

Today's Restaurant

THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY AUTHORITY

VOLUME 30

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When disaster strikes: The vital role of business interruption insurance

By Paul Segreto

The wildfire disaster in Southern California has brought unimaginable tragedy and devastation, leaving many grappling with the reality of loss and the overwhelming process of rebuilding. While discussions about the human impact of such events have dominated conversations, within my business network, the tragedy has also spurred conversations about preparedness and resilience. It's natural, in the wake of such a calamity, to wonder what we might do if faced with similar circumstances. While there's little we can do to prevent a natural disaster, we can take steps to mitigate the impact it might have on our businesses and personal lives.

Ensuring proper insurance coverage is one of the most prudent actions individuals and business owners can take. Many are aware of the importance of insuring physical property, both residential and commercial. However, one critical type of coverage is often overlooked: business interruption insurance.

Business interruption insurance provides a safety net for the lifeblood of your business—its operations. While property insurance covers physical damage, such as a destroyed building or equipment, business interruption insurance compensates for the income lost due to a disaster. This coverage can be the difference between a business surviving a

catastrophe or closing its doors forever.

Imagine a scenario where your business is forced to shut down for weeks or even months due to a disaster. Without the ability to generate revenue, fixed expenses such as rent, utilities, payroll,

considering it necessary, the lack of business interruption insurance can leave businesses dangerously exposed when disaster strikes.

In addition to having business interruption insurance, business own-



and loan repayments could quickly become insurmountable. Business interruption insurance steps in to cover these ongoing costs and may also provide funds for temporary relocation, ensuring that the business can continue operating in some capacity during the recovery period.

Unfortunately, many business owners only realize the value of this coverage after it's too late. Whether due to cost concerns, misunderstanding of policy terms, or simply not

ers should also conduct regular reviews of their policies. Key questions to consider include:

- ◆ Does the policy cover the full scope of potential income losses?
- ◆ Does it account for changes in business size or operations over time?
- ◆ Are additional costs, such as those for temporary relocation or rebuilding, included?

See **DISASTER** page 14

Sammy's Sliders prepares for a breakout year with bold plans for 2025

Winston-Salem, NC – [Sammy's Sliders](#) - the fast-casual gourmet slider franchise founded by restaurateur Sam G. Ballas and award-winning chef Sammy Gianopoulos, is poised for a transformative year in 2025 following significant milestones achieved in 2024. After a successful opening of its second location in Kernersville, NC, and the planning for their third location, the brand has officially entered the franchising arena with plans to grow strategically in the Southeast region.

"2024 marked the beginning of an exciting new chapter for Sammy's Sliders," said Ballas, Co-Founder of Sammy's Sliders. "Our success in Kernersville, coupled with the overwhelming enthusiasm from potential franchisees, validates the strength of our concept and sets the stage for strong growth in 2025."

With two thriving locations



exceeding expectations in Winston-Salem and Kernersville, Sammy's Sliders has captured the attention of food enthusiasts and franchise investors alike. The brand's signature "Beyond the Bun™" sliders, hand breaded chicken tenders, hand-spun ice cream shakes, and chef-driven menu continue

to differentiate it in the competitive fast-casual dining landscape.

Empowering Franchisees with Industry-Leading Support

As Sammy's Sliders looks to expand, the brand is committed to fostering franchisee success. Each new franchise

owner will benefit from a seasoned support team, including franchise business coaches who offer personalized, hands-on guidance with daily operations, marketing strategies, and financial management. The brand's unique approach of limiting territory sizes for coaches ensures that franchisees receive the dedicated attention they need to thrive.

"We're taking a methodical approach to growth, focusing on quality over quantity," said Ballas. "Our goal is to create a network of like-minded entrepreneurs who are passionate about bringing our chef-driven concept to their communities."

Innovative flavors for 2025

In addition to its franchising initiatives, Sammy's Sliders will continue to innovate its menu with seasonal shakes, like its current Andes Mint

See **SLIDERS** page 14

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Appell Pie

The future of AI robots in foodservice

Howard Appell ♦ Today's Restaurant Publisher

Over the last few weeks in meetings of the Today's Restaurant News Networking Group (www.trnusa.com/network-group) we have been discussing the future of AI Robots, so I decided to ask AI what it felt was the future. Here's what we can look forward to.

The future of AI-powered robot waiters in the restaurant industry is rapidly evolving, with significant advancements expected in the next few decades. Here's a detailed outlook:

Present state of AI robot waiters

♦ **Capabilities:** AI-powered robots can already perform tasks like delivering food, taking orders, greeting customers, and even processing payments. Examples include robots from companies like Bear Robotics, Pudu Robotics, and SoftBank Robotics.

♦ **Deployment:** AI robot waiters are most common in countries with high labor costs or staff shortages, such as Japan, South Korea, the U.S., and parts of Europe.

♦ **Customer perception:** While some diners are intrigued by the novelty, others express concerns about reduced human interaction.

Future of AI robot waiters

1. Near future (2025-'30)

♦ **Increased adoption:** Large restaurant chains and fast-casual dining establishments are expected to deploy more AI robot waiters due to labor shortages and rising operational costs.

♦ **Improved AI:** Advancements in natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning will enable robots to understand complex customer queries, provide menu recommendations, and handle diverse accents or languages.

♦ **Hybrid work models:** AI robot waiters will work alongside human staff, taking over repetitive tasks like food delivery and clearing tables while humans focus on customer engagement.

♦ **Affordability:** As technology

matures, costs will drop, making AI robots more accessible for mid-sized and smaller businesses.

2. Medium-term future (2030-'40)

♦ **Advanced personalization:** AI robots will use customer data to deliver highly personalized dining experiences, such as remembering dietary preferences, past orders, or even birthdays.

♦ **Autonomous operations:** Some restaurants may rely almost entirely on robots, with minimal human intervention. AI systems will coordinate between kitchen robots, cleaning robots, and AI waiters for seamless service.

♦ **Interactive robots:** Robots equipped with conversational AI and emotional intelligence may enhance customer interaction, creating a more engaging experience.

♦ **Ubiquity in fast food:** Fully automated fast-food outlets will become widespread, with AI robots handling everything from order-taking to food preparation and delivery.

3. Long-term future (2040-beyond)

♦ **AI-Driven innovation:** Robots will integrate with advanced technologies like augmented reality (AR) or holographic projections to enhance dining experiences. For example, robots could "project" interactive menus onto tables.

♦ **Universal adoption:** AI-powered robots will become a standard in the restaurant industry, particularly in fast-casual and quick-service sectors. High-end restaurants may also adopt them for unique customer experiences.

♦ **Self-Evolving AI:** AI robots will use predictive analytics to anticipate customer needs (e.g., refilling drinks before being asked) and optimize restaurant operations in real time. * Smart Cities Integration: AI robot waiters may collaborate with citywide AI systems, enabling things like on-the-go meal ordering and delivery by robots from nearby restaurants.

