

Food Fanatics

NOW WITH MORE FLAVOR


BEST SERVED HOT
MARCH 2026

HOW CHEFS AND OWNERS ARE REBUILDING THEIR CULTURE AND TEAMS TO POWER WHAT'S NEXT

TODAY'S SPECIAL:

REBUILD.
REFRESH.
RISE.

PLUS:

2026 Trends
Halal Tips
Road Trip:
Seattle, WA

JUMP TO IT

K

5 CHALLENGE:
WHAT'S YOUR HIDING PLACE?

7 HOT PLATES:
2026 TRENDS

12 INGREDIENT TO WATCH

14 ROAD TRIP: SEATTLE, WA

18 FEATURE:
REBUILD. REFRESH. RISE.

28 GEAR CHECK:
TABLETOP + PATIO-FRIENDLY ITEMS

30 RUN THE SHOW:
CHICKEN + WAFFLES 101 TRAINING TIPS

WHAT DO THE YOUNG 'UNS WANT?

35 THE FUNNY PAGES

+ BACK BURNER:
5 QUESTIONS FOR STEVE EWING

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FOOD FANATICS® is the go-to source for the foodservice industry and anyone truly passionate about food, the people behind it and improving the bottom line. Founded in 2012 and redesigned in 2025, the print publication and online magazine is a US Foods publication produced by The Specialists.

ABOUT US FOODS With a promise to help its customers Make It, US Foods is one of America's great food companies and a leading foodservice distributor, partnering with approximately 250,000 restaurants and foodservice operators to help their businesses succeed. With more than 70 headline locations and approximately 90 cash-and-carry stores, US Foods and its 30,000 associates provides its customers with a broad and innovative food offering and a comprehensive suite of e-commerce, technology and business solutions. US Foods is headquartered in Rosemont, Ill. Visit usfoods.com to learn more.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SALO SALO

KEEP IT GOING

JEREMY AND GRACE MCGEE OF SALO SALO. READ MORE PG. 27



SOMETIMES, IT'S REALLY A FAMILY BUSINESS

LET ME GUESS -

YOU'RE BUSY, RIGHT? NO-BRAINER, I KNOW. BUT HEAR ME OUT: YOU GOTTA PUT IN THE TIME TO BRING YOUR TEAM TOGETHER LIKE A FAMILY. PULL THEM ASIDE ONE BY ONE, CHAT AT THE FAMILY MEAL, WHATEVER WORKS. WHY? BECAUSE FAMILIES HAVE TO ENDURE.

LIKE IT OR NOT, WHEN THE SHINOLA HITS THE FAN-LIKE IT HAS BEEN LATELY—YOUR FAMILY IS WHAT GETS YOU THROUGH. AND IF YOUR TEAM FEELS LIKE A BUNCH OF DISTANT COUSINS AT BEST, HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO COPE WITH RISING COSTS, SLOWING TRAFFIC, WHIPLASHING FOOD TRENDS AND THE KIND OF STRESS THAT, WELL, JUST ISN'T NORMAL?

WE USED TO ALWAYS SAY "THE CUSTOMER ALWAYS COMES FIRST." THESE DAYS, THOUGH, WE MIGHT ARGUE YOUR TEAM DOES. BECAUSE YOU CAN'T TAKE CARE OF YOUR CUSTOMER WITHOUT A STRONG TEAM. MAKE YOUR TEAM A FAMILY. FAMILIES ENDURE.

-FOODFANATICS@USFOODS.COM

ON A ROLL



HILLTOP HEARTH® BRIOCHE ROLL is a glossy, sliced roll with a charmingly creamy flavor and a hint of sweetness—and with a rich crumb and golden crust. Versatile and slightly larger than other sandwich buns, these buns are ideal for upscale breakfast and lunch sandwiches, or as a premium hamburger bun.



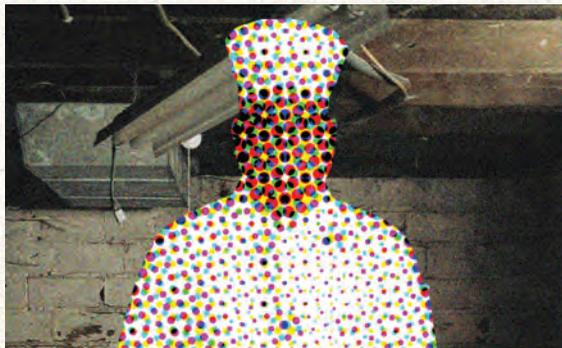
Scan to shop these
buns on **MOXē®**



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FOODS BRAND

EVERY ISSUE WE HIT YOU WITH A #CHALLENGE.

LAST TIME, WE ASKED: WHERE IS YOUR FAVORITE HIDING PLACE AT WORK??



1. MARK P.
OWNER | SHAMROCK'S AND FACEPUNCH FOODS,
ST. PAUL MINNESOTA @facepunchfoods

"The storage side of the

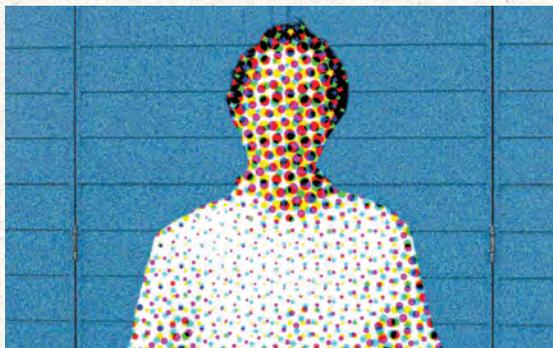
BASEMENT!

Low to no traffic."

2. MELISSA B.
CO-OWNER AND MANAGER | DAS BIERHALLE,
PARKVILLE AND BEL AIR, MARYLAND
@MSMOSCATI

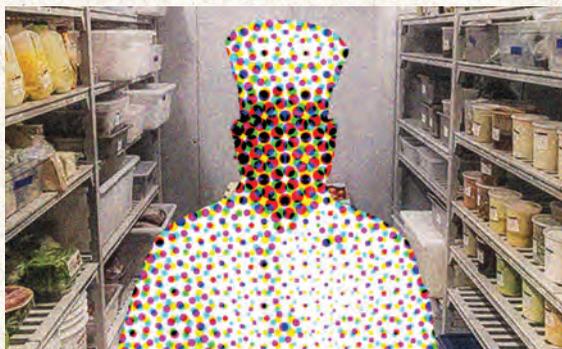
"We have two storage trailers outside used for
disposables and seasonal decor. One is called
the 'He Shed' and the other is called the 'She
Shed.' If I really need to get away, I'm hiding in
the

SHE SHED!"



