IN THE FAST LANE

Georgia’s rapidly growing fast-casual restaurants

Rise Artisan Pizza + Salads
CEO John Smith

SpaceX Chef Ted Cizma Talks Cooking Vegan

Who’s Your New Competition?
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Restaurant INFORMER

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About the Cover: Sarah Newman photographed Rize Artisan Pizza + Salads CEO John Smith at the restaurant’s Atlanta location in Poncey-Highland.

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Fresh. Vibrant. Global. Local. These are words you may not have always associated with the food served at fast-casual restaurants, yet these are some of the ways today’s concepts are keeping pace with the larger food trends steering diners’ dollars.

While fast-casual is one of the smallest subsets of restaurants – only about 7.5 percent of market share – growth in the industry has been more than 500 percent since 1999. In fact, while the restaurant industry as a whole grew 5.7 percent in 2015, revenue grew 10.4 percent for fast-casual restaurants.

So what started out as a slightly elevated version of fast-food back in the ’90s has now become the country’s fastest-growing segment of the restaurant industry, due in no small part to giving people what they want.

Today that means quality food, but fast. We have things to do. We want healthy foods, but not at a cost that will break our budgets. We want the experience of eating out, but we want efficiency, too.

In short, the segment is a reflection of the changing nature of what it means to eat and what restaurants represent to our culture. While every type of dining establishment has its own target audience, taking a look at how the fast-casual market is responding to changing eating patterns can only help your business succeed in an ever more demanding industry.

So Restaurant Informer did just that, profiling four of the state’s fast-casual concepts and showing how they’re a reflection of the industry as a whole. You can find Hope S. Philbrick’s article, “In the Fast Lane,” on page 14.

Keeping up with where the restaurant industry is going also means knowing who your competition is and what you need to do to keep diners coming through your doors. Our longtime contributor Nancy Caldarola shares some of the new players in the field and 9 must-dos to keep your restaurant clean, something that’s always important but even more so in today’s dining climate.

Lastly, one of the significant trends forecasted by food consultants is a bigger emphasis on vegetables. We talk with SpaceX Chef Ted Cizma on page 18 about cooking plant-based meals, even if you aren’t vegan yourself.

And speaking of trends for 2017, guess what’s No. 2 on the National Restaurant Association’s list of Top 10 Concept Trends? Chef-driven fast-casual concepts. Looks like everyone is getting into the fast lane.
The restaurant industry is in the people business. We are only as good as the people that we employ in our restaurants, and our employees are our biggest asset. It is important from an association standpoint that the Georgia Restaurant Association (GRA) focuses on workforce development initiatives to enhance the economic stability of not only the restaurant industry, but also for our community.

The restaurant industry is currently facing a labor shortage. Recruiting and retaining top talent remains to be a top challenge for operators. There is so much competition among other industries for employees. Workforce demographics are shifting as the younger labor pool is shrinking, and there is a greater proportion of older workers.

On the other hand, there are people out there who are unemployed, dislocated workers or low-income adults and youth. Through workforce development programs, we can seek to improve the job training and marketability of Georgia’s workforce while helping the restaurant industry create a solution for labor shortages. The GRA is involved in several initiatives to create solutions for both employers and potential employees.

Kennesaw State University (KSU) offers an excellent culinary program to students interested in the culinary arts. Not every student is interested or financially able to attend a four-year program, yet they may have a passion for the culinary arts and for getting a job within the restaurant community. KSU’s program is based on four hours of classroom per week coupled with 15 hours in that same week working in an established restaurant or catering facility. Each student completes four seven-week apprenticeships to successfully complete the course. Classroom study is immediately put to practice so that the knowledge and skill base stays with the student throughout the program.

United Youth of America is a non-profit organization servicing the needs of underprivileged young people, ages 7 to 17. This organization works with several counties throughout Georgia to place students in paid apprenticeship programs. The county agrees to cover a certain amount of the wages and labor taxes during a six-month period.

Westside Works Culinary Academy is a partnership between Westside Works, Levy Restaurants and the Arthur Blank Foundation. This eight-week culinary academy introduces students to kitchen safety protocols, international cuisines, baking and pastry and restaurant simulations and provides an opportunity to receive ServeSafe Certification. Graduates will have a path to employment through Levy Restaurants venues, as well as dining establishments throughout metro Atlanta.

The GRA believes that these programs will create opportunities and a brighter future for job seekers. The restaurant industry will be able to employ a disciplined, dynamic, dedicated and well-trained group of workforce professionals. We want to help bridge the gap between talent-ready participants and employers that seek to provide a pathway to a good career.

Sincerely,
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CAE, CEO
Georgia Restaurant Association
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Did you know that the restaurant industry is America’s second-largest private-sector employer, with agriculture being the first? Restaurants are truly a driving force in our nation’s economy: They provide jobs and build careers for millions of people and play a vital role in local communities throughout the U.S.

The industry’s anticipated numbers for this year are staggering. According to the National Restaurant Association’s 2017 Restaurant Industry Forecast, restaurant-industry sales will reach $798.7 billion in 2017, a 4.3 percent gain over the industry’s estimated sales of $766 billion in 2016. Restaurants are projected to remain the nation’s second-largest private-sector employer, providing jobs and careers for about one in 10 working Americans.

Georgia’s restaurant industry is one of the strongest in the country and is the second-largest private-sector employer in the state as well. We work closely with agriculture, the state’s largest private-sector employer. They grow the food, we feed the people!