See **APPELL** page 14



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What's Going On

Important new products, corporate news and industry events



Dae Gee Korean BBQ – the Colorado-based franchise previously featured on Guy Fieri's popular show *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* – has officially brought its interactive dining experience and flavorful Korean fare to the Alamo City. Located in the Blanco Pointe Shopping Center in Stone Oak, the new eatery marks the very first Dae Gee Korean BBQ in the state of Texas. "San Antonio has become quite a culinary destination in recent years, and we're excited to bring Dae Gee's great food, endless flavors, and interactive dining experience to the area. We have no doubt the community will love it," said Anahi Resendez, who owns and operates the new restaurant with her husband, Tommy Nguyen, and her parents, Ovidio and Ana Resendez. Dae Gee's arrival to San Antonio comes at a time when the brand looks to continue its aggressive franchise expansion across the United States. With seven restaurants currently open and operating in Colorado, Indiana, and now Texas, company plans call for opening as many as 5-10 new restaurants nationwide over the next 12 months and at least that many each year thereafter. Other Dae Gee restaurants – daegee.com - are already in various stages of development across Massachusetts, NJ, and NC.

Smalls Sliders, known for its cheeseburger sliders and signature "smauce," will be coming to 2691 Watson Blvd. Warner Robins Georgia later this year. Guthrie's Chicken is coming also close to Small Sliders. Online at smallssliders.com.



Frank's RedHot Mango Habanero Wings Sauce. To help operators keep up with the latest flavors consumers are craving, these items combine high-quality ingredients in a ready-to-use format to help save time and labor in the back of house also.

A new food truck park concept, **Street Feast**, is in the works for **Kissimmee**. Owner Aamir Waheed shared this with Business Debut. (We saw it there) Planned for a 5.5-acre tract of land at 2600 S Poinciana Blvd,

the park aims to create an expansive eatertainment destination with a late 2025 opening timeline. Street Feast will feature space for 40 food trucks, each equipped with electricity and water connections. The park will include 700 seats under covered areas. Plans also call for a bar, arcade, playgrounds, splash park, and rentable cabanas complete with private bathrooms and TVs.



John Iannucci

John Iannucci is the new Chief Executive Officer of Mas Mex, the

restaurant group behind Texas-based Escalante's Fine Tex Mex & Tequila and Chicagoland-based Fat Rosie's Taco & Tequila Bar. With over 25 years of leadership experience at iconic brands like The Cheesecake Factory, TGI Friday's and Founding Farmers, John is focused on scaling Mas Mex's brands while maintaining their authentic charm. Since stepping into his role this summer, he's driven operational excellence, strengthened leadership

See **WHAT'S GOING ON** page 6

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Exclusive for TRN

The under-reported risk of labor trafficking in the restaurant business

Stefan Burkey ♦ Today's Restaurant Contributor

Back in 2000, amid a concerted global drive to end human trafficking, the U.S. passed the landmark **Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)** while the United Nations Sustainability Development Goal 8.7 vowed to end child slavery of children by 2025, and universally, by 2030.

But the global community is nowhere close to meeting this goal,

even the U.S. after several revisions to the TVPA. By 2019, the number of human trafficking victims identified worldwide had skyrocketed to almost 120,000 from 30,000 in 2008. And while the pandemic's travel restrictions slowed trafficking dramatically, it was back to pre-pandemic levels by 2022.

Many industries have had a role in this booming crime, whether a

witting one or not. Hotels and motels, for example, have been implicated in 60% of the sex and forced labor cases throughout the world, according to **The Global Slavery Index**. U.S. restaurants also have had a part, but more typically through forced labor. This is where people are compelled to work through "force, fraud or coercion," and forms of punishment like violence or debt repayment keep them in line.

The food services sector stands at the top of the U.S. Department of Labor's list of "**Low Wage, High Violation Industries**" for 2023, with 4,095 compliance actions resulting in \$29.6 million in back wages issued.

Many factors can result in wage and hour complaints, far beyond just forced labor. Even so, the kind of exploitation that characterizes human trafficking is believed to be pervasive in the restaurant business, but under-reported and rarely pursued. Restaurateurs need to be aware of the risk and offset their exposure.

What is labor trafficking?

Labor trafficking is a modern form of slavery, defined by the TVPA as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery."

Bonded labor is one form, where labor is required to repay a loan or service, but the reasonable value of that service is not necessarily applied. Another is forced labor, where victims work under the threat of violence or punishment, their freedom restricted.

Child labor is another form of exploitation that is increasingly putting the food industry under scrutiny. Since 2020, the Labor Department has found 13,000 violations, many in fast food chains, often where 14- and 15-year-olds worked longer or later hours than legally permitted.


Conditions in the restaurant business can create the sort of abuses that may cross the line to create trafficking victims: they are open long hours, often powered by low-wage and immigrant labor in back-of-the-house duties like dishwashing, cleaning and food prep. Many such workers have temporary work visas that they have paid recruiters dearly to obtain, leaving them saddled with debt that's difficult to cover with their wages.

Issues of concern to employers

The restaurant industry is aware of the risk of wage and hour violations – even when trafficking or child labor is not part of the equation.

Still, an expose last year by Boston's GBH News pointed out that victims were too afraid to speak out even though they knew they were being exploited. They worried about their immigration status. They worried about surviving without work. Restaurant workers all shared similar stories about 80-hour work weeks, no overtime pay and sub-minimum wages.

The labor department has stepped up its investigations of labor trafficking complaints; its Wage and Hour Division, for example, investigates and calculates restitution amounts.

Last year, for example, \$11.4 million in back wages and liquidated damages was recovered from an East Coast restaurant chain on behalf of over 1,000 employees for failing to pay minimum wage and keeping inaccurate payroll records. In paying back-of-the-house workers pre-determined amounts, employers failed to pay minimum wage or time-and-a-half for hours worked over 40 in a work week. 

About Stefan Burkey: Stefan is the hospitality practice leader for HUB International Florida. In this role, he oversees insurance placement solutions for owners, developers, and operators from limited-service hotels to full-scale resorts. Stefan and his team clearly understand the financial needs and exposures associated with the hospitality industry, and their singular focus has generated profound market knowledge and significant buying power for HUB clients throughout Florida and the U.S.

Stefan won Risk & Insurance's 2023 Hospitality Power Broker of the Year.

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Public Relations often outflanks advertising



PR Pro Tom Madden ♦ Today's Restaurant Contributor

There's a saying: "Advertising is what you pay for, publicity is what you pray for," but the difference is much sharper and many of us are poor prayers.

Often those in public relations hear from prospects they're pitching for PR business: "We don't need public relations right now as we are happy with our advertising agency."

