



"Fast and fresh" draws diners to Sheridan's Unforked in Kansas, where chef Rob Corliss (lower left) connects people to their food with items like the Barking Pig taco (middle left), with naturally raised Berkshire pork, and a roasted beet salad with edible flowers and baby arugula (above).

FAST & FRESH

Flavor Innovators

Quality, flavor and service are the hallmarks of the industry's flavor leaders

BY JOAN LANG

The booming fast-casual segment is setting the foodservice industry on its ear, with implications for every channel from stripped-down QSRs to white-tablecloth, where brand-name chefs are developing their own sophisticated take on food for the mainstream (meatballs by Michel Richard, anyone?).

According to the NPD Group, visits to the leading fast-casual restaurant chains grew 17 percent over the prior three years, while the rest of the industry suffered a decline of 1 percent — the steepest traffic loss in decades. Moreover, the fast-casual segment (defined as upscale quick-service restaurant concepts that offer more service and higher quality food, and have a larger average check size than other fast-food restaurants) is relatively undeveloped, accounting for just 4 percent of total traffic as of June 2011, compared to 61 percent for QSRs and 11 percent for casual dining.

According to Bonnie Riggs, restaurant industry analyst at NPD, “Our consumer research indicates that fast-casual restaurants excel in several areas compared to QSRs and family and casual dining: order accuracy, taste and flavor, freshness and quality, and preparing food the way patrons like it.” And these areas represent opportunities for other restaurant categories to make improvements.

Bennigan's brand refresh includes a fast-casual model for nontraditional locations, such as colleges and airports, called On the Fly. A new Sonic “concept store” in Fort Lauderdale Beach, Fla., features wine and draft beer, along with a new bar-like atmosphere and karaoke nights. Sbarro is ditching its old food-court image in favor of an upgraded menu that features made-to-order pasta and better-tasting pizza. And Red Robin is betting on its fast-casual Burger Works, with lower prices and limited service, to compete in the booming better-burger arena.

BEVERAGE Friendly

One of the newly defining elements of the fast-casual segment is the availability of interesting beverage options, up to and including wine and beer. Even more notably, the beverages match the menu concept.

What's described as "Pure Orange Juice" (and priced at \$2.70) at **Sheridan's Unforked** actually consists of a display of fresh oranges that customers can squeeze themselves in a Zumex machine — "kids and their parents love it," says chef/co-creator Rob Corliss. Other options include seasonal fresh fruit frescas, wine by the bottle and more than two dozen beers, including large format and locally brewed options.

The menu at **Piada Italian Street Food** includes Italian sodas and bottled water, Peroni beer, and in some locations a peach Bellini.

Asian Box offers such artisanal housemade beverages as Lime Soda with lemongrass and Thai Iced Tea, and will be offering a selection of wines and Asian beers by the end of 2012.

Steak 'n Shake's new counter-service outpost in Manhattan offers not only hand-dipped milkshakes but also wine and beer.

The extensive list of bebidas at Austin's new **Fresa's Chicken al Carbon** includes beer by the six pack, wine by the bottle, Hispanic-branded sodas like Fanta Naranja, aguas frescas and a kit for making margaritas. You can even purchase a beer or wine opener.



UMAMICATESSEN

Meanwhile, the nexus of freshness, food quality, and upgraded service and ambiance that defines the fast-casual segment continues to draw customers.

Take Asian Box, a hip new Asian-street-food-influenced concept that debuted earlier this year in Palo Alto, Calif., with two additional units planned in the San Francisco Bay Area later this year — and plans for nationwide company expansion after that.

"Consumers these days are smart," says Frank Klein, Asian Box's co-creator and CEO. "They expect a high level of quality and flavor, and to be able to have an interesting meal quickly, but they don't want to be dictated to. We offer choices that are healthy and flavor-forward, by emphasizing items that are marinated and then grilled, but we have broken down the menu into components to make it completely customizable."

If fast-casual players offer a price point that's lower (Asian Box's core items are in the \$7-to-\$9 range) and speed of service that's quicker than casual dining can manage, there's also a commitment to ingredient quality and freshness that challenges traditional fast-food chains.

