



10 Chain Innovators

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Written by Dana Tanyeri, Contributing Editor

The restaurant industry is nothing if not indomitable when it comes to innovation. Maybe it's a new twist on an existing concept, a new production system or a new way to enhance the guest experience. It might be new technologies to speed service, a steady stream of craveable LTOs or even a whole new category-creating concept. There's always something new, something hot, something unique that someone — whether old pro or eager young entrepreneur — cooks up to keep things deliciously fresh and interesting.



The chains profiled on the following pages are shining examples of disruptive forces at work in the industry. From frozen superfruit concoctions to pizza in a cone, from ethnic street food to contemporary barbecue and swanky, female-friendly steakhouses, these concepts prove that innovation in the industry is alive and well. Many are relatively new or have just recently gained traction through franchising or infusions of private equity. One just cut the ribbon on the first of what its founder — the same innovator who a quarter-century ago co-founded the Boston Market chain — says will be many more units to come.

Most of the 10 are fast-casual operations taking cues from the segment that has resonated so well with today's consumers and giving it creative new twists. Chocolate anyone? How about vegan cuisine? Others rock QSR, casual-dining and fine-dining segments with dramatically different products as well as fresh variations on familiar themes. Some celebrate American culinary traditions, while the inspiration for others hails from as far away as Italy and Germany and introduce terms like piada and döner to the American culinary lexicon.

Regardless of concept, all of our featured chains' leaders share unabashed excitement about what they've cooked up to deliver fresh, relevant dining experiences to consumers with an insatiable appetite for them. Read on to learn what all the excitement's about.

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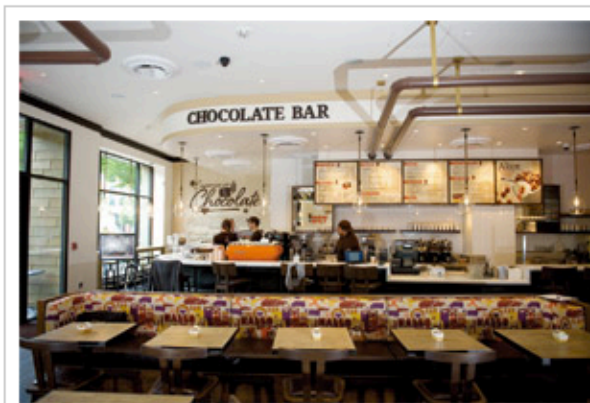
[VERTS Kebap](#)

10 Chain Innovators: Max Brenner Chocolate Bar

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Chocolate lovers have a new treat coming soon to a market near them. Max Brenner Chocolate Bar, a fast-casual operation that celebrates chocolate culture in Parisian-café-meets-Willy-Wonka fashion, opened its first new U.S. prototype in Bethesda, Md., last August and plans to expand nationally over the next few years.



Max Brenner locations include café-style seating, retail displays and covered seats at the chocolate bar, where customers can take in all of the action.

Established in Israel in 1996 by Max Fitchman and Oded Brenner, Max Brenner started as a small specialty chocolate retail shop. Investors from Australia took the brand to their country in 2000, expanding it to include a café-style chocolate bar. Over the next several years, the concept went global, opening more units in Australia as well as the Philippines, Singapore and the United States. In addition to the chocolate bar model it opened 10 full-service, full-menu restaurants — in U.S. markets including Boston, New

York, Philadelphia and Las Vegas. While that model has been successful, it's the fast-casual chocolate bar/café concept that the company recently refined and debuted in Bethesda that it plans to move forward with, says Sam Borghese, CEO of Max Brenner Global, a subsidiary of Strauss Group.

The concept seeks to provide a multisensory chocolate experience for guests. On the menu: a variety of hot chocolate drinks (including Mexican Spicy spiked with chili, cinnamon and nutmeg; Salted Carmel; and Marshmallow) served in the chain's custom-designed, patented Hug Mugs; Choctails (milkshakes and smoothies); Max-I-Scream fountain treats; Chocolate Fondue; Choco-Icons (Melting Chocolate Heart Cake with an iced chocolate shot; Chocolate Chunks Pizza by the slice, half or whole); waffles and crepes; and specialty coffees, espresso and tea.

Each store averages 2,500 to 2,800 square feet, including 200 square feet of packaged chocolate display. Serving as each location's showpiece, the chocolate bar measures 25 to 30 feet and seats 12 to 14 customers. "Those are the prime seats because you can take in all of the activity behind the bar," Borghese says. "The espresso machines are there, the chocolate machines; the desserts are being finished, and you can see the crepe and waffle makers at work.

Overhead, pipes run along the

ceiling through which fresh chocolate is pumped. It's a great sensory experience."

The company is set to open a second unit in Paramus, N.J., in March, and site selection is underway in Washington, D.C., and New York. For now, U.S. expansion will be corporate, but Borghese says the company will likely franchise as well. "We've had interest from Florida to San Diego and Toronto to Houston," he says. "Three to 5 years out we're looking at 200 U.S. units and another 200 or so globally."



The first re-concepted Max Brenner Chocolate Bar Café opened in Bethesda, Md. There are 40 locations globally, including 10 full-service restaurants.

Quick Look

- **U.S. HQ:** New York
- **Ownership:** Strauss Group, Israel
- **U.S. units:** 1 Max Brenner Chocolate Bar (40 globally); 4 full-service restaurants (10 globally)
- **Menu specialties:** Chocolate-based desserts, pastries, beverages, waffles, crepes
- **Segment:** Fast casual
- **Website:** maxbrenner.com