

2023

# 20 FAST CASUAL BRANDS TO WATCH

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Although the fast casual industry is only about 25 years old, it has emerged as the restaurant sector's leader with quick service brands looking to match the higher food quality and casual restaurants racing to embrace similar technologies in hopes of competing on speed of service.

The fast casual industry will see a year-over-year growth of 11.39% in 2022 at a CAGR of 12.41%, according to a Technavio report, which also revealed customer demand for innovation and customization in food menus, as well as a preference for food infused with new and bold flavors is driving growth.

These trends aren't new to most fast casual concepts; in fact, these are their defining characteristics. Industry leaders, Wow Bao, Chipotle, Sweetgreen, Dickey's, Chicken Salad Chick and Panera, for example, continue to innovate each day and are inspiring new players to enter the market.

FastCasual's fourth annual report, "20 Brands to Watch," reveals the industry's future leaders. To be considered, the brands, which nominated themselves, have at least one brick-and-mortar outlet and are under five years old.

A panel of judges narrowed down the applicants by reviewing their use of technology, menu innovation and future growth plans.

Also, after making the list, winners are not allowed to appear on the future editions. However, we expect to see at least a few of them on our future Fast Casual Top 100 Movers & Shakers report, which is published in May of each year.

We are honored to introduce the 2023 class of "20 Brands to Watch," and predict they will continue to help the fast casual industry thrive.

Congrats to all!

Cheers,

Cherryh Cansler

VP of Events, Editor, FastCasual

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## ***Bad-Ass Breakfast Burritos***

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Since 2020, Dog Haus' The Absolute Brands group, founded by Hagop Giragossian, Quasim Riaz and André Vener, has been making mouths water with a growing variety of convenient and delicious fare, prepared at virtual kitchen locations and in most of Dog Haus' brick-and-mortar restaurants. And one of those delivery brands is pretty "Bad-Ass" if you ask its creators.

Guests who order a [Bad-Ass Breakfast Burrito](#) to get a "dropkick to the face," with soft flour tortillas filled with bacon and pastrami, crispy tater tots, cheese and eggs. Specialty sauces include spicy mayo, hot sauce, chipotle aioli and spicy basil aioli, while comfort sides feature French fries, sweet potatoes, onion rings and tater tots.

All meats are 100% all-natural, vegetarian-fed and hormone- and antibiotic-free.

Operating in Pasadena, Hollywood and Chicago, the brand aims to enter more markets in the near future and is cementing its well-rounded place in the Absolute Brands group by participating in the Dog Haus Chef Collaboration Series, which raises funds for No Kid Hungry.



## Bango Bowls



Starting with a quick-serve acai bowl concept in 2018, [Bango Bowls](#) has rapidly grown its menu and its reach, with six New York fast-casual locations offering its personalized healthy dishes.

Diners may enjoy everything from avocado toast, oatmeal and healthier-for-you smoothies with fruit, flax seed and plant-based milks to build-your-own poke, grain or salad bowls topped with fresh, house-made dressings. Or, they may try the proprietary flaninis – flatbread paninis in chicken pesto, Greek and more.

A mobile app allows customers to skip the lines and earn rewards in addition to Bango's delivery, pickup and catering options.

The company's Backed by Bango program, which grew out of its meal donation efforts during the COVID pandemic, demonstrates its commitment to staff and community by providing support and financial assistance to charities and foundations submitted by team members.

Next up, says founder Ryan Thorman – scaling the concept with a franchising model.



## Bobby's Burgers



Celebrity chef Bobby Flay has a new dining concept, which he describes as “approachable and fun.”

[Bobby's Burgers](#), from Flay and partner Laurence Kretchmer, kicked off in 2021 and launched its franchising initiative in March 2022.

It is a “very American concept,” Flay said.