CONCENTRATED FOCUS

As the executive chef launching Sheridan's Unforked in Overland Park, Kansas, Rob Corliss works just as passionately on sourcing ingredients as he does on developing the recipes and menus for the year-old, ingredient-driven "fast-fresh" concept.

"When it's practical, we buy and support seasonal, local, and organic and all-natural ingredients, working with smaller family farms and artisans," says Corliss, whose "day job" as the founder of the culinary company ATE specializes in connecting people to their food, environment and wellness through such activities as the Springfield (Mo.) Urban Agricultural Coalition.

Operators are extending fast-casual menus with artisan sodas, beer and wine, and even mixology-inspired drinks like UMAMICATESSEN's Teal Goose, with vodka, fresh celery, kiwi and lime juices.

Spotlight on ASIAN BOX

The result of two years' research by FK Restaurants & Hospitality, Asian Box has all the fast-casual attributes covered:

- ▶ A mix-and-match, all-gluten-free menu, developed from authentic family recipes by Vietnamese executive chef and Slanted Door alumna Grace Nguyen
- ▶ Fresh prep and total customization of meal elements, answering the question "What's in Your Box?" by allowing patrons to put together their own "box" meal, starting with a base (salad, brown or white rice, or rice noodles with mushroom broth), protein (including tofu), vegetables and toppings (scallion oil, pickled veggies, fresh herbs), and sauce
- ▶ Flavor in layers provided by housemade marinades and sauces such as Coconut Curry, Garlic and Soy Glaze, Tamarind Vinaigrette, No-Oil Fish Sauce and Asian Street Dust (described as "a dirty blend of sweet, salt and spices")
- ▶ Price points starting at \$6.95 for a tofu-based box, rising to \$8.25 for shrimp, plus additions like peanut sauce for 75 cents and caramel egg for 95 cents
- ▶ Upgraded beverage selection including Vietnamese iced coffee and lemon-lime marmalade
- ▶ Eco-friendly practices such as sustainable sourcing, compostable packaging, recycled building elements and energy-efficient design, with Green Restaurant Association certification pending
- ▶ Décor elements like vintage Asian light fixtures, stand-up communal tables, Asian pop music on the sound system and signage and slogans in half a dozen Asian languages



Asian Box makes customization fast and fun, offering flavorful selections like coconut-curry tofu and garlic- and soy-glazed beef.

ASIAN BOX

This has led to the creation of popular menu items like the Barking Pig taco (naturally raised Berkshire pork carnitas tossed in local shagbark bacon glaze with sliced scallions and queso fresco) and Hail the Kale salad (dressed with Parmesan cheese, toasted breadcrumbs and lemon-olive oil dressing), as well as seasonal frozen-custard-based sweets like the Lemon Lush Concrete (vanilla custard mixed with lemon bars).

Having a sharp menu focus on produce helps keep food costs in line, and a robust schedule of seasonal LTOs helps with both new-item testing and the mission of telling customers the story of where their food comes from.

"Everyone is trying to touch that chord of freshness and flavor that goes beyond health and wellness," explains the chef, "so we're really concentrating our focus on quality ingredients and scratch cooking."

Unlike most fast-casual concepts, however, Unforked touts the added convenience of a drive-thru in addition to dine-in/takeout and catering options. "We've had to work on our efficiencies, especially on waiting and ticket times, because it's the combination of quality and speed that helps us compete more effectively with traditional quick-service and casual dining."

KNIFE-AND-FORK FRIENDLY

Fast casuals have been particularly effective at building traffic during the dinner daypart, an Achilles heel for QSRs. Zoës Kitchen, the 60-unit Mediterranean-inspired fast-casual chain based in Birmingham, Ala., started life in 1995 as a lunch-only concept specializing in fresh salads, sandwiches and soups, but has been upping the game on the evening daypart over the past year or so.

