with openings set for Lake Pleasant, Surprise, Moon Valley, Gilbert and Peoria by year's end.