3. CHEF KEVIN B.
LINE COOK | TULSA UNIVERSITY

"FREEZER!"



NEXT ISSUE'S CHALLENGE?

WHAT'S A FAMILY MEAL YOU'LL NEVER FORGET?

ANSWER ON SOCIAL AND TAG
#USFOODSCHALLENGE

→
SEE OUR TERMS:
[USFOODS.COM/
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HASH BROWNS



THAT DESERVE THEIR OWN #

Crispy creativity worth tagging in any menu. They're skin-on russet ribbons with real back-of-the-house appearance – just griddle for golden, tender-inside hash browns or fry for shatter-crisp toppers and shareables that work across dayparts.

PRODUCT #: 7582919: Ribbon Cut Hash Brown Potatoes



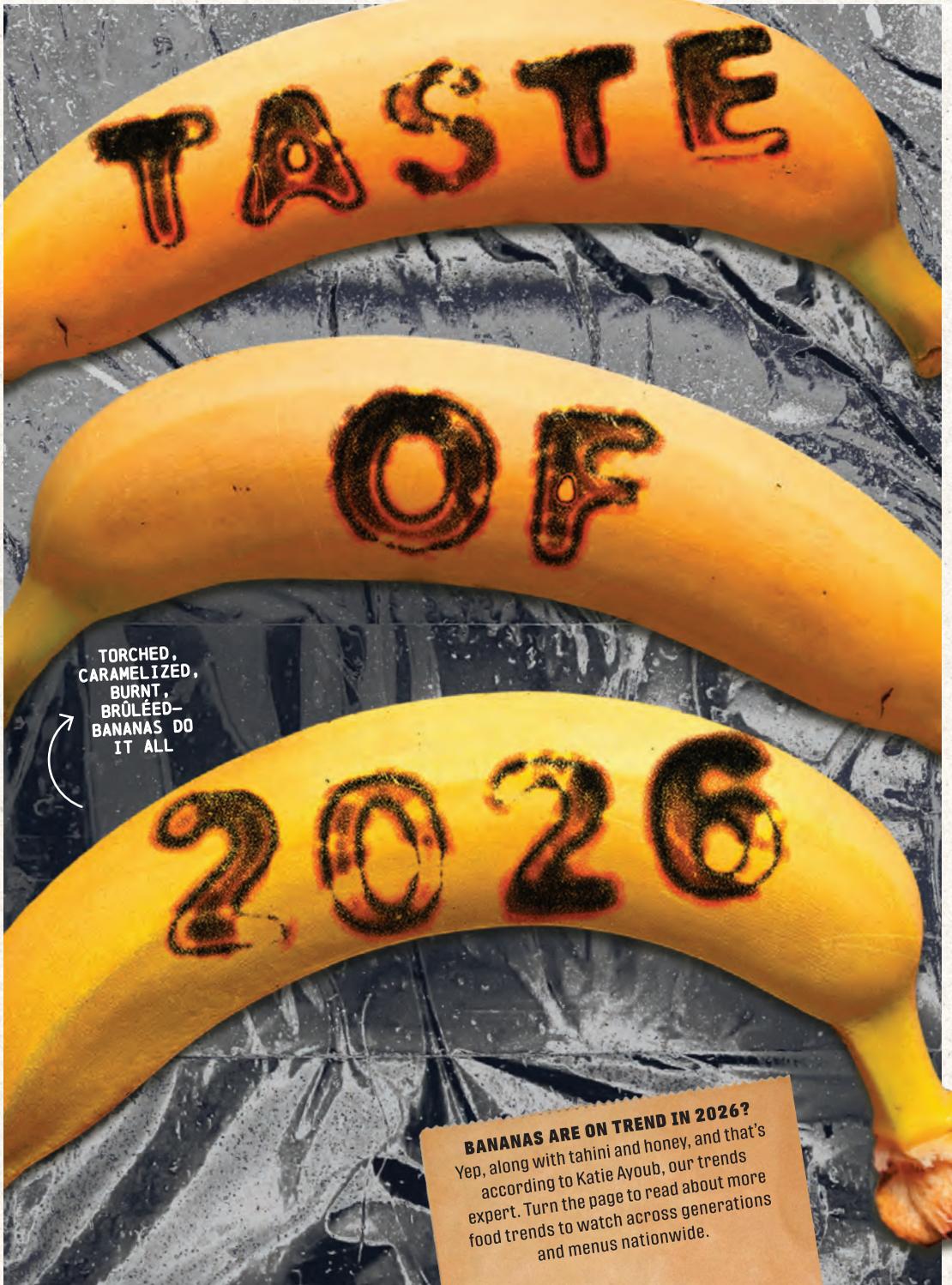
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**US. FOODS EXCLUSIVE
BRAND**

HOT PLATES

BUZZWORTHY BITES BLOWING UP MENUS



TORCHED,
 CARAMELIZED,
 BURNT,
 BRÛLÉÉ—
 BANANAS DO
 IT ALL

BANANAS ARE ON TREND IN 2026?
 Yep, along with tahini and honey, and that's according to Katie Ayoub, our trends expert. Turn the page to read about more food trends to watch across generations and menus nationwide.

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY THE SPECIALISTS

THIS ISSUE'S SPECIALS: EXCITING FRUITS, HALAL TIPS AND INGREDIENTS TO WATCH



ON THE
MENU
MIJO, NYC

TACOS ÁRABES WITH
SHAWARMA-SPICED PORK

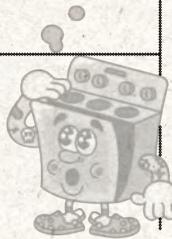
PROTEIN PICK

Mexican Meats

Carne asada and carnitas are finding new footing, as are tacos árabes (ah-RAH-bess), a Puebla specialty with Lebanese shawarma roots featuring spit-roasted, marinated pork that's shaved and wrapped in a soft, pita-like shell.