However there is a big difference. Advertising is paid media, public relations is earned media. There's a huge difference especially in terms of results. In PR you have to convince reporters or editors to write a positive story about a client, candidate, brand or issue.

But what's more powerful is it appears in the editorial section of the magazine, newspaper, TV station or website, rather than the "paid media"

section where advertising messages appear that have obviously been paid for, not earned.

So the PR content has more credibility because it was independently verified by a trusted third party, the media, rather than purchased.

more effective, just saying yourself how good you are or having a credible chorus sing how superb you are? Here's a summary of the differences:

Countless studies report that, next to word-of-mouth advice from friends and family, editorial commentary car-

rying far more weight than advertising. And what does PR do? It generates editorial content.


Advertising keeps embracing an antiquated, top-down, inside-out way of communicating, reflecting senior management's view on what a consumer or business-to-business buyer should think is important.

PR, on the other hand, depends upon listening to the conversation and understanding the who, what, when, where, why and how of engaging in the discussion. Public relations executives excel in

storytelling and, typically, present a perceived problem, like obesity, and their client's unique solution (i.e. a new type of supplement to take. Implied endorsement by a third party such as a newspaper can carry far more credibility among potential customers, hence impact.

The best analogy for public relations some say is gift wrapping. If you give your sweetheart a gift in a Tiffany box, it would have higher perceived value than if it were just given to her plain. That's because we live in a culture where we gift wrap everything, our politicians, TV stars and even our toilet paper.

Almost every article you read or see in the media is "gift-wrapped" or originates from a public relations agency. Another huge difference between the two methods is price. A former client purchased one full-page ad in a popular weekly newsmagazine that cost him \$150,000. He expected a wave of phone calls, viral media and multiple conversations about the ad. Instead, he got zero.

In contrast, getting quoted in a major newspaper can result in national speaking invitations, calls from new and existing clients, solid credibility and other successful outcomes from the secret sauce, PR. 

ADVERTISING

- ◆ Paid
- ◆ Builds exposure
- ◆ Audience is skeptical
- ◆ Guaranteed placement
- ◆ Complete creative control
- ◆ Ads are mostly visual
- ◆ More expensive
- ◆ "Buy this product"

PUBLIC RELATIONS

- ◆ Earned
- ◆ Builds trust
- ◆ Media gives third-party validation
- ◆ No guarantee, must persuade media
- ◆ Media controls final version
- ◆ PR uses language
- ◆ Less expensive
- ◆ "This is important"

"The idea is the believability of an article versus an advertisement, which is between 10 times to 100 times more valuable than an advertisement."

A recent study by Nielsen on the role of content in the consumer decision-making process concluded that PR is almost 90% more effective than advertising and on average, expert content lifted familiarity nearly 90 percent more than branded content.

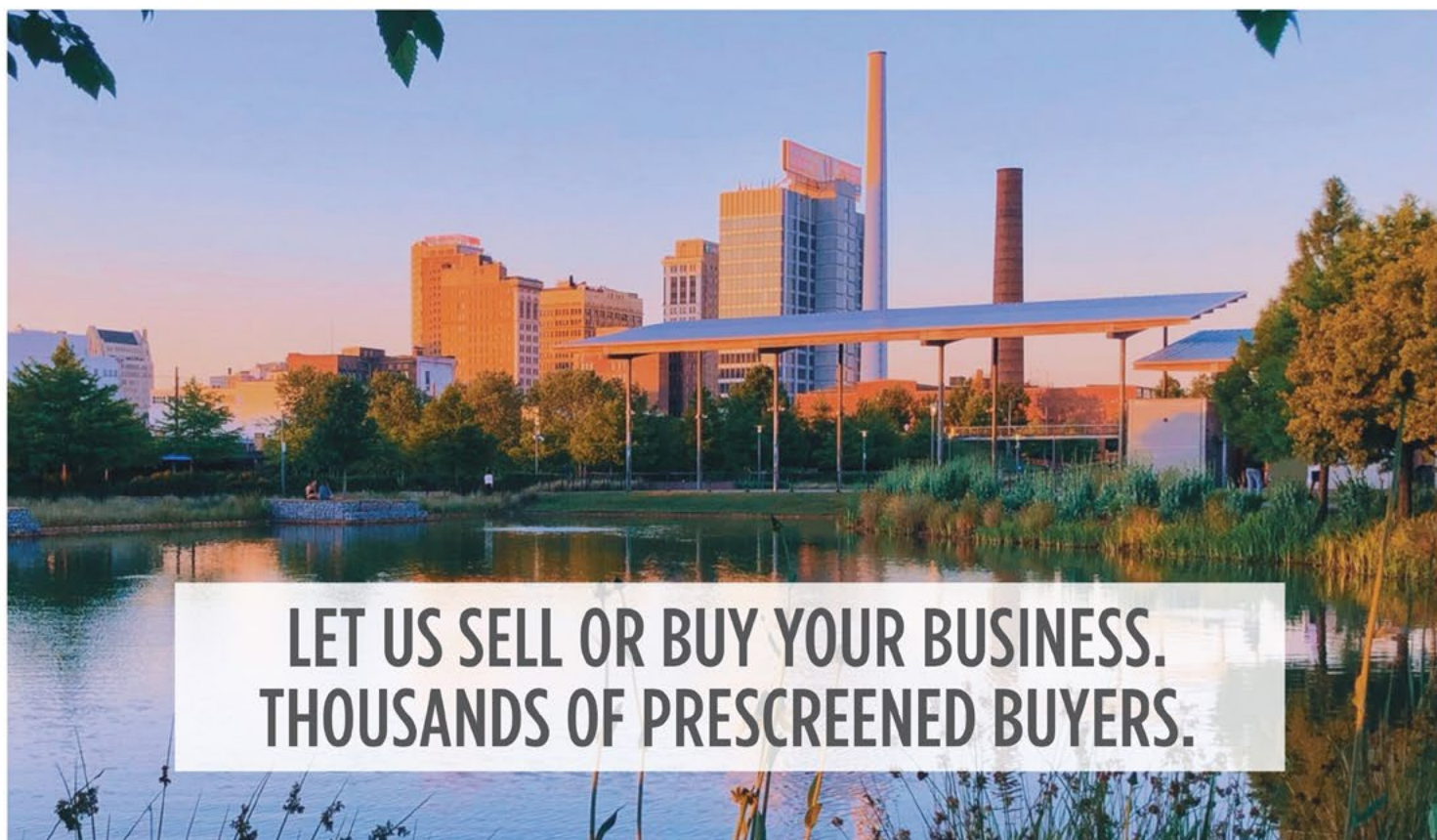
With advertising, you tell people how great you are. With publicity, others sing your praises. So, which do you think is

Implied endorsement by a third party such as a newspaper can carry far more credibility among potential customers, hence impact.