Our state currently has more than 17,900 eating and drinking place locations that employ 446,600 people, which accounts for 10 percent of Georgia’s workforce. The number of jobs Georgia restaurants provide is projected to grow to 516,600 by 2027. Restaurants can expect to see a 5.4 percent growth in sales from 2016 to 2017, with a projected total sales amount of $19.6 billion this year.

The Georgia Restaurant Association (GRA), Georgia’s only not-for-profit representing the state’s foodservice industry, takes immense pride in our industry’s economic contribution on a national and state level. By acting as the voice of the restaurant industry in advocacy, education and awareness, restaurant owners and operators can spend their time and efforts focusing on their employees, guests and overall business performance.

The GRA continuously works on building and maintaining relationships with elected officials to increase the advocacy efforts of our association. We are dedicated to protecting the bottom line for the foodservice industry. We work hard to fight any legislation that will have a negative effect on our industry, and we work hard to support any legislation that will have a positive effect on our industry. The GRA appreciates when legislators support small business and help minimize the red tape that holds establishments back from being successful.

Keep in mind that more than half of restaurants in the U.S. are independently owned and operated, and 80 percent of those restaurant owners started their industry careers in entry-level positions. The restaurant industry exemplifies how hard work and dedication can lead to a huge impact on our economy.

For more information on the NRA 2017 Restaurant Industry Forecast, visit www.restaurant.org/forecast. For more information about the GRA, visit www.garestaurants.org or contact the GRA at info@garestaurants.org or (404) 467-9000.

Why Become a Member of the Georgia Restaurant Association?

Whether you are looking to get involved with shaping public policy, for discounts on programs and services that are critical to running a restaurant or to stay informed about changing laws and regulations affecting the foodservice industry, you’ll find it all at the GRA.

Online applications are available at www.garestaurants.org. For questions, contact GRA Director of Membership Ryan Costigan at ryan@garestaurants.org or (404) 467-9000.

Celebrate the flavors of Georgia! Georgia Restaurant Week aims to highlight the various dining options that are available to consumers throughout the state. This week will allow patrons, both local and from out of state, to explore various dining options throughout Georgia for a set price and experience the local Georgia products that are available in Georgia’s restaurants.

www.garestaurantweek.com
What do you think is the biggest or a unique challenge for those in the fast-casual segment?

Each month, Restaurant Informer is asking some of the hospitality community’s top leaders to give their insight on today’s biggest issues and trends in the restaurant industry. Answers have been edited for space or clarity.

Jay Bandy
Goliath Consulting Group

The biggest challenge is differentiation now. Fast-casual is everywhere. Twenty years ago I was a regular Chipotle customer at their location in Chicago, and they owned the market where their locations were located. It was unique. Now it’s not. There are a half-dozen pizza concepts, Mediterranean, burritos etc. and dozens of better burger restaurants.

It’s about being innovative and not being a “me too” concept – being like everyone else in the space. Shake Shack has led the way, and other New York-based fast-casual concepts are differentiating themselves with high-quality, chef-driven menus.

Federico Castellucci
Castellucci Hospitality Group

I believe that the proliferation of many different cuisine types into the fast-casual segment is creating increased competition. Further changing the competitive landscape is the explosion of food halls nationwide, which is creating further pressure on the incumbent brands.

For a segment that has seen tremendous growth in the last 10 years, this new set of competition is going to make growth harder to achieve. Customers are also expecting their fast-casual options to be delivered to them. This forces the restaurant to choose between expensive delivery services like UberEats, building their own delivery system (also expensive) or risk losing out on sales due to not offering delivery.

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A hurdle these rapidly growing concepts appear to have in common is the challenge of attracting and retaining top talent for their locations. The business model of a fast-casual restaurant points to a lower-cost build out and ease of deployment to multiple cities. I’ve had company executives from this segment tell me the hardest thing isn’t acquiring locations, building sites or even getting guests in the door – the hardest part is finding great people to manage their operations.

To gain a competitive advantage, organizations must focus on building a compelling employment proposition, maintaining a rigorous selection process, investing in and implementing effective training programs and creating a culture where they are always on the lookout for good people. In the fast-casual world, growth isn’t hampered by the ability to build great spaces – it’s hampered by the ability to build great teams.

Steve Gibson  
TalentServed

Steve Gibson  
TalentServed

“...growth isn’t hampered by the ability to build great spaces – it’s hampered by the ability to build great teams.”
— Steve Gibson

Bill Ray  
US Foods

The largest challenge that operators face today is relevance. The newest generation of diners is different. [The millennials] want to socialize their food and feel connected with the brands they choose because they are representative of the individual. Operators will need to be connected with the community and build brand loyalty based on their social initiatives.

Technology will continue to be used to make food experiences more convenient for diners and will be the most important optimization tool for operators. M-gen diners are not satisfied with standard fare. Instead they want new, innovative flavors that mirror the ethnic variety found in their social networks.
Each year, the ACF-Atlanta Chefs Association (ACF-ACA) recognizes individuals and organizations whose support significantly contributes to the success of the organization throughout the year. On February 12, Druid Hills Golf Club hosted the ACF-ACA President’s Awards and Casino Night to honor those who greatly supported the Chapter in 2016.

Chapter members, vendors and community leaders gathered to enjoy an evening of great food and camaraderie. Druid Hills Golf Club Executive Chef Livinton Bedminster, his staff and student volunteers created a buffet fit for the most discriminating chefs. From the braised short ribs and smoked trout to Asian duck and bread pudding, the food was deliciously outstanding and well executed.