SCAN FOR THE FULL
TRENDS REPORT



SOCIALLY DRIVEN

“GEN Z AND GEN
ALPHA DISCOVER
FOOD ON

TIKTOK

FIRST. THINK OF
IT AS ONE GIANT
FOCUS GROUP.”

-TRENDS EXPERT KATIE AYOUB

LEAFY LOVE: BITTER GREENS

52%

How much bitter
greens rose
on menus, with
a predicted
60% two-year
growth for
dandelion greens



HOT HANDHELD

EMPANADAS

Empanadas—South American savory meat pies—have climbed the ranks of handheld stardom, with nearly a quarter of consumers eating them weekly and a 7.6% growth on menus in the last year. More than half of consumers (51%) love them.

SOURCE: DATASSENTIAL'S GLOBAL FLAVORS KEYNOTE

ON THE MENU
SALO SALO, INDIANAPOLIS

PORK BELLY EMPANADAS WITH
POTATOES, CORN, GREEN BEANS
AND A FILIPINO VINEGAR-BASED
DIPPING SAUCE



TACOS: COURTESY OF MIJO; EMPANADAS: COURTESY OF SALO SALO

WAKE UP,
FRUIT IS CALLING



LINGONBERRY SAUCE

+67%

MENU GROWTH



FIG JAM

+53%

MENU GROWTH



MANGO PUREE

+52%

MENU GROWTH



POMEGRANATE VINAIGRETTE

+51%

MENU GROWTH

SHIBUYA TOAST: COURTESY OF OMI CAFE; OTHERS: ADOBE STOCK

SWEET SELECTION

HONEY + DESSERT TOAST

Move over avocado toast—honey’s getting all the attention now. Shibuya toast, also called honey toast and brick toast, is a Japanese dessert featuring hollowed-out milk bread. Hollowed-out pieces are honey-buttered and stuffed back in.

ON THE MENU
OMI CAFE, CHICAGO

THE OMI OMI SHIBUYA



CAN'T FIND MILK BREAD? TRY BRIOCHE!
WE'VE GOT IT HERE:



VIRAL FLAVOR FORECAST
WITH **KATIE AYOUB: MUSUBI**

HAWAIIAN “NORI” – SPAM AND RICE WRAPPED IN SEAWEED



AND THAT'S JUST ONE!
SEE MORE, LIKE TAMINI, HERE:



“CAKE PICNICS”

Social gatherings for swapping mini cakes. Operators: Bring on the dessert flights!



TARTAR SAUCE

Not just for fish sandwiches—top nachos, serve with calamari and add spices for a twist.

TRENDING CERTIFICATION:

HALAL

FROM COAST TO COAST IN CITIES LIKE CHICAGO, CLEVELAND AND NEW YORK, THERE HAVE BEEN MORE ASKS FOR HALAL PRODUCTS.

"WE ARE SEEING EXPLOSIVE GROWTH in halal as a way of eating for well-being, beyond just for religious purposes," says **SUNNY MCDANIEL**, US Foods Local and Sustainable Product Lead. "These products have a perceived health and humane halo about them with very broad demographic appeal." Only 1% of Americans follow a halal diet, but 20% of Americans seek out halal-certified products, and that number continues to grow, research shows.

64%

4-YEAR PREDICTED GROWTH ON MENUS NATIONWIDE



SCAN FOR REAL MENU EXAMPLES:



BREWED TO BE CHEESY

The Molly's Kitchen® Beer Mac and Cheese brings rich, brew-forward comfort to your menu with ease—combining Fat Tire Ale, three cheeses and tender cavatappi pasta into a deeply flavorful, adult-leaning twist on a classic. Its boil-in-bag format slashes up to 90 minutes of labor per case while delivering a consistently smooth, craveable dish every time.



PRODUCT #: 1978276: Beer Mac and Cheese



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THE 101

LABEL LESSON

HOW TO SOURCE PROPERLY CERTIFIED HALAL PRODUCTS

HALAL-CERTIFIED products include beef, poultry and lamb slaughtered according to Islamic dietary laws. Other allowable halal foods are all fruits, vegetables and grains as well as seafood. **HARAM** (unacceptable) products include pork and pork byproducts, gelatin, non-halal-certified meats, birds with talons and alcoholic beverages.



Look for gold standard certifications from IFANCA, HFSAA, ISWA and HTO

Price premiums vary, with slightly higher premiums for poultry versus beef. Operators can use marketing and signage to leverage the appeal and demand for these products.



Watch out for unsubstantiated claims or generic 'halal' stamps with no certifier listed

44% OF CONSUMERS VIEW HALAL-CERTIFIED MEATS AS MORE HUMANE THAN CONVENTIONAL MEAT
SOURCE: IFANCA



SCAN TO CHECK OUT US FOODS' HALAL GUIDE FOR FOODSERVICE PROFESSIONALS



LEFT: COURTESY OF NC STATE UNIVERSITY, RIGHT: ADOBE STOCK



CITRUS. CITRUS!

Yes, we know it's a winter thing, but the data says this acid's having a trip right now—from lemon-infused sauces to citrus-marinated meats, yuzu-driven dishes and more. Even tamarind—a non-citrus fruit with citrus-like flavors—keeps stealing the spotlight. So let's roll that seasonality right into spring, especially for brightening up those bitter spring greens (also trending).

On The Menu



CONFIT BEETS
WITH FRESH FIGS,
TRUFFLE WALNUT
CREMA, BROKEN
CITRUS VINAIGRETTE
+ PICKED MINT
NAPA BISTRO &
WINE BAR,
N.C. AND S.C.



THE PONGONIS PIZZA

WITH GARLIC OIL,
LEMON RICOTTA,
OREGANO, BASIL +
COARSE SEA SALT,
DEVELOPED BY CHEF
JENNIFER PONGONIS
OFF THE TRACKS
BREWING,
ROCK HILL, S.C.

TRENDING CITRUS: YUZU KOSHO

48%

TWO-YEAR PREDICTED MENU GROWTH





COOL, LET'S TRY IT!

SCAN TO
LEARN MORE



"CITRUS DELIVERS—
IT ADDS
BRIGHTNESS, CUTS
THROUGH RICHNESS &
AND BITTERNESS TO
REALLY BRING OUT
UMAMI FLAVORS."
—CHIEF OFFICER
FOODFANATICS®

STAT SOURCE: TECHNOMIC IGNITE TWO-YEAR PREDICTED MENU GROWTH

WHO'S DOING IT GREAT AND WHERE.