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What's Going On from page 3

teams, and overseen the record-breaking opening of Fat Rosie's Rosemont, the sixth location of this vibrant, family-friendly taco and tequila bar throughout the Chicago suburbs. A Cornell University Food & Beverage Management graduate, John is passionate about mentoring the next generation of leaders and advocating for the restaurant industry. He serves as Vice Chair of Restaurants for the Nevada Restaurant Association, a Hill Runner for the National Restaurant Association, and on the advisory council for the Restaurant Leadership Conference

◆ **Apogee Enterprises' Architectural Framing Systems segment has enhanced the Tubelite ForceFront® Storm (FFS) 400T Curtainwall system.** The improved design combines verified hurricane impact-resistance with updated thermally broken design, helping code-compliant, energy-efficient buildings support occupant safety, comfort and wellbeing. Tubelite FFS 400T Curtainwall's aluminum framing features a 2.5-inch, captured or structural silicone glazed (SSG), pressure bar system for use on single- and twin-span applications. "Projects in climates with hurricanes and tropical storms, also face extreme heat and high temperatures. Tubelite

ForceFront Storm Curtainwall provides building owners with a cost-effective, comprehensive solution," said Tim Fookes, vice president of product engineering for Apogee Enterprises' Architectural Framing Systems segment and Tubelite products. "Our FFS 400T system helps protect people and property from windborne flying debris and wind-driven rain. Its high-performance thermally broken framing also allows for large daylight openings, while maintaining comfortable indoor temperatures and energy-efficient operations." To learn more about Tubelite aluminum-framed storefront, entrance curtainwall and other products, visit tubeliteusa.com. (Shown is the Dream Hotel in Nashville)

◆ Roughly 67% of an average restaurant's revenue now comes from carryout orders placed online or by phone, and that number rises to 75% for quick-service restaurants (QSRs). Yet most eateries still hand out finished mobile orders from the front of the house or place them on open shelves, frequently resulting in



long wait times, order mixups and/or thefts requiring costly food remakes. Entrepreneur Kent Savage, four decades after inventing a film and single-use camera vending machine for Kodak and then earning the first of dozens of patents for creating an automated tool dispenser now widely used in factories,

Savage recognized that his technology could be used for mobile food order pickup. **That's when the smart food locker was born.** Today, Savage's **Apex Order Pickup Solutions** sells smart food locker solutions to **restaurants, college campuses, and other foodservice operations.** Finished orders are placed into locker compartments, and customers scan a code with their phone to retrieve them. There are no lines, no waiting, and no missing muffins or purloined burritos. Apex Smart Food Locker Solutions give customers and delivery drivers secure order pickup in less than 10 seconds. At the same time, they help operators optimize labor, eliminate order errors

and theft, and increase throughput. And they provide valuable insights and data that completes the digital order chain of custody.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
NetCost Market has opened in Hollywood at 3791 Oakwood Blvd. Known for its extensive selection of

Eastern European delicacies, this is the first location for the popular **grocery chain** in the state. NetCost Market, which operates 13 locations across New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, is celebrated for catering to a multi-ethnic customer base with a focus on Eastern European foods. The store's **Gourmanoff Corner** features fresh baked goods. They offer a deli counter with freshly prepared foods, charcuteries, and signature caviar selections. Eduard Shnayder is the CEO. Visit NetCostMarket.com for all details. Further locations are planned in FL.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
◆ **The National Protein and Food Distributors Association**, a leading organization in protein industry, recently named **Wendy Kavanagh** as their



Wendy Kavanagh

new president and CEO. Kavanagh grew up in the agricultural industry, where she was an active 4-H member. The National Protein and Food Distributors Association, formerly known as the National Poultry and Food

Distributors Association, is a non-profit trade association based in St. Mary's, Georgia. Established in 1967, the association consists of 300 industry firms nationwide, including protein and food suppliers, retailers, processors, transportation companies, and marketers.

See **WHAT'S GOING ON** page 10

CARPIGIANI

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QDOBA kicks off 2025 with planned new franchise developments across the U.S.

Cafua Management leads expansion with 20 new restaurants in New Hampshire and Rhode Island

San Diego, CA - QDOBA, America's #2 restaurant brand in the Mexican fast-casual category, is starting 2025 with several new franchise development agreements to expand its footprint in key U.S. markets. Among these is a significant deal with APR Island Management/Cafua Management, led by Mark, David, and Greg Cafua alongside Ricardo Gonzalez. As the largest Dunkin' franchisee in the U.S., Cafua Management has committed to developing 20 restaurants in New Hampshire and Rhode Island, building on their 2024 agreement to develop five restaurants in Pennsylvania.

"After more than 40 years in the quick-service industry, we chose to invest in the fast-casual market, and QDOBA stood out for its fresh, customizable meals and loyal customer base," shared Mark Cafua, QDOBA Franchise Owner with Cafua Management. "QDOBA's strong track record, exceptional franchisee support, and scalability made it the right fit. Ultimately, it was the passion of the people – both guests and employees – that truly convinced us. We're excited to join QDOBA and contribute to its growing success."

This announcement builds off the recent momentum shared at the end of 2024, where QDOBA celebrated



16 consecutive quarters of positive same-store sales and 22 new franchise signings nationwide, bringing its total franchise commitments to more than 450 future restaurants. Among these agreements is a significant deal with Q Eats LLC, an experienced multi-unit franchisee, who has signed on for 15 restaurants across Greater Houston with more opportunities available in the market.

Additional new franchise agreements highlight QDOBA's momentum and its ability to attract experienced

operators nationwide—most of whom are new to the system:

- ◆ Jay and Ahmad Jabbar, with an entrepreneurial background in other related multi-unit franchising businesses, have signed on for five new restaurants in New Orleans, expanding the brand's presence in Louisiana.

- ◆ Equipped with over a decade of experience, Spork Restaurant Holdings has committed to bringing 12 restaurants in Kansas City and surrounding counties in Missouri.

- ◆ Lifelong Chicago resident with

over 35 years of QSR experience, Holy Moley Guacamole, LLC has committed to build 15 new restaurants in Lake and DuPage counties throughout Illinois.

- ◆ Led by seasoned group Boost Enterprises with a combined 40 years of experience in QSR, Savannah, Georgia expects to be home to eight new QDOBA restaurants soon.

- ◆ Existing QDOBA franchisees are continuing to invest in the brand, demonstrating confidence in its growth potential. OM Group, a major Dunkin' and Wingstop franchisee, recently expanded its development agreement, adding six more units in Cleveland and Toledo. Other franchisees making additional commitments include QDOBA Cincinnati, adding three restaurants in Ohio; Goraya, committing to three restaurants in Baltimore, Maryland; Patel, adding one restaurant in Fort Morgan, Colorado; and Golden Maize Restaurants, LLC, signing for four new locations in Connecticut.