New concept stores built in recent years feature display chargrills that support the addition of such dinner-friendly items as grilled chicken, and new steak and salmon kabobs. There are also “meal options” including Take-Home Tubs of hummus and salads, and call-ahead Dinners for Four that include entrée, salad and a side for takeout. The daypart may be a small part of the sales mix at the current time, but it’s an important point of differentiation for Zoës Kitchen.

“We are working to introduce heartier, ‘knife-and-fork’ entrées that will appeal to guests who want to come in and have a nice dinner with a glass of wine,” says Kevin Miles, president. “This direction is more of a lifestyle gift to busy families, and part of our mission to ‘let us be your kitchen.’”

Fresh, customizable menu components are one of the defining characteristics of the fast-casual model. At Qdoba Mexican Grill, a Colorado-based chain of more than 500 units specializing in San Francisco-style burritos, the make line is in full view of the customer and the menu is fully customizable. Guests choose the menu item (i.e., burrito, quesadilla, nachos, taco); the platform and protein (for example, flour or whole-wheat tortilla; grilled chicken or pulled pork); additions (chile-lime rice, black beans, various salsas and three-cheese queso); and extras (guacamole, grilled vegetables) for a totally bespoke experience.

“The guest gets to make it,” notes Ted Stoner, director of strategic product development. “Instead of creating new niche items, we introduce new components — like our new whole-wheat tortilla — that can be spread across the entire menu. The whole idea reinforces the underlying mindset of the guest: I am a unique person and I want it just the way I want it.

“This is the age of the 30-minute lunch hour,” adds Stoner, even if it’s so patrons can do something else with the extra half-hour. “Having to sit down and be waited on is an inconvenience — it takes too much time.”

Back-of-the-house, this suggests tighter specs and a modular approach to production, he notes. “We want to take away the opportunities to lose speed and quality.” Clear, simple recipes; premeasured spice mixes; the right kind of avocados and the right trim level on the ball tip for barbacoa are all vital, especially in the case of a concept like Qdoba, which occupies the sweet spot for popularly priced food in an era when interest in authentic Mexican flavors and ingredients is growing.

FINE-DINING FAST FOOD

It’s very telling that Adam Fleischman, the founder of Los Angeles-based Umami Burger, describes his smash-hit burger concept as “fine-dining fast food,” where every single detail of the \$10-to-\$15 burgers have been taken apart and put back together in an upgraded way, from housemade umami ketchup to onion strings seasoned with smoked sea salt and tomatoes that have been oven-roasted.

Now Fleischman is introducing several new self-service iterations of the concept, including U-ko, with specialty burgers at a lower price point, and

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ZOE'S KITCHEN

Zoës Kitchen expands its reach with its Dinners for Four takeout options that include an entrée, salad and side (above). Qdoba's new whole-wheat flour tortilla is a natural complement to its customizable menu. (below right).

a mini version offering a smaller Umami Burger menu for takeout. U-Mini, located by the UCLA campus in Westwood, Calif., will also be a testing ground not only for new burgers but also for web and app ordering and tablet-only customer service.

The company also has a new self-service, quality-oriented Neapolitan pizza concept called 800 Degrees, with a long counter where diners can choose from dozens of toppings like peppadews, prosciutto and long-stemmed Italian artichokes to be prepared in a proprietary woodburning display oven that

turns out the pies in about a minute. There is also wine, craft beers and gelato.

As far as this entrepreneur is concerned, fast casual is the place to be. "We've seen a lot of growth very quickly and we're planning for a lot more in the future," says Fleischman. ☺

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Take-Away TIPS

FLAVOR IN LAYERS: Successful fast-casual menus infuse flavor into all aspects of each menu item, from the sauces and marinades to the bases and carriers to the creative toppings.

HAVE IT YOUR WAY: Fast-casual leaders have proven that guided customizability pays – especially with the younger demographic, who expects it.

DRINK UP: Don't overlook the beverage menu as a means to extend your brand's mission, even in quick-serve concepts. At a minimum, feature some element of housemade or artisan non-alcoholics, and explore beer, wine and even mixology programs.



QDOBA