

MENUS CHANGE®

*From the 2015 Menus of Change Annual Report
© 2015 The Culinary Institute of America and President and Fellows of Harvard College*

CAVA GRILL

In 2006, three childhood friends, Ike Grigoropoulos, Ted Xenohristos, and chef Dimitri Moshovitis, all children of Greek immigrants, opened Cava Mezze, a full-service restaurant that emulates the mezze style (small plates) of dining prevalent in Greece and throughout the Mediterranean. Cava Mezze now has three locations. In 2011, the partners spun off

Cava Mezze Grill, now called simply Cava Grill to avoid confusion with the name of the original restaurant. Cava Grill is a fast-growing, fast-casual Greek and Mediterranean chain with 11 locations in the Washington, D.C. area representative of a new generation of emerging chains. Having recently raised \$16 million, it is now poised to open in Los Angeles, its first new market. (The business also includes a retail line of dips and spreads, Cava Foods, which is sold at grocery outlets such as Whole Foods Market throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast. They are planning to soon expand to Chicago and the Midwest.)



Cava Grill admittedly targets health-conscious consumers, but it does so in a unique way. Its marketing is not focused on eating a light meal, or eating its food because it seems like something one should do, but rather something one wants to do, thanks to an emphasis on flavor (that happens to come from many plant ingredients). The customizable concept—with an average ticket of about \$12—might sound familiar, but it's one that continues to score well with diners, especially Millennials: start with a base (salad, pita, or rice); add dips, spreads, and a protein (falafel, meatballs, grilled or braised meat); and finish with toppings (pickled banana peppers, quinoa tabbouleh, mint, crumbled feta) and sauces (Sriracha Greek yogurt, spicy harissa, lemon herb tahini).

Cava Grill emphasizes local sourcing and the quality of what it sources. The chain sells diners on transparency, simplicity, and purity. Cooking is done from scratch. The design of the restaurants is modern and sleek, yet inviting and comfortable. Many units have at least partial open kitchens, hearth ovens, and spices and greens on display.

The chain's website posts a kind of manifesto, reminiscent of the sensationally popular Holstee Manifesto from a few years ago, which is a set of about 15 pithy commandments such as "Do what you love, and do it often" and "When you eat, appreciate every last bite." Cava Grill's list of statements describes its culture and what it stands for. Entitled "For those who savor," and without using words like "mindfulness" or "slow food," the message evokes that ethos of Mediterranean culture, which is at the heart of the Mediterranean cuisine it offers. The following statements are representative of the overall approach Cava Grill takes in communicating with diners: "Good, healthful food, made with simple, colorful ingredients, steel knives, skillful hands and fire;" "With olive oil, lemon, sea salt, cracked pepper, a fistful of spice and zero apologies;"

"Because while others are content to feed their faces, you desire food that feeds your spirit; Food that fills you and fulfills you, too." The chain doesn't call its local charity work "CSR," or the farmers and manufacturers it buys from "suppliers," but instead, all are "partners," again evoking a theme of Mediterranean culture, this one of familial ties and community.

Cava's rapid growth speaks to the success of its approach. "We knew that we could take culinary-driven, high-quality ingredients and put it in a fast format, where you combine it by leveraging the naturally healthy profile of Mediterranean foods," Cava's CEO Brett Schulman told the DC-area news station, WTOP, in January. "But what we've seen is these trends just accelerate even faster than we expected."

#

For more information about the Cava Grill story, visit their website:

<http://cavagrill.com/culture>