- ◆ On the non-traditional front, multi-unit operator group ELPX Restaurant Group, LLC, with an extensive portfolio of restaurants, plans to expand the QDOBA footprint globally within multiple U.S. military installations beginning in 2025.

See QDOBA page 12

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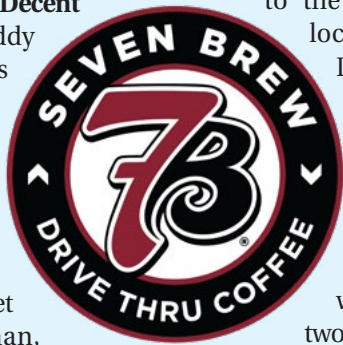
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Featured city Phoenix

This year, 2025, Phoenix diners will have multitudes of new restaurants to choose from. **Pretty Decent Concepts** led by Teddy and Katie Myers, is planning to open a few new restaurants this year after just opening Carry On, a 1960s airplane-themed cocktail bar on 3rd Street late 2024. Cleaverman, which will be their steakhouse restaurant and Filthy, their vintage martini bar concept is slated before mid-2025. Established in Phoenix, PDC is a premier hospitality group.



7 Brew, a new drive through coffee shop is coming to Phoenix with plans to open multiple locations. Since opening in Rogers, Arkansas, in 2017 with seven original coffees, the company has grown so far to almost 300 locations in 31 states. 7 Brew's staff offers espresso-based coffee drinks, teas, smoothies, chillers, shakes and sodas. John Davidson is the company's CEO.



Gourav Saini

Gourav Saini, an experienced entrepreneur with over 15 years in the restaurant industry, has opened a

Dickey's Barbecue Pit in Phoenix, marking a significant milestone in his journey to bring Texas. Barbecue™ to the community. The new location opened last year. Looking toward the future, Saini is focused on expanding his business and plans to open additional locations in the coming years. "If everything continues to go well, we're looking to open two or three more locations," Saini said. "Our goal is to double our success, and we're committed to making that happen."

Formation Brewing opening by March 1st, will be situated at 925 N Fifth St. in Phoenix. The new place will serve beer on 24 taps and offer a dining menu to reflect Detroit-style pizzas. The bar will offer signatures brews and serve craft ciders, cocktails and nonalcoholic options. From their FB page: "Nestled in the artistic Roosevelt Row neighborhood, our taproom and craft kitchen offer a welcoming atmosphere where folks can enjoy a pint and bite together."

Formation Brewing CEO Robert MacEachern, is also a co-owner of Colorado's Denver Beer Co. Visit formationbrewing.com for more info.



TRN FEATURED RESTAURANT PHOENIX

Today's Restaurant featuring

Ricemill to launch three new locations in 2025 debut

Ricemill an innovative fast-casual eatery dedicated to presenting a diverse menu inspired by regional Asian Cuisines, including Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Szechuan has announced the launch of three new locations in Phoenix in 2025.

As the first selected U.S. city to debut this innovative fast-casual concept, Phoenix represents Ricemill's commitment to redefining dining in the region as the go-to destination for elevated rice bowls, according to a press release. Ricemill will start with the Downtown Phoenix opening at Collier Center in March 2025, followed by the first West Valley location in Arrowhead Towne Center, and the crown jewel of their initial rollout will be a store in Tempe.

"We're excited to introduce accessible, chef-driven rice bowls to communities, combining high quality, convenience, dynamic flavors, and innovation," Co-founder Fannie Wang said in a press release. "At Ricemill, we reimagine a timeless staple into a fresh experience that celebrates cultural fusion and craftsmanship while meeting the demand for unique dining



options in underserved areas craving for a concept like ours."

Each rice bowl is a culinary story, blending the founders' cherished family memories and Asian culinary traditions with a contemporary twist. Ricemill's founders are Fannie Wang, Harry Yu, Chef Yiyi Wang, and Jin Zhang.

"Growing up, I was fascinated by how



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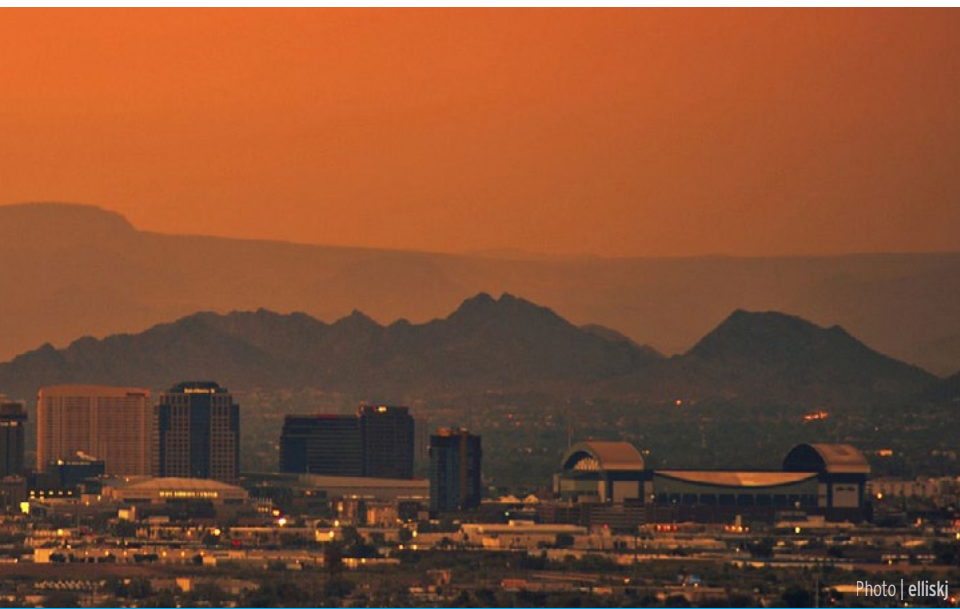


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RESTAURANT CITY PHOENIX

red company of the month • —

ree Phoenix locations ng the concept



Ricemill team embarked on a culinary adventure across Asia: Hong Kong, Shanghai, Sichuan, and Osaka to develop the food and beverage program. Led by Chef Yiyi's culinary direction, who honed her skills at both a 3 Michelin Star and a 2 Michelin Star restaurant, the thoughtfully-curated menu transforms timeless rice bowls bursting with rich fusion flavors.

The menu's core features chef-curated signature rice bowl dishes, such as the savory Seoul Garlic Chicken bowl and aromatic Shanghai-style Steak bowl, which combine Asian traditions with a modern twist. In addition to the signature bowls, guests can "bowl it your way" by creating their dream rice bowls in three easy interactive steps. This option offers endless possibilities, including different foundations, premium proteins, and housemade sauces. Ricemill's beverage menu will uniquely offer refillable milk teas.