The menu features original recipes, drawing on Flay’s travels around the U.S. to find the best food experiences. Certified Angus beef burgers, vegetarian burgers or the fried chicken sandwich pair with fries, cheese fries, bacon and cheese fries, sweet potato fries and buttermilk onion rings. Sweet treats come in the form of “spoon-bending” milkshakes in vanilla bean, dark chocolate, pistachio and more.

Bobby’s Burgers operates in Yankee Stadium, several Las Vegas strip locations, and its newest spot is in Harrah’s Resort Atlantic City. The franchising team is eager to grow the chef-driven brand nationwide, bringing craveable flavors to everyone at a fair price point.



## Cookie Plug

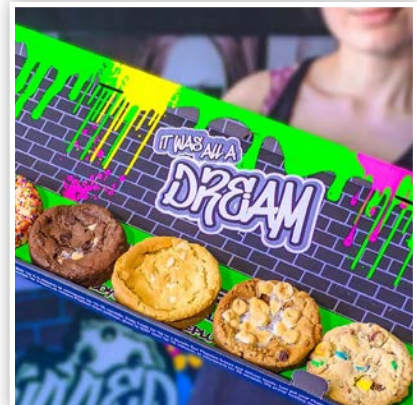


[Cookie Plug](#) is a vibe. In just three years, the unique dessert brand has grown to 25 locations, and has no plans of slowing.

Founder and Chief Brand Officer Erik Martinez has married fresh-baked cookie creations that rival a hockey puck in size with hip-hop street culture; the music is pumping, graffiti art and street slang literally color the shops, and even some of the cookies are quite colorful.

A Cookie Plug cookie, or “phattie,” is baked fresh daily in-house. Customers may go for the always freshly made G.O.A.T. – the classic O.G. chocolate chip cookie – or try a monthly limited- edition flavor. Other regular menu favorites include the S’mores flavored Firecracker, the Pixie Junkie sprinkle-topped sugar cookie, the triple-chocolate Chocolate XTC and the Snooperdoodle, a super-fat snickerdoodle, of course.

Operating across Southern California, the dessert brand has franchises in development across Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Texas and several other states. Luckily, for those farther away, online ordering for local delivery and nationwide free shipping are both available.



## Cracked Eggergy



From its food truck origins to two brick-and-mortar locations now operating with an egg theme and “big egg energy,” Washington, D.C.-based [Cracked Eggergy](#) serves up innovative egg sandwiches, bowls, burgers and tots – all made from premium, local ingredients.

In 2020, the Cracked Eggergy food truck was bringing its inventive egg sandwiches on fresh toasted challah to the people, and partners Mike Tabb, Ross Brickelmaier, AJ Zarinsky, Donald Patterson are luring people to their shops with diner food plus surprising twists. The Abe Froman egg sandwich, for example, features sausage, naturally, and the Southern Charm pulls in fried green tomatoes.

The Bubby adds smoked salmon and cream cheese, topped with red onion and caper tapenade. Bowls run a gamut from the Korean-inspired Seoul Mate to the Rancheros Cucamonga.

And the Cracked Tots can hold their own, with six flavors: salted, garlic parm truffle, honey butter, honey bbq, old bay and cinnamon sugar.

Customers may eat in or enjoy contact-free pickup. And yes, the food truck is still trucking.





## Crimson Coward



Nashville hot chicken is sweeping the nation, and [Crimson Coward](#) is winning some of those fans in sunny California. With a 2021 start in Downey, founder Ali Hijazi has grown the brand to four locations. He started by doing his homework.

Six months of research and meetings with chefs around Nashville, plus four months of recipe- testing led to the Crimson Rub, which has 16 primary and 32 secondary spices. Premium, all-natural, non-GMO, hormone-and antibiotic-free chicken boneless breasts atop a brioche bun topped with house-made slaw and pickles make up the perfect Nashville Hot Chicken sandwich. Mac and cheese, potato salad, slaw, fried pickles or the special "Joey Eat Fries" come on the side.

At the opening of the fourth Crimson Coward in Long Beach, Hijazi said he was proud to serve locally sourced ingredients, including chicken that was "all-natural and certified-Halal.