More than 150 of Atlanta’s culinary leaders were in attendance, including chefs, cooks, pastry chefs and bakers, culinary instructors and industry leaders from some of the largest food companies in Atlanta.

The awards portion of the evening began by honoring the Chapter’s partners for their continued support of the chefs, the Chapter and the community throughout the year. (See sidebar for this year’s winners.)

The ACF-Atlanta Chefs Association would like to thank all the wonderful chapter members, vendors and purveyors who give their support and make this ACF chapter the best in the country. Without you, we could not create an organization where chefs can network and grow in the culinary industry and impact the communities of Atlanta as we do. Working together, we can accomplish much and help make Atlanta one of the country’s top culinary leaders.

Cathy Harris, Rockdale Career Academy, accepts the Presidential Award from ACF President Kully Crean.

ACF members enjoy the Casino Night theme of the evening.

### The 2016 ACF-ACA Awards

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<td>Alexander “Alex” Bladowski, CEC, CCE – North Georgia Technical College</td>
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IN THE FAST LANE

Fast-casual restaurants went mainstream in the 2000s, and now it’s the most rapidly growing segment of the restaurant industry

By Hope S. Philbrick

Back in the 1990s, if you wanted a quick meal on the go, fast-food was pretty much your only choice.

But then a few companies figured out a way to raise the bar with their product but still commit to quick service while providing a slightly more upscale environment. A new restaurant segment was born.

Today, fast-casual is the restaurant industry’s fastest-growing segment. Increasing 550 percent since 1999, it reached $30 billion in annual sales in 2014. That’s more than 10 times the growth of the fast-food industry over the same period, reports Nation’s Restaurant News and The Washington Post. A slowdown isn’t expected: Double digit growth is forecast through 2022.

Matt Andrews, above, founder and CEO of Uncle Maddio’s, which specializes in “create your own” pizzas

CEO John Smith at Rize Pizza + Salads in Atlanta
Fast-casual is a hybrid mixing the convenience and quick service of fast-food with the healthier ingredients and more upscale settings of casual restaurants. For many people, especially those in the coveted 18-35 year old demographic, fast-casual is perceived as healthier than their fast-food counterparts.

“There are three key drivers of ‘fast-casual,’” says Matt Andrew, founder and CEO of Uncle Maddio’s, an Atlanta-based fast-casual pizza concept with 57 locations in 18 states. “Higher food quality, made to order and price – of course, customers pay a little more for a premium product [compared to fast-food], but it’s still affordable.” A meal might cost $10 rather than $5.

Fast-casual gives people what they want: Quality food fast for a reasonable value.

Define, Differentiate

To compete, any restaurateur needs a defined concept and a marketplace differentiator. Fast-casual is no exception. “Identify consumer demand and fill the void,” says Andrew.

Uncle Maddio’s key differentiator is its specific niche: New York-style pizza. “New York-style pizza appeals to 40 percent of the market,” says Andrew. “But our competitors play in wood-fire or Neapolitan, which is 17 percent of the market.”

Of the $40-billion a year in pizza sales in the U.S., he notes, New York-style pizza accounts for $16-billion worth of sales. “That translates to tens of millions of consumers – a much larger pool of people who demand and crave New York-style pizza as opposed to wood-fire or Neapolitan pizza, which is a $5- to $6-billion market.”

While pizza is a large market, “fast-casual pizza appeared about five to seven years ago; it’s an awakening of a new category,” says Andrew. “While it took 25 years for the burrito [concept] to get 1,000 stores, it won’t take that long for pizza. There’s a major paradigm shift in how consumers are using pizza.”

Traditional options (delivery to home or office, whole pie or slices at a restaurant) have been reinvented as Uncle Maddio’s serves craft pizza in eight minutes or less. “That’s transitioning the occasion from dinner to lunch,” says Andrew, who sees a 50-50 split in lunch and dinner, “a major shift.”

Newcomer Rize Artisan Pizza + Salads is “fast-casual 3.0,” says John Smith, founder and CEO. At Rize, guests order when they walk in the door then sit anywhere in the open dining room of tables, booths and pizza bar. Once seated, there’s tableside service until they decide to close their check. Everything is handcrafted, but the approach isn’t build-your-own.

While Smith cites the “amazing pizza crust” as Rize’s biggest differentiator, service is equally essential. He sees his restaurant as someplace that families can get in and out quick at and people can pick up food to go when they’re in a hurry, but it can also be a great date night spot, too – something that’s not typical for the average fast-casual concept.

“We invest in our culture, do a lot of training,” he says. “There are competitors and then what I call rivals.” For Smith, traditional pizza places are rivals, while any other restaurants that customers may consider dining at are competitors.

Fast-casual isn’t just burritos, burgers and pizza. “‘Fast-fine’ is the category we developed in 2006,” says Pierre Panos, founder and CEO of Fresh To Order. “We take fine-dining preparation and cooking methods and bring it down to a fast-casual price point and space.”

With the mission to serve “incredible food” in under 10 minutes for around $10, Fresh To Order’s menu is chef-inspired yet line-cook executable with recognizable favorites like grilled salmon, fire-grilled chicken, seared tuna, Asian salad and more. “‘Fresh’ and ‘fine’ permeate everything we do,” says Panos.