The Downtown Phoenix restaurant will introduce the inaugural design concept. It will offer an indoor dining room, an interactive rice bowl bar and an outdoor dining patio. Email the company at info@ricestudiogroup.com. **TR**

my family could take simple ingredients and create something magical," Co-Founder and Operations Partner Harry Yu said in a press release. "A rice mill represents a beautiful process of transformation – taking something humble and unlocking its full potential. That's exactly what we do in our kitchen every day."

Guided by these memories, the

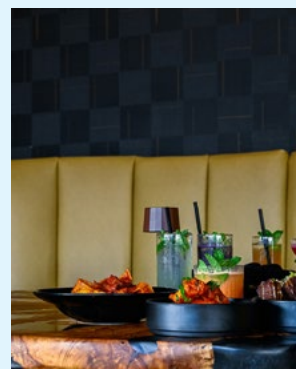


Title 9 Sports Grill is opening by February. Located at 4221 N Seventh Ave in Phoenix, Boycott Bar and Dahlia Tapas, Tequila and Wine owner Audrey Corley and Kat Moore are opening the sports bar. The owners will offer an elevated bar food menu with items named for notable athletes and a drinks selection that includes beers, ciders and spirits crafted by women makers. There is expected to be a trophy room that will showcase the awards and stories of women athletes.



describes itself as a neighborhood small-plates restaurant and upscale craft cocktail lounge. Michael Cheatham is an owner/ operator of Scapegoat Beer and Wine in Old Town Scottsdale. Mike has been in the hospitality industry for almost twenty years. He has participated in two openings

for Hillstone Restaurant Group in Phoenix and Napa Valley as well as opening Pomelo here in the valley. He was also a member of the opening team for Central Wine. Chef Edward Mclachlan, a Chicago native is at the helm of the kitchen. After graduating from culinary school, he spent years working and learning from experienced chefs across multiple cuisines and restaurant concepts. Edward's menu reflects his commitment to creativity and culinary exploration while paying homage to traditional and foundational cuisines and cultures.



Bonnie's Bread & Butter has opened at 777 N Arizona Ave in Chandler. Bonnie's Bread & Butter is an all-day eatery that blends casual comfort with an upscale charm. The owner / operator is Bonita "Bonnie" Henderson. Her place is a lunch spot by day, offering sandwiches, salads and house-made chips paired with a rotating selection of local brews and custom cocktails. They also play '70s and '80s music.

Today's Restaurant invites you to submit your information for the What's Going On column. All you need to do is email your company, product, service or event information to terri@trnusa.com. **TR**

Industry Standard Restaurant has opened in Phoenix. Located at 128 E Roosevelt St, the restaurant



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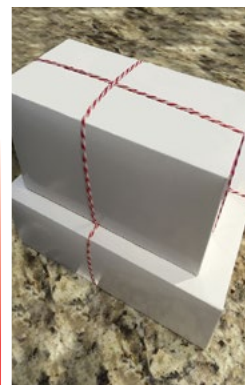
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Iconic UK brand crosses the pond

PizzaExpress to debut U.S. franchise in Florida

London, England - United States pizza lovers can expect to see an innovative new player in the mix as global pizza icon, [PizzaExpress](#), announced its entry into the U.S. market. With an international legacy built on the brand's iconic offering and a commitment to delivering 'proper pizza,' PizzaExpress is poised to make a splash in its journey across the pond – set to debut in Florida in 2025.

Challenging the status quo: PizzaExpress difference

Renowned for its love affair with live music, black and white striped-clad team (a nod to Venetian gondoliers),

marble tables, open kitchens with flaring Pizzaiolos (pizza chefs), and a [hand-crafted menu](#) with distinctive Dough Balls and garlic butter, [PizzaExpress delivers a pizza experience unique to the American market](#). Those unfamiliar with the standout menu can expect to see creations like the Padana (featuring creamy goat's cheese and caramelized onions), La Reine (a classic combination of ham, black olives and mushrooms), the one-of-a-kind lighter pizza, Leggera – a pizza with a refreshing salad-filled hole in the middle, featuring the great taste of the brand's Romana base pizzas, but with a third fewer calories, a children's menu

aply named Piccolo, and the American pizza – a love story-inspired pepperoni pizza.

The brand was founded by prominent entrepreneur [Peter Boizot](#), who set out with his ambitious vision to serve authentic high-quality pizza in a casual and inclusive setting. Inspired by the pizzerias of Italy and live jazz artists, Boizot opened the first PizzaExpress in the 1960s in Soho, London, and what started as a single restaurant quickly grew into a beloved brand.

Celebrating its 60th birthday in 2025, PizzaExpress is a global icon with a legacy built on innovation, quality, experience and a passion for proper pizza. Generating over half a billion dollars in

we're confident we've found the perfect partner to help raise the bar for pizza in the United States. Together, we're bringing the best of PizzaExpress to new audiences, the home of affordable everyday celebrations, where showtime meets dinnertime – whether you're dining with family, mates, or dates."

Purple Square, led by fellow Brit and CEO & President Vik Patel, operates over 245 franchise locations across 15 states. With over 20 years of U.S. market expertise, Patel and his team bring proven success in scaling brands, making them the ideal partner for PizzaExpress' launch.

"This is a full circle moment to bring a brand I've loved and grown up with in London to a new market eager for an elevated pizza experience," said Patel. "We know this concept has the potential to resonate with U.S. consumers in a truly unique way. Walking into a PizzaExpress location is a one-of-a-kind experience, designed to welcome everyone—whether you're bringing the kids out for a slice or soaking in the energy of live music. We're thrilled to introduce its rich legacy, inclusive atmosphere, and affordable price points to our home state of Florida. This is just the beginning of a journey we're confident will inspire a new wave of dining experiences across the country."



annual revenue, the brand boasts a robust portfolio of nearly 360 restaurants across the U.K and Ireland, alongside 110 international locations spanning 12 markets, including owned operations in Hong Kong and the UAE, and franchised sites across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. With international growth remaining a core focus, PizzaExpress' arrival into the U.S. market marks a pivotal milestone in its franchise growth strategy.

U.S. franchise expansion

With the brand moving at pace to officially launch in Florida in 2025, PizzaExpress is tapping into experienced franchising group, [Purple Square](#), to bring its 60-year legacy to life in the States.

"To debut in the U.S., it was vital to find an experienced franchise partner who shares our passion and vision to deliver delicious pizzas while simultaneously offering a unique dining experience," said Chris Holmes, Chief Development Officer at PizzaExpress. "With Purple Square,

Music is at the heart of PizzaExpress – home to six live venues, including three in London, where artists like Ed Sheeran, Amy Winehouse, and Norah Jones have performed. With its PX Records label, the brand continues to champion talent worldwide. Its love for making meal-times showtime will set PizzaExpress apart as it debuts in Florida with restaurants featuring full-service live and "live light" music venues spanning a collective 2,500–3,800 square feet.