ROAD TRIP!

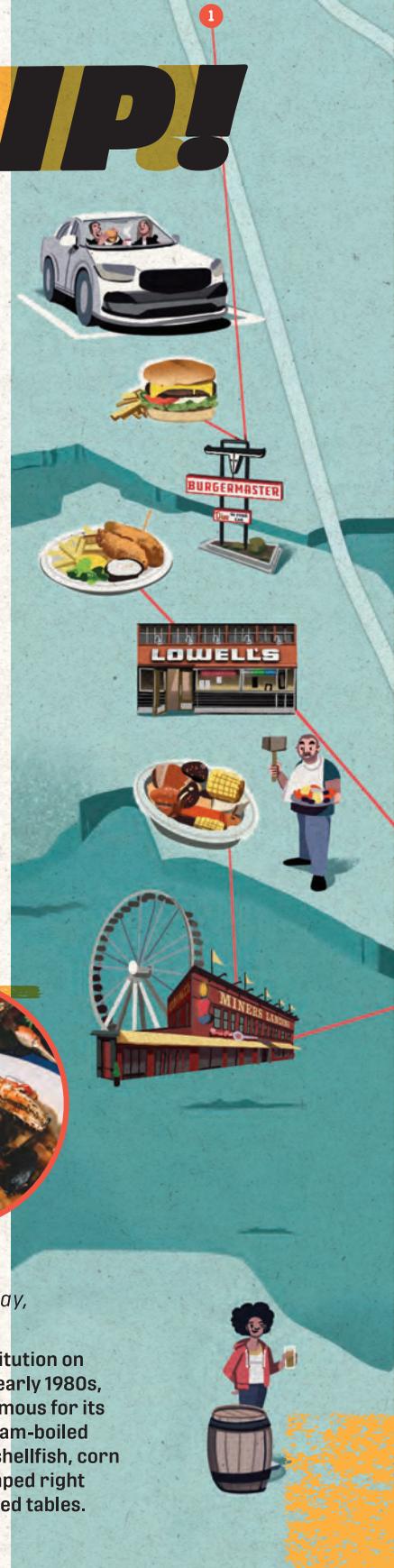
SEATTLE, WA

SEATTLE'S HITTING ALL THE TRENDS

right now: smash burgers, halal, new wave coffee, sustainable fish, health and wellness. "We have some of the highest menu prices in the country right now; because of that, operators have to go above and beyond offering great food and even greater service—they have to serve a deeper purpose for consumers," says **US Foods Janelle Lhotka, Seattle North VP of Sales.**



JANELLE LHOTKA,
SEATTLE NORTH
VP OF SALES.
US FOODS



THE VETERANS:



1

Burgermaster

9820 Aurora Ave. N

An iconic, family-owned drive-thru concept founded by Phil Jensen in 1952 with a newer location in Issaquah and now serving breakfast in Bellevue.

MENU FAVE:
BURGERMASTER



2

Lowell's at Pike Place Market

85 Pike St.

Lowell's—established in 1957—offers three floors of waterfront views and market-fresh seafood classics, from crab-laced breakfasts to wild salmon and fish and chips.

MENU FAVE:
CLAM CHOWDER



3

Crab Pot

1301 Alaskan Way,
Pier 57

A waterfront institution on Pier 57 since the early 1980s, The Crab Pot is famous for its "Seafeasts"—steam-boiled spreads of crab, shellfish, corn and potatoes dumped right onto paper-covered tables.

MENU FAVE:
FISH AND CHIPS

12 **NOTABLE UP NORTH:**
Coconut Kenny's
 a tropical-themed pizza and sandwich concept with eight—and counting—locations

THE NEWCOMERS:



Toasted

Opened: JULY 2024
Chef/Owners: JAAFAR ALTAMEEMI & MURAT AKYUZ
 University of Washington grads Jaafar Altameemi & Murat Akyuz opened this hospitality-forward bagel sandwich shop serving halal-certified meats.



The Hall on Occidental

Opened: JULY 2025
Chef/Owner: THE HALL MANAGEMENT GROUP
 The newest Hall concept, this SoDo gastropub near Lumen Field has quickly become a go-to for Seahawks fans and locals.



Halal Smash BRGR

Opened: OCTOBER 2023
Chef/Owner: MOHAMMED BU JUBARAH
 Created by a former tech-sector pro, this ghost kitchen burger concept features 100% certified halal beef and a variety of housemade sauces.



NOT PICTURED, STILL AMAZING:

- 7** LUNE CAFÉ (UNIVERSITY DISTRICT)
- 8** ITADAKI (BELLEVUE)
- 9** BEACHHOUSE BAR + GRILL (KIRKLAND)
- 10** PHÊ (CAPITOL HILL)
- 11** PIKE PLACE CHOWDER (PIKE PLACE MARKET)

LEARN MORE ABOUT 'EM ALL!



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STOCK YARDS®
COLLECTIVE

A US FOODS® COMPANY

MEAT'S BACK, BABY!

HOW TO MAKE CENTER-OF-THE-PLATE TRENDS FOR 2026 WORK

CONSUMERS WANT MORE PROTEIN OPTIONS, NOT LESS



72% of consumers say animal meat is more satisfying than plant-based.**

59%

59% of consumers regularly crave animal meat.**

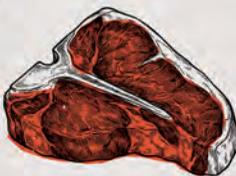


72% of operators say animal protein delivers more "bang for the buck."**

CONSUMER-DRIVEN PROTEIN TRENDS

PRIME CUTS

Nearly two-thirds of meat consumers express strong interest in centerpiece beef cuts like steaks and chops, with even higher demand among millennials and Gen X diners.**

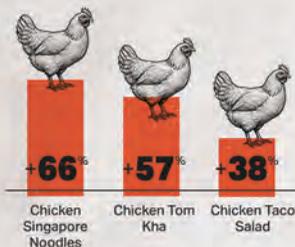


SLOW-COOKED BEEF

Trending comfort foods like authentic Mexican birria and other braised dishes are driving demand for beef cuts like chuck, shoulder and brisket.***



BIRRIA TACOS
+350%
PROJECTED 4-YEAR MENU GROWTH



CHICKEN CUTS THAT FLEX*

Top-growing dishes support demand for versatile chicken cuts like breast, thigh and tenders. To the left: dish growth on menus nationwide.