## Flake Pie Co.



At [Flake Pie Co.](#), customers don't have to share, as they'll be enjoying their own delicious, individual pies, thanks to Carol and Rick Timmons, who opened in 2020 with the goal of serving personal-sized pies.

Two years later, the duo operates two locations in South Jordan and St. George, Utah.

The mini pies come in a variety of flavors, including Sweet Child O'Lime and Apple of My Eye, plus creative seasonal flavors, such as "You Were Meant for Me" and "Manic Sunday" (we're seeing a rock-and-roll theme here).

But the sweet treats don't stop there. Flakies are the bakery's house-made version of a toaster pastry. Flavors include peach with mascarpone as well as Pots de creme. Savory hand pies round out the temptations on the menu, and Flake Shakes allow guests to order their favorite Flakie flavors as milkshake, too.



## Good Taco



While on a trip to Primo Tapia (Baja California) 10 years ago, Dustin May fell in love with the people and food and was inspired to bring back a piece of that experience to Canada. The result: [Good Taco](#), which was opened in Abbotsford, British Columbia in 2020. A location has also been opened in Primo Tapia and five more franchised locations are scheduled to open over the next year.

During his trip, May was introduced to a children's center that provides child care help for working parents who can not afford it. As a result, Good Taco has a stated goal of helping to alleviate childhood poverty in Mexico. The company donates one percent of their daily sales to the cause.

The menu is inspired by the local hand-made tortillas and the flavors from the street stands of Primo Tapia. Al pastor, carne asada and carnitas tacos are paired with freshly cooked tortillas pressed in-store. Tacos are served with only cilantro, onions, guacamole and salsa, and no fillers — just like what you'd get in Mexico.

Good Taco restaurants are bright and colorful and filled with allusions to the happy childhoods they are helping to create for so many children.



## HOT CHIKN KITCHN



The founders of [Hot Chikn Kitchn](#) think that if we even pretended to be as happy as we really were when we sat down to a great meal, the world would be a better place, and it seems like they have a great point.

Getting their start in Woodbridge, Virginia in 2020, father-and-son duo, Mike and Anthony Sarago, and chef Frederic Gilmore serve hot Nashville chicken with love and lots of spice in two locations. Franchising opportunities are available, and locations are opening soon in New Jersey, Florida and Arizona.

Wings, chicken and waffles, tenders and mac 'n' cheese bowls deliver the spice, alongside the hot chicken sandwich on a potato bun. If you can't get enough of the hot stuff, bottles of sauce in four levels of heat are available to go

One way the founders keep up the positivity is with Unity Through Food, a program where non-profits can raise money in their restaurants. The restaurant donates 25% of pre-tax sales from each Unity Day to the designated organization, which adds up to a lot of benefits for the local community.



## Kimchi Box



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For those who can't help but fantasize about leaving their corporate positions, [Kimchi Box](#) Founder Min Kyu Kim's story may be inspiring. He left a position as a KPMG consultant during the COVID pandemic to open the concept in Northville, Michigan. Nearly two years later, five locations are operating with more in the works.

Korean food with a few twists make up the varied and colorful menu. They include Korean (double) fried chicken, bulgogi, kimchi tacos, bibimbap and K corn dogs as well as Korean street food offerings, such as japchae, red bean buns and Korean street toast.

With more diners trying and loving Korean dishes, Kimchi Box is a fast-growing brand to watch.



## Lazy Susan

### LAZY SUSAN

A long-time take-out favorite across the U.S. – Chinese food – got a major makeover at [Lazy Susan](#), after founders Hanson Li and Tiffany Yam stepped back and took a look with fresh eyes.

The menu includes 25 favorite dishes, and the approach thoughtfully focuses on gluten-free choices and meals designed to be consumed within 30 minutes of pickup. Ghost kitchens, brand licensing and efficient shops with counter seating and omni-channel ordering up the efficiency level at all steps in the process.