With a robust international development support system, PizzaExpress aims to fill the vast white space in the United States market and has set ambitious plans to reach 1,000 restaurants globally by 2030. 

About PizzaExpress: Founded in 1965, PizzaExpress – www.pizzaexpress.com – is a global restaurant brand renowned for its high-quality, handcrafted pizzas made from the finest ingredients. With nearly 360 locations in the UK and Ireland and a growing international presence across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and more, PizzaExpress has become a staple in casual dining. Known for its iconic menu items such as the American Hot and Dough Balls, the brand continues to expand, looking for new, qualified partners to bring its fresh take on proper pizza to new markets worldwide.



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PepsiCo Foundation and NRA Educational Foundation announce 1M partnership

New York, NY - The PepsiCo Foundation and the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation (NRAEF) have announced a strategic partnership aimed at expanding restaurant and hospitality job-readiness training to new cities across the United States to help build a future workforce.

This collaboration will empower people from all backgrounds to pursue jobs in the restaurant industry, providing them with the skills necessary to start and build a restaurant industry career. The PepsiCo Foundation awarded NRAEF \$1 million dollars to expand the Restaurant Ready program aimed at training employees and providing career services to underserved communities.

"We are thrilled to partner with the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation to expand workforce training programs and create more opportunities for individuals to acquire essential skills and build rewarding careers in the restaurant industry," said C.D. Glin, President, PepsiCo Foundation & Global Head of Social Impact, PepsiCo Inc. said. "Our commitment to supporting food service workers underscores our dedication to creating lasting change, feeding potential and catalyzing social and economic advancement for people and communities."

Through this partnership, NRAEF will leverage the support of the PepsiCo Foundation to enhance its training initiatives, focusing on equipping aspiring restaurant employees with the essential skills and knowledge required to thrive in the industry. The expansion will tar-

PEPSICO FOUNDATION

We Feed Potential

get underserved communities, ensuring that more individuals have access to the Restaurant Ready training program and subsequent employment opportunities through its network of community-based organizations and state restaurant associations. The PepsiCo Foundation investment has already allowed Restaurant Ready to launch in five new sites including Baltimore, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, and New York City.

"First jobs are deeply formative, representing a 'foot in the door' and

the chance to start and grow a career. The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation is focused on ensuring people from disadvantaged populations can grab ahold of these opportunities through the Restaurant Ready program," Rob Gifford, President, National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation said. "We are grateful for the support of the PepsiCo Foundation, which is helping us to equip more people than ever to build a future in our industry."

The PepsiCo Foundation through NRAEF has supported more than 2 thousand trainees in 2024, including more than a thousand new enrollees this year alone.

"We have seen some transformative experiences for individuals, including 'second chance' hires who have an opportunity to move into the workforce, learn, obtain their industry certifications, and get to work. We want to change lives. For me, that means working with people, knowing we're giving them an opportunity that they may not have otherwise," Chef Frankie (Shannon Curtis), a Restaurant Ready employer in Prince George's County, Maryland, said.

"Learning the job readiness training competencies has really helped me sharpen up on my communication skills. This brought my confidence and

knowledge up another level. Being able to practice with other people and practice interviews was very helpful for me and I believe it was helpful for others also," RC Jr., Restaurant Ready participant at Impact Culinary in Chicago, Illinois said.

PepsiCo Foundation's Commitment to Small Foodservice Businesses for Social and Economic Advancement

In addition to supporting NRAEF's workforce training programs, the PepsiCo Foundation remains committed to helping small businesses and restaurants through several additional initiatives including Impacto Business Accelerator and the Restaurant Accelerator program in collaboration with the National Urban League. These programs are designed to provide critical resources, mentorship, and financial support to small business owners, enabling them to grow and succeed in a competitive market.

Impacto Business Accelerator: In partnership with four regional Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) the Impacto initiative focuses on empowering small foodservice businesses that focus on Hispanic community and culture by providing grants, training, and mentorship. This program aims to create a more inclusive and equitable business

See PEPSICO page 14

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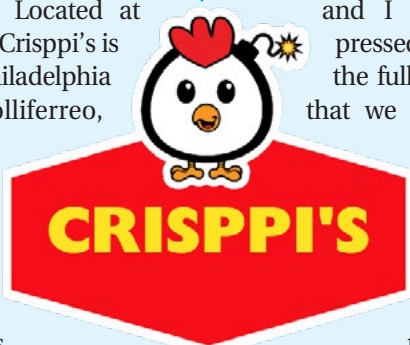
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What's Going On from page 6

NPFDA's objective is to provide networking opportunities, foster growth and learning among members, and cultivate enduring business relationships. The association aims to facilitate discussion and exchange of ideas among food distributors, processors, and allied industries. For more information, visit www.npfda.org.

Pro Football Hall of Famer Randy Moss makes another Big Play – Partnering with the new Crisppi's Chicken in Miami. Located at 2917 Biscayne Blvd., Crisppi's is the brainchild of Philadelphia native Brittany Tolliferreo, her unique concept of Crisppi's Chicken grabbed the attention of Pro Football Hall of Famer Randy Moss, who was looking for investment opportunities with great potential for expansion. After meeting with experienced restaurateur Tolliferreo and hearing her story, Moss felt he had found the perfect fit with a business model and team that prioritizes community, family and giving back. "It's all about helping those who empower the community. Crisppi's embodies exactly that. As an entrepreneur myself, teaming up with another like-minded go-getter has

been everything I imagined it would be," says Moss. South Florida-based BYB Extreme — The Backyard Brawl bare-knuckle fighting organization founded by MMA fighting champion Dhafir "Dada 5000" Harris and NASCAR powerhouse Mike Vazquez — have also signed on as sponsors of Crisppi's. They will also partner with BYB on future events and upcoming fights. Vazquez says, "After meeting with the team at Crisppi's regarding a sponsorship with BYB Extreme for our local South Florida events, Dada and I left extremely impressed with the team and the full menu, so much so that we decided to partner in this new location!" The owners are confident the Miami location will prove to be as successful as the team is forecasting, and are **already making plans to expand to more locations.** Crispischicken.com.



