



IX. BUSINESS ANALYSIS: THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE AND PROFITABLE

CHEF-DRIVEN FAST FOOD

CHEFS HAVE LONG LOOKED AT OPENING CASUAL RESTAURANTS AS A WAY TO SUPPORT THEIR FLAGSHIP FINE-DINING INSTITUTIONS. IN THE LAST YEAR, HOWEVER, MANY OF THE COUNTRY'S LEADING CHEFS HAVE TURNED TO FAST FOOD, OFTEN WITH A PLANT-FORWARD FOCUS AND HAVE TURNED TO FAST FOOD, OFTEN WITH A PLANT-FORWARD FOCUS.

The Washington, D.C.-based José Andrés, known for a wide range of successful restaurants in his ThinkFoodGroup portfolio, from the experimental cuisine of Minibar and his Las Vegas restaurant *é* to Spanish and Middle Eastern favorites at *Jaleo* and *Zaytinya* respectively, launched this spring the first of a vegetable-centric quick service restaurant with the tongue-in-cheek name “Beefsteak” (as in the tomato) and a tagline that proclaims “vegetables, unleashed.”

Daniel Patterson, of the lauded *Coi* in San Francisco, has teamed up with CIA alumnus Roy Choi, king of L.A. street food and co-founder of *Kogi*, to bring the world the best hamburger possible (beef cut with quinoa, barley, and seaweed) for, they hope, 99 cents. They consider their fast food vision revolutionary: *Loco'l* will source locally, offer fair wages to its employees, and aim to build community in the areas where it opens restaurants. Choi recently explained to *Eater* that the vision is “to create a fast food concept with the heart of a chef.” A crowd-funding campaign through *Indiegogo* raised more than \$128,000 to help build the first outlets, which will open in a low-income area of San Francisco called the *Tenderloin*, which many argue is a food, desert, and the *Watts* neighborhood in Los Angeles.

Chris Jaeckle, chef-partner of *All'onda* in New York and a *Morimoto* veteran, also recently opened a fast casual spot, *Uma Temakeria*. It features

Jaeckle's signature rolls but also hand rolls made to order, and it seeks to use only sustainable seafood and ingredients associated with minimal environmental damage. Joshua Skenes, chef-owner of *Saison* in San Francisco, has teamed up with *Umami Burger* restaurateur Adam Fleischman to debut *Fat Noodle*, a fast-casual Chinese noodle bar. That's a long way from the 18-seat *Saison*, recipient of three Michelin stars, which can feature as many as 20 courses at prices that vary by the day but are typically several hundred dollars per person.

Another CIA graduate, Franklin Becker, most recently of *Abe & Arthur's* restaurant in New York City, has opened a plant-forward quick-service chain called *The Little Beet*. Diners pick from sides like charred cauliflower or Southwest-style millet and pair them with proteins in salads, bowls, soups, or wraps in customized plates; combinations are in the \$8-\$14 range for a meal.

Overall, these new companies are aiming to make their top-quality food accessible to the masses through average checks under 10 dollars.

What's happening is the speed, price point, and ubiquity of *Subway* meeting the quality, culinary training, and concern for sourcing of *Chez Panisse*. Several chefs credit *Chipotle* founder (another CIA alum) *Steve Ells* for inspiration; in fact, Andrés

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aims to follow a similar model and says he hopes to reach Chipotle-level scale. Many of the new concepts, such as Fat Noodle, follow Chipotle's create-your-own, assembly line model, with various combinations of bases, proteins, toppings, and sauces.

We also need to recognize the chefs who pioneered this new path. Wolfgang Puck Express have been in airports across the country for decades, and big names from Rick Bayless to Bobby Flay boast multi-unit fast casual chains. But what has changed is that overall the restaurant industry has grown tremendously, especially in fast-casual, with stars like Panera Bread and Chipotle bringing in double-digit billions across nearly two thousand locations apiece. (Meanwhile, McDonald's stock is floundering.)

What underlies all these new concepts is the potential for average people to eat a Michelin star-caliber meal at a single-digit price. In other words, it's about bringing craveable food that's often healthy and responsibly sourced—food formerly reserved for the fine dining crowd—to the masses.