Menu items aim to celebrate over 100 years of Chinese food in America, the owners point out, as well as satisfy Asian food cravings with some of the most familiar and popular choices: crab rangoon, potstickers and hot and sour soup appetizers pair well with entrees like kung pao chicken, beef and broccoli, and pepper steak. Vegetarian fare includes Impossible Mapo tofu and Buddha's delight.

San Francisco, Palo Alto and Campbell, California, locations are just the beginning for Li, whose background includes founding the Salt food and beverage business in San Francisco, and Yam, who joined after working in her family's Chinese restaurant and then in corporate finance.



## Local Kitchens

### Local Kitchens

Micro Food Hall

The COVID pandemic and its aftermath have created lots of creative approaches in the Fast casual space. Three ex-DoorDash employees think they've come up with a fresh one that will be a winner for both restaurant owners and their customers. Jon Goldsmith, Andrew Munday and Jordan Bramble brought us Local Kitchen in 2020, and the brand is growing in California, from San Francisco across the Bay Area, as more restaurants sign onto the shared-revenue model.

[Local Kitchens](#) gives restaurants the opportunity to expand in a convenient style of dining for consumers. Each location brings together five to 10 local and regional restaurant concepts under one roof, allowing guests to mix and match cuisines in one order. By eliminating the heavy costs for rent, marketing and hiring staff, local and regional restaurants have the opportunity to thrive post-pandemic.

Diners love it, too, as they easily order from the website, app or a kiosk and have access to limited "food hall" style seating in some locations.



## Nomoo



Plant-based fare couldn't be hotter for the fast casual space right now. Just ask burger joint [Nomoo](#), based in Los Angeles. Founded by George Montagu, the concept offers sauces, shakes and "chik'n" made in-house. Its vegan burgers have no additives, and customers may get a little creative by testing the BBQ "Facon" sandwich or the Nomoo wings, made from fried oyster mushrooms.

Nomoo has forged partnerships with Nestle Professional and Fransmart to support fast expansion, and with its small-footprint, low-labor concept for franchisers, it's hoping to set the standard for plant-based fast casual chains.





## Noodlelove



The soulful approach to cuisine that infuses [Noodlelove](#) has founder Natalie Camerino to thank.

After growing up in a Korean-Italian family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and becoming enamored of Korean and other Asian foods as she traveled the world, Camerino brought it all together in 2020 when she opened Noodlelove on Mott Street in New York, New York.

The brand is dedicated to serving healthy, innovative Asian food for the mind, heart and soul. With high-quality, smartly sourced and natural ingredients, her goal is to serve guilt-free options without sacrificing bold and exotic flavors.

The menu features bowls, including the Kimchi Crunch, made with glass noodles and house-made gochujang sauce, and the Hibachi Ginger Salad, featuring watermelon radish, nori crumble and carrot-ginger dressing. Diners may also build their own bowls or wok creations from a list of fresh, healthy bases, vegetables and sauces. Vegan and gluten-free options are plentiful, too, and cocktails and sake are available to add another dimension to the dining experience.



## ***Paradise Smoothie Juice Bar***



**PARADISE**  
SMOOTHIE JUICE BAR  
Paradise Powers Performance

Enhancing general wellness and specific health concerns, [Paradise Smoothie Juice Bar](#) is serving a growing number of customers at four Georgia locations in Atlanta, Marietta and Mableton.

Owners Ron Bolden and Bill Johnson took their passion for healthy living and combined smoothie, juice, shake and shot recipes with all-natural ingredients and no-added sugar or dairy. Everything is all-natural, vegetarian and vegan.

Their idea that “paradise powers performance” is resonating with guests, who snap up their creations made with nothing but whole fruits, seeds, nuts, vegetables, herbs and spices. Fruit-based smoothies are made to order, and booster add-ons include mixtures of oats, seeds and almond milk.

Paradise Smoothies can travel, too, with its food truck available for private and public events. Franchising opportunities are now offered, as well.