POWERHOUSE PORK



Consumers continue to gravitate toward authentic comfort and global classics, reinforcing pork's role as both bold and familiar. Pork butt, belly and loin offer versatility for bowls, tacos, sandwiches and fusion plates that appease current consumer interests and drive traffic overall. ****



SURF & TURF

This classic combo's making waves in the seafood category, especially among millennials.**



Nearly half (45%) of consumers like surf & turf, but only 37% of operators offer the dish—meaning there's plenty of room to reengage diners and elevate menus.**

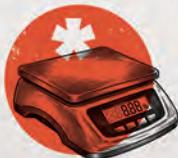
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usfoods.com/SYC



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YEARS
OF PROTEIN EXCELLENCE
Founded in 1893 in Chicago's Union Stockyards.



100M+
POUNDS
OF PROTEIN PROCESSED YEARLY
Scale that delivers consistency operators can count on.



160
MASTER BUTCHERS
Expert hands turn raw protein into foodservice-ready solutions.



REBUILD REFRESH RISE

THESE US FOODS CUSTOMERS ARE CONNECTING WITH
THEMSELVES, THEIR TEAMS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES FOR
FRESH IDEAS, RENEWED PURPOSE AND REAL REINVENTION
IN A CHALLENGED INDUSTRY.

BY AMELIA LEVIN

THE INDUSTRY HAS CHANGED.

WE'VE LOST PEOPLE. IT FEELS SCATTERED SOMETIMES. EVERYTHING COSTS MORE. PEOPLE ARE DINING OUT LESS. WE'RE BURNED OUT. IT'S TIME FOR A REFRESH—SOME SPRING CLEANING, IF YOU WILL. A RECHARGE. A REBUILD. A RENEWAL AS WE MOVE INTO A NEW ERA OF RESTAURANTS IN AMERICA.

20

ALL SPUDS, NO DUDS!

NO OTHER VEGETABLE WORKS AS HARD AS THE PERENNIAL POTATO.

BAKED, MASHED, SCALLOPED OR ANY WAY YOU FRY IT, THIS VERSATILE VEGGIE SERVES AS A STAPLE INGREDIENT THAT CAN HELP DRIVE TRAFFIC AND BOOST PROFITS.



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RADICAL HOSPITALITY

CHEF ANTHONY SITEK
CROWN RESTAURANT
GROUP | OHIO

You know the airplane rule—put your mask on before helping others. That’s the motto that **ANTHONY SITEK**, chef-owner of Crown Restaurant Group in Cincinnati, takes. His company’s service-forward approach is not just to get guests to come back—it’s to serve and support his team, first and foremost.

“We call this ‘radical hospitality,’” he says. “We’re investing in every corner of the restaurant to make the experience better—but we’re also investing in each and every one of our team.”

Sitek credits a hands-on leadership team, including his wife, **HALEY NUTTER-SITEK**; director of operations Brenna Alderman; and food and beverage director Alex Stevens, for helping develop this strong culture. “They’re 100% with the teams every day, and I’m with the back of the house every day,” Sitek says. That attention has paid off.

“You can give people sh*t food, but if the service is great, they’re going back,” Sitek says. “We make everything from scratch—our own butchery, pasta, ice cream—but service is just as important.”

In order to encourage staff to give good service, though, they need to feel motivated—with opportunities for growth and a better quality of life. Sitek’s company operates on a five-day workweek cycle, offering paid vacation and health insurance, for starters. “Our turnover is low

“OUR TURNOVER IS
LOW BECAUSE
WE INVEST
IN OUR TEAM—
EVEN SKIPPING MY OWN
PAYCHECK IF NEEDED.”

—CHEF ANTHONY SITEK

Haley Nutter-Sitek
and Anthony Sitek at
Losanti in Cincinnati

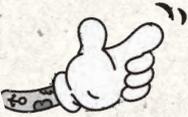
THE BIG STORY

because we invest in our team—even skipping my own paycheck if needed,” Sitek says. “We’d rather take care of our employees than ourselves, because the return is better long-term.”

Sitek says he also doesn’t “hide anything when it comes to finances,” keeping the books open and accessible so everyone feels a part of the group effort to improve. Even the company’s growth plans are (partially) team-oriented.

“We had a manager, one of our best GMs in the company, approach us saying that she’d like to move closer to her home in Columbus,” Sitek says. “We had been thinking about expanding our steakhouse concept, so we started looking at spaces in Columbus. Now she’s going to run that location for us, and on top of that, she’s taking one of our other top GMs with her so he can grow and learn with her. When it comes to growth, we know what brands are going to do better than others at scale, but we also want to give our staff the best quality of life possible, so that factors into the decision-making.”

READ ANTHONY
AND HALEY’S
FULL STORY:



Above, Chef Adam Hegsted; Below, Adam demoing technique

LIFE OR DEATH

CHEF ADAM HEGSTED
EAT GOOD GROUP | PACIFIC NORTHWEST

HOW TO CHANGE CULTURE FROM THE TOP

—A CONSULTANT’S VIEW

We asked Jay Bandy of Goliath Consulting Group, a restaurant and hospitality consultancy, for his thoughts on how to shape the future of foodservice. Bandy is often called upon in the industry for his seasoned viewpoints.

BE CONSISTENT

“Don’t waver, and see your commitments through. In organizations, leadership is not about grand pronouncements; small behaviors repeated daily—incremental actions rather than a one-time push—can have a greater impact on building trust and a culture of accountability over time.”



READ ADAM'S
FULL STORY

A **DAM HEGSTED**, chef/owner of Eat Good Group (Baba, Francaise, Honey, Republic Kitchen + Taphouse, The Yards) in the Pacific Northwest, also knows the importance of putting your mask on first before helping others.

The reason for his much-needed recharge a couple years ago? He almost died.

During a routine checkup in fall 2023, a doctor discovered a heart murmur Hegsted never knew about. Further testing revealed an aortic aneurysm. "They caught it before it exploded in my chest," he says. "I was told I couldn't lift anything over five pounds and had to go into emergency surgery in two days. I needed to get my will together and basically get my whole life together."

The experience was life-changing—literally and emotionally. Hegsted, who operated multiple restaurants at the time, had to step away to recover physically—and reconsider not just how he would return, but what he was returning to.