The menu alone cannot drive the dining experience. Tijuana Flats takes an “‘anything goes’ approach to food, service, art, hot sauce and life in
general,” says CEO Larry Ryback. The Florida-based Tex-Mex concept has two locations in Georgia. “Our community handmade ceiling tiles and mural art are throughout the restaurant; our team members are empowered and unscripted with a mission to include multiple touch points with our guests.”

Empowering team members is one way Tijuana Flats helps “ensure guests have a 'flat outrageous' experience,” says Ryback. “Our guests are greeted at the door, our team might share their favorite menu item, review the menu with them, explain the order process and the hot sauce bar, refill drinks, deliver food to the table and clean up.”

Growth Drivers
The impact of fast-casual is felt throughout the industry, especially fast-food and casual dining.

“We are taking market share from casual dining restaurants,” says Fresh to Order’s Panos. “Guests want quality food quickly at a lower price point. In casual dining you eat slowly and have to leave a tip, so the average ticket is $15 and up per person plus a 20 percent tip. In fast-casual, your ticket average is $10 per person for the same food quality, and you don’t have to leave a tip.”

While fast-casual concepts tend to average less than 20 percent of sales from dinner, at Fresh To Order dinner accounts for close to 40 percent of sales. Panos credits entrées on the menu and locations near a high density of both office workers (potential lunchtime customers) and residents (for dinner) for the numbers.

Millennials are big fans of fast-casual. “They eat out more frequently,” says Smith. “And they want better food but at the same time don’t want to spend two hours in a restaurant. Fast-casual is the intersection of better food and a better dining experience with a timely service cycle time and lower cost.”

Fast-casual alcohol sales are typically five percent, but Rize is “approaching 20 percent, which is unheard of,” says Smith. “And we don’t have a bar or bartender – we have beer, wine, sangria. Twenty percent is what casual restaurants with a bar and sell spirits get.” He credits the menu and atmosphere for the numbers, favoring locations with rooftops and/or patios to encourage lingering.

What the Future Holds
Fast-casual will continue to evolve, especially as fast-food outlets up their game to gain some market share. Expect to see an ongoing rollout of new menu items and different flavor profiles, as well as additional serving size options and expanding fresh, vegetarian and locally sourced options.

Also look for new technology and tech applications. “Technology and convenience will continue to play a significant role in the restaurant industry,” says Tijuana Flats’s Ryback. “As consumers become busier and the world continues to evolve, restaurants must also become fast paced in order to serve those growing needs.”

Adapting to customers’ demands helps keep them. “Online ordering and delivery services are changing the landscape,” says Andrew. “We have to be at the forefront of embracing technology and how that plays into our dining room and kitchen. There may be a shifting downward in the size of dining rooms as people use more third-party delivery services to take food home.”

Rize employs smart digital technology – via team member’s individual tablets for tableside service, mobile app ordering and Bluetooth technology – for expedited food delivery and bill pay. “You can’t do cool stuff with an old closed-system POS,” says Smith. “We use a cloud with open architecture and are giving control back to the consumer in terms of when they order, how they order, when they pay and how they pay.” The goal is to give diners more control while allowing for increased
interaction between team leaders, team members and guests.

From the moment someone enters the door, technology steers their experience at the restaurant. Team members take their order on a tablet then give the diners a disc similar to those pagers that buzz when your table is ready.

But these do much, much more. The discs are synced up with that initial order, and each table has RFID technology built in underneath that ‘talks’ to those discs as soon as they’re placed on the table. So if a diner sits at one table, then decides to move to a different table or sit at the bar, for instance, team members have no trouble finding them in the restaurant. Diners can also download the Rize app and pay via their smartphones when they’re finished eating and ready to leave.

If they’re in a hurry, they can also place an order before they arrive. The system will detect when the person is arriving, so the kitchen can fire the order and have it ready for pick up as soon as possible – but not so early that the food gets cold.

While more restaurants will begin to incorporate such technology, labor and food cost challenges aren’t going away. “The difference between the cost of eating at home and the cost of eating out can’t continue to grow,” says Smith. “We cannot raise our prices or consumers will say it’s more financially beneficial to eat at home.”

At the same time, quality cannot be compromised. “The biggest trend we’ll see is fast-casual will try to elevate up to fast-fine,” predicts Panos. “Fast food is starting to elevate their facilities, trying to capture some of the market they lost to fast-casual, which is fast-casual will try to elevate up to fast-fine,” predicts Panos. “Fast food is starting to elevate their facilities, trying to capture some of the market they lost to fast-casual, which has been the darling for 10 years.”

Ultimately, “People will always want to eat out to escape,” says Panos.

“When people decide to leave their house and eat in a restaurant, they have a lot of options,” says Smith. “When they choose a restaurant they’re saying ‘I trust you.’ They want to enjoy the moment. If the food is not right or a team member has a bad attitude or the food doesn’t come out right, we destroy that moment.

“We’re trying to enhance the moment for our guests,” he says. “It’s a lofty goal for fast-casual, but we’re doing it.”