◆◆◆◆
Today's Restaurant invites you to submit information for the What's Going On column. Email your company, product or event info to terri@trnusa.com. Get free publicity for your company! **TR**



QDOBA from page 7

"As we kick off 2025, QDOBA's growth has never been stronger," said Jeremy Vitaro, Chief Development Officer at QDOBA. "Strong sales, strategic incentives, and experienced operators reflect the strength of our brand. We're proud to partner with franchisees who share our vision for delivering bold flavors and quality dining experiences to communities nationwide, setting the stage for long-term success." **TR**

About QDOBA Mexican Eats: QDOBA is a fast-casual Mexican restaurant with approximately 800 locations in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. Committed to bringing flavor to peo-

ple's lives, QDOBA uses ingredients freshly prepared in-house by hand throughout the day to create a variety of flavorful menu options. Guests can experience QDOBA's delicious offerings by customizing their own burritos, bowls, tacos, quesadillas, nachos and salads to suit their personal tastes and cravings. Premium toppings can always be added to entrées at no extra charge, including signature 3-cheese queso and hand-crafted guacamole. For six years running, QDOBA has been voted the "Best Fast Casual Restaurant" as part of the USA TODAY 10Best Readers' Choice Awards.

Backed by over 25 years of proven success in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico, QDOBA is prioritizing franchise growth in key markets such as Alabama, California, Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah. Non-traditional opportunities are available nationwide.

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Disaster from pg. 1

- ◆ Are there any specific exclusions for natural disasters common in your region?

Beyond insurance, business continuity planning is another crucial step toward disaster preparedness. This includes identifying alternative suppliers, creating remote work policies, and ensuring critical data is backed up and accessible from secure locations. A well-prepared plan, paired with appropriate insurance coverage, can greatly improve the likelihood of a business emerging from a disaster intact.

The tragedy in Southern California serves as a stark reminder of life's unpredictability. As heartbreaking as it is, it also provides an opportunity for reflection and action. For business owners, this means ensuring that all possible measures are in place to safeguard their ventures against unforeseen disruptions. While no one can prepare fully for the chaos that accompanies natural disasters, taking these steps can provide a sense of control and security, ensuring that when the storm passes, recovery is not only possible but sustainable.

Make today a great day. make it happen. Make it count! **TR**

About the Author: With more than 40 years of experience in small business, restaurant, and franchise management, marketing, and development, Paul Segreto is a respected expert in the entrepreneurial world, dedicated to helping others achieve success. Whether you're an aspiring or current entrepreneur in need of guidance, support, or simply a conversation, you can connect with Paul at paul@acceler8success.com.

Appell from pg. 2

Challenges to Overcome

1. Technical issues: Ensuring robots operate smoothly in crowded, fast-paced environments.

2. Customer experience: Balancing efficiency with the human touch diners often value.

3. Regulations: Addressing concerns about data privacy, safety, and workforce displacement.

4. Cost: Managing initial investments for widespread adoption in smaller or less profitable restaurants.

Key Milestones

◆ 2025: AI robots become commonplace in chain restaurants and fast-food outlets.

◆ 2030: High adoption in mid-tier restaurants; robots capable of personalized customer interactions.

◆ 2040: Fully autonomous restaurants with AI robots dominating fast-food and casual dining.

◆ Beyond 2040: Industry-wide integration of AI robots, driven by technological advancements and cost-efficiency.

While AI robot waiters won't completely replace humans in the near future, they are set to become indispensable in enhancing operational efficiency and customer experience. Would you like examples of AI robot waiter brands or specific use cases? **TR**

Sliders from pg. 1

Shake, and LTO sliders, also known as Slider Spotlights. The brand's current slider spotlights are the Nashville Hot Pimento Chicken and Bacon Jam + Pimento Burger. Sammy's Sliders also plans to deepen its community engagement, with each new location donating a portion of its grand opening proceeds to a local charity nominated by the community.

"In 2025, we're excited to continue driving innovation with limited-time offerings that showcase the creativity behind our menu," said Gianopoulos, Chef and Menu Curator. "We're always aiming to surprise and delight our guests with bold, fresh flavors that set Sammy's Sliders apart. We will never jeopardize our culinary approach regardless of the speed we may grow."

The brand's commitment to quality, innovation, community involvement and franchise owner support has positioned it as a rising star in the fast-casual dining space. With strong momentum heading into 2025, the brand is ready to make its mark on the industry and beyond. **TR**

About Sammy's Sliders: Founded in July 2023 by award-winning chef Sammy Gianopoulos and visionary entrepreneur Sam G. Ballas, Sammy's Sliders - sammyssliders.com - is a fast-casual, chef-driven restaurant offering gourmet sliders, fresh salads, hand-spun ice cream shakes, and topped fries. Known for their freshly crafted, never frozen® Certified Angus Beef sliders and antibiotic-free chicken, Sammy's is dedicated to delivering a dining experience that goes "Beyond the Bun™ & Into Yum!" With a proven menu and low-cost entry, Sammy's is now franchising nationwide.

Pepsico from pg. 2

environment, fostering economic growth and stability within underserved communities.

Restaurant Accelerator Program: In partnership with the National Urban League, the Restaurant Accelerator program offers comprehensive support to restaurants in communities that often lack financial resources. This initiative includes business development training, financial assistance, and access to a network of industry experts, helping these businesses overcome challenges and achieve long-term success. **TR**

About National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation: As the supporting philanthropic foundation of the National Restaurant Association, the NRAEF's charitable mission includes enhancing the industry's training and education, career development, and community engagement efforts. The NRAEF and its programs work to Attract, Empower, and Advance today and tomorrow's restaurant and foodservice workforce. NRAEF programs include: ProStart® - a high-school career and technical education program; Restaurant Ready/HOPES - Partnering with community based organizations to provide people with skills training and job opportunities; Military - helping military servicemen and women transition their skills to restaurant and foodservice careers; Scholarships - financial assistance for students pursuing restaurant, foodservice and hospitality degrees; and the Restaurant & Hospitality Leadership Center (RHLC) - accredited apprenticeship programs designed to build the careers of service professionals. For more information on the NRAEF, visit ChooseRestaurants.org.

TR Today's Restaurant

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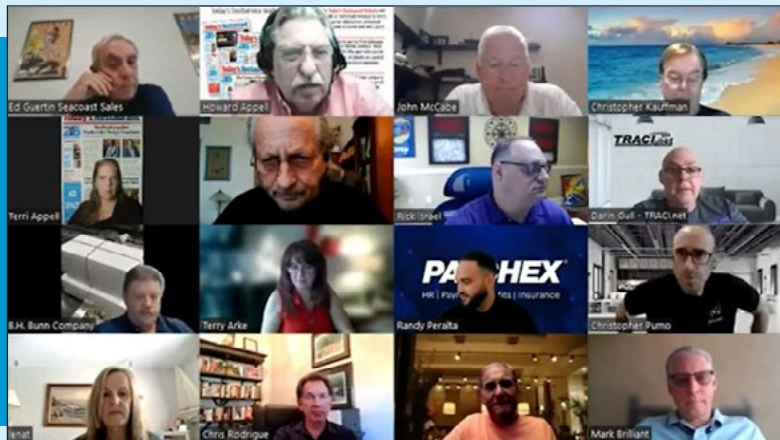
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