"Life really is so fragile, and it can be taken away in any second," Hegsted says. "It makes you kind of think about all the things you're doing in your life, and whether those things are conscious choices. Even though my heart condition wasn't stress-related, I wanted to take a closer look at how I was living my life and take back control, be more proactive rather than reactionary."

That mindset sparked a major reframe, starting with leadership.

"We're letting culture guide the way we're going, not the other way around," says Hegsted. "Kitchens used to be about someone dictating—I help shape the vision and direction, but it's really the people steering the boat every day."

Hegsted also widened the circle when it came to menu development, pulling ideas from across the team rather than making decisions alone. Hiring followed the same philosophy. "We hire more for attitude than experience or having worked at cool places—that makes us a little different."

**"EVERYONE SHOULD
BE ABLE TO DO THE
SAME JOB
I'M DOING"**

—CHEF ADAM HEGSTED

He's also become more proactive about addressing problems before they spread. "If you have an employee causing issues, it needs to be addressed right away," he says. "Otherwise, it's like a virus—it spreads from one person to the next."

One of the biggest shifts was investing more deeply in education and transparency. "We teach our managers and chefs about budgets, scheduling, the books—everything," he says. "We want people to operate the restaurants as if they're their own. If they leave here, they'll know how to do it. And if something ever happened to me again, the company could function without me. Everyone should be able to do the same job I'm doing."

Even deep in the kitchens, the cultural shift is intentional. "The old-school stuff—throwing pans, yelling in people's faces—we just don't do that," Hegsted says. "The second you walk away, they've lost respect for you. No one wants to live on edge, constantly scared they're going to do something wrong. That's not a life anyone wants to live."

Images courtesy of Eat Good Group

SET GOALS COLLECTIVELY

"Talk about the vision and values of the brand. Live them. Learn about your staff outside of work. Engage in small talk. Repeat."

LISTEN ACTIVELY

"Active listening is the key. Ever talk to people who want your opinion and they talk 90% of the time? Don't be that person. Listen and turn that information into visible changes within the organization/restaurant."

MAKING WORK FUN

CHEF ANDY BROWN
ANDY'S PIZZA | WASHINGTON, D.C.

Personal growth has become inseparable from professional growth—and for many operators, that’s at the core of this culture shift conversation.

“Before COVID, I was a nobody with \$8,000 in the bank,” says **ANDY BROWN**, owner of Andy’s Pizza, which now has seven locations in Washington, D.C. Brown entered

the pizza world as a competitive pizzaiolo, winning international championships, but he says he had zero experience owning or operating restaurants.

“COVID was the best thing that ever happened to me,” he says. “Pizza went crazy, and by the time the pandemic was over, I was a real restaurateur.”

While revenue surged, staffing became the real challenge. “During COVID and even after, a lot of good restaurant people left the industry,” Brown says. This left the staffing pool smaller, so “we made it our goal to be the best place to work in D.C. This business shouldn’t be about making people stay—it’s about people enjoying their lives. WTF are we doing on this planet if we don’t like it here?” That philosophy shows up in everyday decisions. “If you’re out of vacation days but your cousin’s getting married, go to the wedding,” Brown says. “We don’t have a script—we just support our people.”

Training is a core pillar. “Even if someone moves on, I want this to be the last job they ever had in that role,” he says. “If I can’t move someone from server to manager, I



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Real
POTATOES**

Andy Brown,
a pizzaiolo
at work



**“WTF ARE WE
DOING ON THIS
PLANET IF WE
DON'T LIKE
IT HERE?”**

—CHEF ANDY BROWN

still want them ready for that next position. We want our people to keep moving up.”

Even supplier partners are treated as part of the team. “I’ve gone into Michelin-starred restaurants and seen people getting into it with the delivery guy—and we’re supposed to be delivering hospitality at the highest level?” Brown says. “Hospitality has to extend to vendors. We offer slices, lemonade—we take care of our partners as if they work here, because they do.”

**READ ANDY'S
FULL STORY:**



HEALTH & WELLNESS RESOURCES

In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, here are four organizations in the US Foods CHECK® Business Tools program offering meaningful support for foodservice professionals and the teams who rely on them.

#FAIRKITCHENS

A global movement founded by Unilever Food Solutions in 2018 and focused on improving health, well-being and working conditions.

GIVING KITCHEN

A James Beard Award-winning nonprofit provides emergency financial assistance and stability resources to foodservice workers nationwide.

VIAPATH FOUNDATION

Supports second-chance employment by connecting restaurants with skilled candidates impacted by incarceration through its 2C Your Impact initiative.

AUGEO BENEFITS

Helps restaurant owners and employees navigate health insurance through one-on-one guidance from licensed benefits counselors.



Clockwise from top left: Chef Delmer Bustillo mixing the Crispy Mango Glazed Shrimp; Ruth Hayden helping set tables for a party; Chef Gustavo Acevedo on expo; Server Matt Bess ringing in his tables.

COMM MATTE

GRACE + JEREMY MCGEE
SALO SALO | INDIANAPOLIS

Not every rebuild starts with a big team. Sometimes, it starts with the community.

Husband-wife duo **GRACE** and **JEREMY MCGEE** built a cult following with Mr. Bonbon, their Indianapolis-based Filipino bakery, selling ube macarons and cakes at farmers markets and specialty stores. Demand grew after they began selling at the Philippine Cultural Community Center in South Indy.

Grace McGee leaned on her family recipes as a second-generation Filipina, and on a passion for cooking and baking she shares with her husband, to experiment and grow further. That turned into a pop-up restaurant at the center featuring empanadas



Jeremy McGee

Wildfire: images courtesy of Wildfire; Salo Salo: Images courtesy of Salo Salo

AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE

AARON MERVIS
PARTNER, WILDFIRE | MCLEAN, VA

At Wildfire in McLean, Virginia, partner **AARON MERVIS** takes a similarly intentional approach. “Our philosophy is simple: Take care of the employees, and they’ll take care of the guests,” says Mervis, referencing the culture of Chicago-based parent company Lettuce Entertain You®. “We listen. We accommodate. If someone looks unhappy, we try to address it before it becomes a bigger issue.”

Mervis also focuses on celebrating the wins. “We read guest compliments out loud at meetings—calling out servers by name and letting the team celebrate each other,” he says. “It turns recognition into something motivating.”