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**FAST-CASUAL FEATURED PLAYERS**

- **Fresh To Order (f2o)**
  - **Concept:** Pioneer of “fast fine,” which combines the quality of food found in casual fine dining with the operating platform and pricing of fast-casual. Menu offers recognizable favorite entrees, sandwiches, soups and salads with flavorful chef-inspired twists plus beer and wine.
  - **Launched:** 2006
  - **Locations:** 13 open, 4 under construction (2 in Indianapolis, 2 in Atlanta), 11 more in various stages of development; multi-unit agreements recently signed in Indianapolis, Chicago and Philadelphia.
  - **HQ:** Roswell
  - **Founder/CEO:** Pierre Panos, who founded Stoney River Legendary Steaks in 1996 and later Brookstone Management, the parent company of Brookwood Grill and Stoney River (which he sold to O’Charley’s Inc. in 2000). In 2000, Panos established QS America, now a $60-million company, which parents 42 Papa John’s franchises, Brookwood Grill, Brookwood Catering and f2o, which he started franchising in 2010.

- **Rize Artisan Pizza + Salads**
  - **Concept:** A chef-driven menu of California-style artisan pizza, hand-crafted salads and pasta with bold flavors. Digital strategies aim to enhance the guest experience without getting in the way of human interaction.
  - **Launched:** 2016
  - **Locations:** First one opened in Atlanta’s Poncey-Highland neighborhood in November 2016, and a Sandy Springs location opened in March.
  - **HQ:** Atlanta
  - **Founder/CEO:** John Smith, whose resume includes stints at General Electric, IBM, McKinsey & Co., Diamond Cluster International, HealthAxis Corporation, Target Corporation, Collective Brands, Inc., and Caesars Entertainment Corporation, where he was regional president.

- **Tijuana Flats**
  - **Concept:** Tex-Mex with specialties like Bangin’ Chicken Tostadas and a hot sauce bar with 12+ unique varieties, including a proprietary line of Smack My Ass and Call Me Sally sauces.
  - **Launched:** 1995
  - **Locations:** 126 in Florida, Virginia, Indiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia (Poloer and Savannah). 15 locations are planned to open in 2017.
  - **HQ:** Winter Park, Fla.
  - **CEO:** Larry Ryback, appointed in July 2016; previously worked as COO for True Food Kitchen, P.F. Chang’s, Kona Grill and Redstone American Grill

- **Uncle Maddio’s**
  - **Concept:** Build-your-own New York-style pizza concept that serves guests in under eight minutes for about $8. With three crusts in four sizes, seven sauces, 27 vegetables and 15 meats, it offers a possible 132,651 different combination options. Create-your-own salads and ‘foldwich’ sandwiches round out the Italian-inspired menu alongside craft beers and wine.
  - **Launched:** 2008
  - **Locations:** 57 in 18 states; on track to have 300 restaurants open in five years with 1,000 units in development.
  - **HQ:** Atlanta
  - **Founder/CEO:** Matt Andrew; previously he was president and co-founder of Moe’s Southwest Grill (which launched in 2001 and was sold to Focus Brands in 2007).
Whether it’s for environmental, ethical or health reasons, more people are choosing to eat plant-based meals – even if they aren’t vegan seven days of the week. Some of 2017’s top trends echo this desire to eat less meat and animal-based products, from root-to-stem cooking and spiralized vegetables to fermented foods like kombucha and kimchi.

Chefs don’t need to follow a plant-based diet to make extraordinary vegan food, however. Take Chef Ted Cizma, global executive chef for Space Exploration Technologies Corp. – better known as SpaceX, the aerospace manufacturer and space transportation company launched by entrepreneur Elon Musk.

Cizma opened the award-winning Grace Restaurant in his hometown of Chicago in 1998 and its sister restaurant Elaine in nearby Naperville in 2001, both of which he later sold to consult to luxury resorts and hotels throughout the country. In 2000, Food & Wine magazine named him its Best New Chef in America.

The son and grandson of butchers, Cizma was once known for his signature game dishes – a very non-vegan chef. Yet since 2011 he has served tens of thousands of meals a month in California, Texas and Florida, feeding SpaceX employees like rocket scientists and astronauts and preparing lots of vegetable-forward dishes.

I talked with Ted last winter about why chefs should provide vegan options on their menus, what to focus on when cooking vegan, and which plant-based foods are easy to keep on hand in a commercial kitchen.

Q. Why should chefs – regardless of their own dietary choice or culinary emphasis – provide vegan options?

Ted: It’s just good business. No matter what type of operation you have (independent, hotel or corporate) a portion of your “clientele” will be interested in vegan options. It’s your responsibility as a chef to provide them with offerings that are in keeping

Looking for Vegan Food in Georgia?

Mainstays vegetarian Café Sunflower and all-vegan Soul Vegetarian Restaurant in Atlanta serve up plant-based fare that range from healthy to comfort food at its finest. cafesunflower.com soulvegetarian2.com

Buffet-style Back to Edenz in Macon serves up veg versions of Southern favorites, from vegan mac and cheese to vegan sweet potato cupcakes. facebook.com/edenzvegetarian

New kid on the block Herban Fix in Midtown Atlanta focuses on upscale Asian vegan fare. herbanfix.com

In Athens, The Grit diner offer vegan soups, salads, deli-style sandwiches, Middle Eastern and Mexican plates and even vegan cake and ice cream. thegrit.com

Find sweet treats at Dulce Vegan Bakery & Café in the Kirkwood neighborhood of Atlanta. dulcevegan.com

For uber-nutritious bites, try Healthful Essence in the West End neighborhood and Tassili’s Raw Reality in Little Five Points in Atlanta. healthfulessence.com tassilisrawreality.com

While not a vegan or vegetarian restaurant, the menu at Vito Pizza & Ristorante in Alpharetta features vegan options for several Italian classics, including chicken parmesan and eggplant rollatini – and pizza with vegan cheese. vitospizzaandristorante.com
with your ability and mission to offer a product and service that is desirable to your guests.