## Sankranti



Translating to “positive change,” [Sankranti](#) is bringing a fast casual Indian dining experience to Dunwoody, Georgia, and plans to add locations throughout the Atlanta area.

Although founder Srinivasa “Nimms” Nimmagadda is known around the Georgia restaurant community for his fine-dining restaurant and banquet hall, also called Sankranti, he hopes his fast casual concept will make Indian food more accessible, affordable and approachable.

Featuring dishes from both the north and south of India, Sankranti serves lunch and dinner and features an open kitchen, indoor seating with high-top tables and additional outdoor seating.

Guests also may place orders to go or for delivery with DoorDash, GrubHub or UberEats.

A wide variety of build-your-own curry bowls, plus a la carte pulao rice, paratha bread, samosas, and potato and spinach cakes make up the menu. Diners looking for something new may try the mango lassi or rose milk to complement their meals.



## Savannah Seafood Shack



A unique offering in the fast casual space, [Savannah Seafood Shack](#) is bringing its take on the traditional Low Country boil, by focusing on a single-serve, quick and affordable dish.

Getting its start in 2020, the concept offers a feast featuring seasoned shrimp, sausage, potatoes and corn. Using only boil and fry methods, it serves up its Low Country boil and other seafood dishes with an average ticket time of 5 minutes.

While seafood is often a fine-dining splurge, part of Savannah Seafood Shack's appeal is that its use of technology and streamlined operations model make it an everyday option.

The company has quickly developed a cult foodie following and was featured on The Travel Network and Cooking Channel. Founder and CEO Christine Cutlip has made franchising for available as well.



## Son of a Butcher



### Son of a Butcher

Sliders featuring a touch of nostalgia for “the good old days” and high-quality Texas beef are at the heart of [Son of a Butcher](#), operating in Dallas and Plano, Texas.

Shakes, fries and 3-ounce sliders are the stars of the menu, and its Wagyu beef is locally sourced from A Bar N Ranch. The waffle fries and onion rings are sauced, and the milkshakes are handspun (make it boozy for a couple of bucks more). Hand-breaded chicken and a black bean vegetable patty are also on the menu.

Both locations are cashless, and guests may order for pickup or delivery through UberEats or DoorDash.

With SOB in operation since 2019, CEO Jack Gibbons, CMO Rae Phillips Luther, CFO Dan Lawler, Chairman Randy DeWitt and Brand Leader Tim Timbs want guests to feel like a part of the SOB family and encourage diners to enjoy the variety of mixing and matching sliders each time they “slide by.”



## Taco Reho



The funky, SoCal-inspired [Taco Reho](#) in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, is the creation of Billy Lucas, an experienced fine-dining chef and caterer to the stars.

After traveling the world and settling in Los Angeles, he brought the best of West Coast tacos back to the East Coast, where he spent summers growing up, first with his food truck, Black Betty, and now with his first brick-and-mortar restaurant.

The Baja fish taco is the top seller, alongside burritos, bowls, dillas, carne fries, hot dogs and taquitos. Just about everything is made in-house, including the corn tortillas.

The fun, rocking environment is efficient thanks to a focus on technology, including QR code meal ordering from the table. Taco Reho and the Black Betty food truck are also available for gigs, including lunch stops, all types of festivals and fairs and private events.



## Truli Italian Food



New at The Promenade at Coconut Creek this year in Coconut Creek, Florida, [Truli Italian Food](#) is the creation of global restaurant and bar concept creator and operator Doug Zeif.

The company allows guests to choose from pizza and house main specials, including chicken parm or steak pizzaiola or create-your-own pastas, with a variety of pasta types, sauces and add-ins. Gluten-free, vegetarian and vegan creations are plentiful, as well.

Truli aims to provide an attractive value with a surprising number of specials for brunch, lunch, free kids' meals, wine deals, happy hours and even a \$15 unlimited weekend drink offering. A loyalty program makes return visits even more popular.