He also brings line cooks, dishwashers, bussers and front-of-house staff to meetings with managers. “One thing we’re very intentional about is breaking down the wall between front-of-house and back-of-house—it’s one restaurant, one team.”

Promoting from within is just as important. “Our GM started as a server, our chef started as a dishwasher, and I started as a host,” Mervis says. “We want people to see this as a career, not just a job.”



SCAN HERE TO READ
AARON'S FULL STORY



UNITY RS



Grace McGee

with scratch-made dough and longanisa sausage and burgers with housemade buns and Filipino vinegar-spiked sauces alongside mango and ube cakes.

“The center’s been a great spot for us to start [a restaurant] because we had an established customer base of people seeking Filipino food,” Grace McGee says. “We’re also self-taught and don’t have any professional cooking or restaurant management

experience, so we were able to use an existing space to learn more. Starting a restaurant from total scratch is super difficult.” The momentum from their community has continued. A local Hawaiian-inspired lunch spot owner invited them to serve dinner, and at press time, the couple was preparing for expansion.

“Piggybacking on another restaurant owner’s success—especially someone who believed in us—has

helped a lot,” Grace McGee says.

Whether you’re rebuilding a multi-unit group or launching your first pop-up, the through line is the same: People come first. It’s a lesson Hegsted told us about—and one he learned the hard way.

“In the restaurant business, it’s easy to get caught up in chasing growth and money,” Hegsted says. “But at the end of the day, it’s a people business. Our customers are important, of course—but so is our team. When you forget about your people, everything else starts to fall apart. I’m just trying to invest in them and hopefully that’s what I’m leaving behind when the time comes.”



READ JEREMY +
GRACE’S FULL
STORY HERE

FOODFANATICS.COM 27

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GEAR CHECK!



WITH US FOODS EQUIPMENT+ SUPPLIES
SPECIALIST DANNY FRICK

SPRING is a season of reset—and for operators, that goes far beyond the menu. As diners look for more memorable moments when they eat out, **tabletop design** plays an increasingly important role in how hospitality shows up at the table. From flexible bread service to interactive beverage moments, these standout tabletop picks deliver experience, versatility and visual impact—indoors and out.

FEATURED PRODUCT:

Libbey Plastic Cocktail Glasses

“Rocks glasses that look like crystal but they’re plastic—suitable for serving those \$15 cocktails and NA options on patios.”

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OF CONSUMERS CHOOSE
NON-ALCOHOLIC DRINKS
MORE OFTEN

ISI TWIST N' SPARKLE

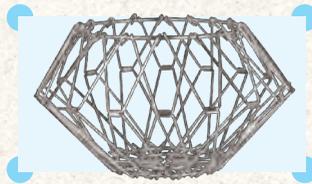
TABLESIDE INSTANT CARBONATION BOTTLES

"You can do sparkling or infused waters tableside almost immediately with this system. You can even bring out herbs or fruits and let guests create their own infused waters right there at the table—and then upcharge for it."



"OPERATORS HAVE TO MAKE DINING IN THEIR RESTAURANT AN EXPERIENCE AND NOT JUST A WAY TO COME IN AND GET FOOD."

GO OUTSIDE OTHER PATIO-FRIENDLY OPTIONS



FLEXIBLE WIRE BASKETS

"It looks like a wire basket, but it does a bunch of things. Use it as a shallow basket or flip it into a tall narrow basket."



ACACIA WOODEN SERVING BOARDS

"They're real wood and great for charcuterie but dishwasher-safe with options for laser-engraved logos."

LIKE 'EM? GET 'EM!



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EXECUTIVE CHEF
KARMA MURILLO
WITH THE CHICKEN
+ WAFFLES AT NAPA
BISTRO STONECREST,
IN NORTH CAROLINA



TODAY, WE'RE MAKING:

CHICKEN + WAFFLES

CHICKEN & WAFFLES just keeps chugging along as a brunch fave. Even chain restaurants have gotten into the game, making it more mainstream and giving chefs a chance to put their own spins on the classic. The riff at Napa Restaurant Group, with four locations in North and South Carolina, features a dusting of Ethiopian berbere spice.



TIPS FOR A
SUCCESSFUL SERVICE

BETTER BRUNCH

DAVID and TONY LEWIS,
co-owners of Wylie
& Rum, a “Floribbean”
restaurant in Atlanta,
share their two cents.

1. GET SOMEONE IN CHARGE.

“Make sure you have a competent chef—it’s so easy to overcook eggs for Eggs Benedict or shrimp and grits. But these mistakes will cost you.”

2. MAKE YOUR CORE MENU AVAILABLE.

“We’ve segmented our brunch menu while keeping our regular menu items available—we had several guests come in during brunch but want what they always get.”

3. MENU WHAT YOU HAVE

“Cross-utilization is everything. We had a new chef who wanted to add this and that but then you have to accommodate all that with space, plating and labor. It can be too much.”

EGG ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTINA LEE FOR FOOD FANATICS®

FOOD LOOKING GOOD? SCAN HERE + SHOP THE SHOOT --> -->



LET'S COOK THIS SHIT!

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO NAPA'S CHICKEN + WAFFLES
WITH EXECUTIVE CHEF KARMA MURILLO



STEP ONE

BRINE THE CHICKEN IN BUTTERMILK.

The brine also contains a little hot sauce, crushed garlic, peppercorns and thyme for a 48-hour marinade.



STEP TWO

MIX THE BATTER.

The addition of corn starch, baking powder and baking soda help activate the acid in the buttermilk to create more crunch.



STEP THREE

DOUBLE-FRY THE CHICKEN.

Blanch the chicken at 325° F; then do a second fry at 350° F until browned and crisp.



STEP FOUR

MAKE THE WAFFLES AND THE FINAL SEASONINGS.

These waffles get a dusting of a secret berbere spice blend and a drizzle of hot honey made with garlic, coriander, thyme, bay leaves and Aleppo pepper.



Hank Clark, partner and vice president of operations (left), with John C. Metz, executive chef and co-owner (right)

RISE + GRIND, BABY

TRAINING WITH CLARK

INSIDE AN ONLINE TRAINING SYSTEM DESIGNED TO SHAPE LEADERS, NOT JUST ONBOARD STAFF

Founded in Atlanta in 2004, Marlow's Tavern has built its culture as intentionally as its menu—with training at the center. What began as 1½- to 2-minute learning modules has evolved into Marlow's University, the restaurant group's online training platform.