Q. What do you focus on when preparing a vegan meal?

Ted: I like to compose dishes with an eye on three components, primarily: flavor, texture and appearance. When considering a vegan dish, I often also give more emphasis to the nutritional values of the ingredients. But the most important thing about any dish, vegan or not, is that it be delicious and attractive to the diner.

Q. What plant-based foods are easy to keep on hand in a commercial kitchen?

Ted: In my operation, because of the volume and variety of food I cook each day – 30 unique menu items per day over six to eight outlets – I generally have a plethora of both fresh and dried plant-based food. Recently I have been experimenting with creating nutritional “boosts” for plant-based dishes with pea protein and reduced, concentrated fruit and vegetable juices.

Q. What is your go-to vegan recipe?

Ted: Crispy Cauliflower & Avocado Tacos with Pico de Gallo. Vegans and carnivores alike approve!

JL Fields is the founder and director of the Colorado Springs Vegan Cooking Academy and the author of several cookbooks, including The Vegan Air Fryer and Vegan Pressure Cooking. Fields is on the culinary arts faculty at the University of New Mexico-Taos, the Colorado Springs Gazette vegan dining critic, and hosts the weekly radio program Easy Vegan. Learn more at JLgoesVegan.com.
How to stay competitive so you can capture your piece of the shrinking consumer food dollar

By Nancy Caldarola, Ph.D., RD

An increase in payments like rent, education and car loans along with decreasing food costs are leading more people to eat somewhere else instead of a restaurant, whether they’re buying food from a c-store, ordering home replacement meals or going to the grocery store to cook at home.

A recent survey by market research group NPD revealed that 75 percent of respondents have cut back on restaurant dining as they keep a closer tab on spending. Many consumers say restaurant prices are just too high – the average restaurant bill has climbed an estimated 21 percent in the past decade due to increased compensation, health costs, fixed costs and rollercoaster food costs. The group also estimates that 82 percent of all meals are now consumed at home. That means the 48 cents restaurants see from the consumer’s food dollar may be starting to decrease – a quiet but alarming change in past guest behaviors.

Plus, The Restaurant Industry Snapshot by research firm TDn2K shows that December 2016 was the weakest month in over three years for same-store sales growth (a 4.3 percent sales decline) and February 2017 same-store sales fell 3.7 percent while traffic declined 5 percent. Guess who got hurt the hardest? Casual dining, especially the bar and grill segment, along with family dining.

So what can restaurants do to keep diners coming through their doors?

Know Your Guests AND Your Competition

What do your guests want when they are looking for a meal outside the home? According to the NPD research team, first, guests want what they “can’t do or won’t do at home.” Many Gen X-ers and Millennials are not comfortable in the kitchen or do not want to put their time into the activity of food preparation.

Second, guests want familiar foods and healthy choices, “clean” food free of additives and preservatives with bold flavors and ethnic flare, and foods that say community and can be shared with family and friends. Finally, guests want more from the place they choose as their preferred food establishment – they want a food experience with a WOW factor. Diners are more knowledgeable about food and expect menu options that fit their dietary preferences no matter when or where they visit restaurants.

Then there is the competition. Food trends are now more concept-based than ingredient-based, with an ever-evolving focus on sourcing and preparation. Groceries and convenience retail operators that can deliver all or even some of these guest preferences will be winners.

The foodservice sales increases seen in these two segments show that they are ready to take on the restaurant industry. There are striking new looks inside the grocery store, appetizing and fresh food bars and an ever-increasing array of locally grown produce to highlight the sustainability movement.

And it’s not a surprise that more customers are dining at the grocery, picking up ready-to-heat meals at c-stores and even buying freshly made sushi at Walgreens in New York City. Retailers are getting in on the act with expanded food offers and an understanding of the new technologies embraced by Millennial guests to order groceries and meals for take-away and convenient delivery.

Convenience, all-day grazing and food on the run are all still part of the daily dining scene. As with any good strategic plan, it is important to recognize that QSRs, fast-casual and convenience operations with made-to-order offers all continue to pull sales from other segments. These competitors are quick to market with changes, new products and new technologies. They watch guest behaviors; they do guest research; they focus on what guests want.

Put Cleanliness and Value Before Price

Guests have also been vocal about other characteristics of the food establishment they will frequent, citing cleanliness and value as the top two reasons to select a place to purchase food or have a dining experience. According to research group Technomics, the price of product came in third, demonstrating that an attractive and inviting environment, clean restrooms and a well-organized and clean foodservice operation will continue to be a key driver of success.

With continual channel blurring, the restaurant industry needs to take stock of its offer, its personnel, food quality and food safety. Guest expectations are much higher, and social media can carry a negative message about your operation to more than a few close friends.

Guests use the online establishment score website maintained by the state and local county environmental health officials. They remember weekly TV stories about restaurants failing their food safety inspections and articles presenting all the unpleasant details about the deficiencies in selected foodservice locations. It makes no difference if the establishment is a big brand or a small independent operation; poor food safety practices will negatively impact restaurant sales and profits.

Since guests are vocal about cleanliness, owner/operators should also be vocal about cleanliness and food safety. A strong food safety culture is essential in all foodservice operations, and
successful restauranteurs understand that ongoing training of their managers and employees in this area helps them meet guest expectations.

**Create a Clean Culture**

Culture refers to the ‘way we do things here’ mentality. It has to do with an understanding of the company mission and priorities. If managers walk the talk and ensure proper food safety and cleanliness behaviors, then employees will observe and connect with the controls and measures in place. Owner/operators should continually focus on the four main pillars of restaurant success: People, Product, Equipment and Controls.

- We cannot operate without the best managers and employees, and they cannot support and contribute to the restaurant’s success without training and continual skills improvement.
- Your menu offer is your restaurant road map. A great menu concept in a welcoming environment is the backbone of attracting guests. Add Georgia Grown produce where appropriate, and tell your guests. Seek ways to educate about your connection to fresh and “clean” food.
- Where it is fiscally appropriate, upgrade equipment. New foodservice equipment saves energy dollars and is easier to clean and maintain.
- Measure what you expect in all areas of the operation. Checklists and other control tools help to keep the team on target. Guests expect a clean kitchen, clean restrooms, a clean and attractive exterior and interior of the restaurant, and employees who follow correct food handling and personal hygiene rules, including proper handwashing.

As we move into warm weather season in Georgia, we know that guests will return. Still, expect that consumers will continue to watch their spending. With this in mind, keep your operation in tip-top shape to welcome your guests.

Keep it clean, attractive, well-maintained, and inviting. Create craveable foods that meet what guests say they want in a WOW dining experience.

All these things can keep guest counts and average checks high, but don’t forget to create a food safety culture and walk the talk. A checklist can keep you on the right road to success.

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**Keep it Clean: 9 Must Dos**

1. Ensure that managers are current in food safety certifications and all persons in charge are properly trained in the same content. ServSafe® Food Handler training coordinates with the manager program content and is recommended for your service and production teams.

2. Be sure all employees know how to properly wash their hands. ServSafe® has the correct procedure. Teach it and ensure employees wash hands frequently in their work.

3. Create checklists for all key measurement areas: hot foods, cold foods, coolers, reach-ins, maintenance, restroom cleaning and general establishment cleaning. Use them!

4. Be sure managers and employees have been informed about the Georgia Food Code illness policy and procedures. There are very specific guidelines about employees who are ill and when they must be restricted or excluded from the food service operation or from the entire store. This must be part of the restaurant onboarding process, and a signed form for each employee must be kept on file for viewing by the Environmental Health Specialist during inspections.

5. Food allergy awareness is now an added requirement for employee food safety training, especially for individuals directly responsible for handling, preparing and serving foods to guests with life-threatening allergies. Contact us if you need information on how to get training for your employees.

6. Potentially hazardous foods are now known as Time/Temperature Control for Safety Foods or TCS foods. The list now includes cut leafy greens as well as meats, dairy, eggs, cut tomatoes, melon and cooked rice. Be sure these food items get your special attention.

7. NO bare-hand handling of ready-to-eat foods — ever. Be sure there are plenty of disposable gloves in varying sizes — one size does NOT fit all.

8. Food MUST be labeled when stored if not in the original container or if in the production cycle. This includes unsliced cheese, sliced fresh veggies and in-house sauces. If foods are not labeled, there is a hefty point deduction during inspections.


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Nancy Caldarola, Ph.D., RD, works from Atlanta with her consulting team, the Food Training Group. With more than 40 years experience in the hospitality industry, she is the former education director for the NACS Center for Achieving Foodservice Excellence at Georgia State University School of Hospitality and is currently the program director of Gwinnett Technical College’s Hospitality, Restaurant and Tourism Management program. The Food Training Group is the food safety educators for the GRA, offering consulting in operations improvement, training programs, food safety training and audits, menu engineering, nutritional product analysis and profitability improvement projects, including ServSafe® Food Safety Manager Certification and employee food handler programs. You can reach Dr. Caldarola and her team at 21

Register for ServSafe® Classes at foodtraininggroup.com.
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PREFERRED SUPPLIER LIST

The companies listed below are leaders in the restaurant industry and should be considered a part of any restauranteur’s preferred supplier list. Each of these suppliers participates in Restaurant INFORMER’s Power of Eight marketing program. To learn more about this program, call 719.599.7220 or email jsawyer@sawyerdirect.com

1. Gas South
   1.866.512.3129 chris.coan@gas-south.com gas-south.com/gra
   Gas South is one of Georgia’s leading natural gas providers serving more than 260,000 customers throughout the state. We’re proud to serve the restaurant industry and are pleased to provide discounted rates and waive customer service fees for GRA members.

2. Georgia Power
   404.316.9981 mcradde@southernco.com www.georgiapolice.com/foodservice
   Georgia Power’s Foodservice Team offers consulting services recommending the most cost-efficient electric cooking equipment options available to commercial kitchen operators.

3. Postec
   678.424.4000 sales@postec.com postec.com
   Independent provider of custom POS solutions and award-winning support services. Top-of-the-line hardware and software coupled with custom-designed solutions and backed by a support system to provide value to your business.

4. RDS
   678.279.8041 vlister@rdspos.com www.rdspos.com
   Provider of Aloha POS Systems, the management solutions for QSR, fine dining and franchise establishments. Excellent service and support packages tailored to our clients needs.

5. Savannah Distributing Co.
   678.380.1212 ewittgen@savdist.com savdist.com
   Georgia’s oldest wine and spirits wholesaler specializing in craft beer, craft spirits and a diverse portfolio of wines from around the world.

6. Sysco
   404.765.9900 jaks.yvette@atl.sysco.com www.syscoatlanta.com
   A leading foodservice marketer and distributor. Sysco distributes food and related products to restaurants, nursing homes, schools, hospitals, and other related venues.

7. US Foods
   770.774.8300 william.ray@usfoods.com www.usfoods.com
   US Foods®, your official food supplier, offers a broad range of products from national brands, private label, exclusive brands, equipment and supplies to all segments of the foodservice and hospitality industry.

For more on how to participate in or attend these events, see event websites. To see more upcoming industry events, check out restaurantinformer.com/restaurantbusinessevents.
Todd English Tavern  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
1100 Circle 75 Pkwy. (The Battery)  
Atlanta 30339  
Southern menu with an international influence. Full bar.

Simon’s  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
793 Juniper St. NE  
Atlanta 30308  
Sharable plates, raw bar with rotating menu of oysters and sushi.

Tasty China  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
1800 block of Atlanta Road (Taylor Square)  
Smyrna 30080  
Second location featuring Chinese fare.

Kaiser’s Chop House  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
5975 Roswell Road (Hammond Spring Shopping Center)  
Sandy Springs 30328  
Steakhouse from Kevin Rathbun and Peter Kaiser. Boutique wine and cocktail program.

Monkey 68  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
1073 Green St.  
Roswell 30075  
Hibachi-style Wagyu steak, Korean gumbo and more. Full bar.

First & Third Hot Dog and Sausage Shack  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
1100 Circle 75 Pkwy. (Atlanta Braves SunTrust Park)  
Atlanta 30339  
From chef Hugh Acheson, menu will feature high-quality sausages, hot dogs, andouille, merguez sausages and more.

Antico Pizza  
**Est. Opening Date: April 2017**  
1100 Circle 75 Pkwy. (Atlanta Braves SunTrust Park)  
Atlanta 30339  
New location of the Naples-style pizzeria.

Blue India  
**Est. Opening Date: May 2017**  
915 Peachtree St. NE  
Atlanta 30309  
Upscale Indian cuisine. Full bar.

Muchacho  
**Est. Opening Date: May 2017**  
904 Memorial Drive SE  
Atlanta 30316  
West Coast-style fare like tacos, grain bowls, toast and poke.

Otter’s Chicken  
**Est. Opening Date: May 2017**  
1965 Cobb Pkwy. (Kennesaw Marketplace)  
Kennesaw 30152  
Chicken meals, salads, boxes, tenders, wings and dessert.

The Roast  
**Est. Opening Date: May 2017**  
650 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE (Whole Foods Market)  
Atlanta 30308  

Salata  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
265 19th St. NW (Atlantic Station)  
Atlanta 30363  
Create-your-own salad bar. No ABC.

Gyu – Kaku Japanese BBQ  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
265 18th St. NW (Atlantic Station)  
Atlanta 30363  
Japanese concept that includes cooking meats over a flaming charcoal grill at the dining table. ABC.

Chai Yo  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
3050 Peachtree Road NW (Two Buckhead Plaza)  
Atlanta 30305  
Thai concept from the partners of Tuk Tuk Thai Food Loft.

Nova Sushi Bar & Asian Bistro  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
3637 Peachtree Road (Buckhead Triangle)  
Atlanta 30319  
Menu in development.

Max’s Coal Oven Pizzeria  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
4400 Ashford Dunwoody Road NE  
Atlanta 30346  
Pizza, sandwiches, salads and desserts from Legacy Ventures.

Metro Diner  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
3710 Northside Drive  
Macon 31210  
Chicken and waffles, shrimp and grits, meatloaf, pot pie and more.

Bar Americano  
**Est. Opening Date: June 2017**  
56 East Andrews Drive NW (Andrews Square)  
Atlanta 30305  
Italian concept from the partners of The Pinewood.

Black Sheep Tavern & Oyster Room  
**Est. Opening Date: July 2017**  
330 Edgewood Ave.  
Atlanta 30312  
Appetizers, sandwiches, fried tacos, wonton mozzarella sticks, bratwurst and more. Full bar with 8-12 local beers on tap.

Your Pie  
**Est. Opening Date: July 2017**  
275 Memorial Drive SE  
Atlanta 30312  
Fast-casual pizza, paninis, chopped salads, gelato and local craft beer.

Tokyo Belly  
**Est. Opening Date: September 2017**  
5001 Peachtree Blvd. (Peachtree Crossing)  
Chamblee 30341  
Asian street food concept from owners of Ichiban. Full bar.

Punch Bowl Social  
**Est. Opening Date: September 2017**  
1100 Circle 75 Pkwy. (The Battery Atlanta)  
Atlanta 30339  
8 bowling lanes, 1980s video-game arcade, billiards, private karaoke rooms. Food and full ABC.

Gus’s World Famous Fried Chicken  
**Est. Opening Date: September 2017**  
3551 Memorial Drive  
Decatur 30032  
Southern fried chicken and soul food.

The information provided on this page on current real estate transactions, leases signed, ownership changes and business brokerage activity is provided by Restaurant Activity Report, P.O. Box 201, Willow Springs, NC 27592; (443) 974-8897; joe@rarleads.com; restaurantactivityreport.com
“ELECTRIC COOKING ALLOWS ME TO BE BETTER AT WHAT I DO.”

EXECUTIVE CHEF MICHAEL DEIHL

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