"A lot of companies talk about training, but if you don't have a platform, it's really hard to scale," says **HANK CLARK**, partner and vice president of operations. "We spend more time on skills we build than on food or labor costs. That consistency in leadership makes the vision easier to execute."

"GREAT ORIENTATION TO THE BRAND— THAT'S HOW YOU KEEP PEOPLE TOGETHER"

THE PLAYBOOK

FOUR GUIDING PILLARS FOR TRAINING SUCCESS

1. CULTURE FIT

"We put a lot of effort into the selection process. We're looking for willingness to serve and alignment with our values. Once we have our person, we're very clear about who we are and what they're getting into."

2. FORMAL ONBOARDING

"No matter what role you start in—line cook, server—you're immediately plugged into the system. Prep cooks can see how a dish is prepared, and FOH teams learn how to educate the guests on menu items."

3. PATHS TO PROMOTIONS

"We want great people to join us from outside, but our focus is on internal growth and long-term cultural fit. Out of our 21 chef de cuisines, 15 were internally promoted—that's a standout for our brand."

4. GAMIFICATION + MOTIVATION

"We use an interactive learning system where employees earn points, rewards and recognition. High performers want to be held accountable. We're able to see progress in real time."

**READ MORE,
SCAN HERE:**



HOW TO TREAT THE YOUNG 'UNS

HEAR THEM OUT

THIS IS WHAT CULINARY GRADS (AKA YOUR NEXT EMPLOYEES) WANT

INSIGHTS FROM
CHEF-EDUCATOR

MICHAEL MCGREAL,
CEC, CCE, CHE,
CULINARY ARTS
DEPARTMENT CHAIR
JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

THEY WANT TO
FEEL VALUED
+ SUPPORTED.

“Many students don’t want to leave culinary school because they feel cared about here—and then they go into the industry and come back saying, ‘I don’t know if this is right for me.’ They must feel like they’re valued. If they don’t, they’ll leave.”

THEY WANT
POSITIVE
FEEDBACK

“Money is great, but people still want to hear, ‘Thank you. You did a great job.’ That’s what makes them feel seen.”

**“WE NEED TO BREAK
THE MOLD.**

IT’S NOT ABOUT PAMPERING—IT’S
ABOUT PATIENCE, COACHING AND
CREATING JOBS THAT FIT REAL LIVES.”



THEY WANT
FLEXIBILITY
NOT JUST
MONEY.

“The new generation wants jobs where they’re not going to be worked like dogs. We need to break the mold. Why not stagger shifts to offer more flexibility? I had a mom who could only work certain hours in the day but was able to work more at other times.”

THEY WANT
MENTORSHIP +
OPPORTUNITIES
TO LEARN

“The coaching mentality is key. Be patient. Show them. Help them get it right. Then they’ll say, ‘What are we doing tomorrow, Chef?’”

DID YOU KNOW?

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THE FUNNY PAGES

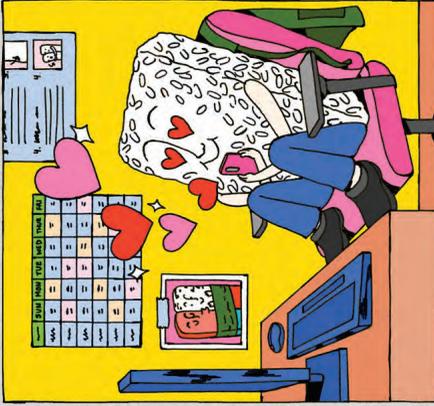
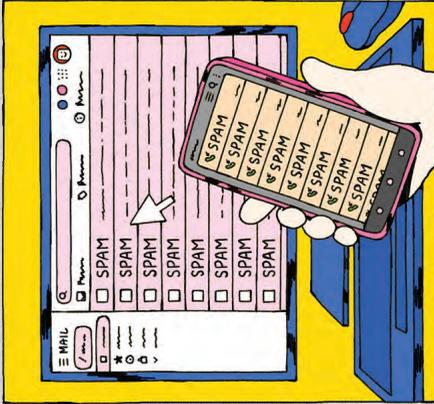
THINK YOU'RE FUNNY?
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CRAVING ACID? TAKE A TRIP TO CITRUS TOWN ON PAGE 12

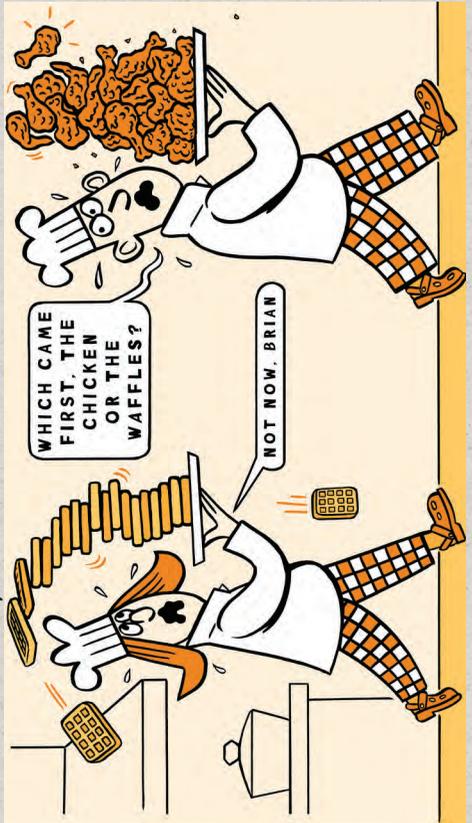
THE CITRUS FIEND



MUSUBI: THE SPAM + RICE DREAM TEAM. SEE MORE ON PAGE 9



WE DON'T KNOW EITHER, BUT WE DO HAVE A RECIPE. PAGE 31



BACKBURNER

FIVE Q'S 'CAUSE NO ONE'S GOT TIME FOR MORE MARCH 2026

STEVE EWING

OWNER @ STEVE'S HOT DOGS,
ST. LOUIS

Steve Ewing—musician, restaurateur and overall do-gooder—has been referred to as the “unofficial mayor of St. Louis.” His restaurant group has provided more than \$10,000 in free meals to food pantries and local social service organizations.

1. WHAT'S YOUR MUSICAL BACKGROUND?

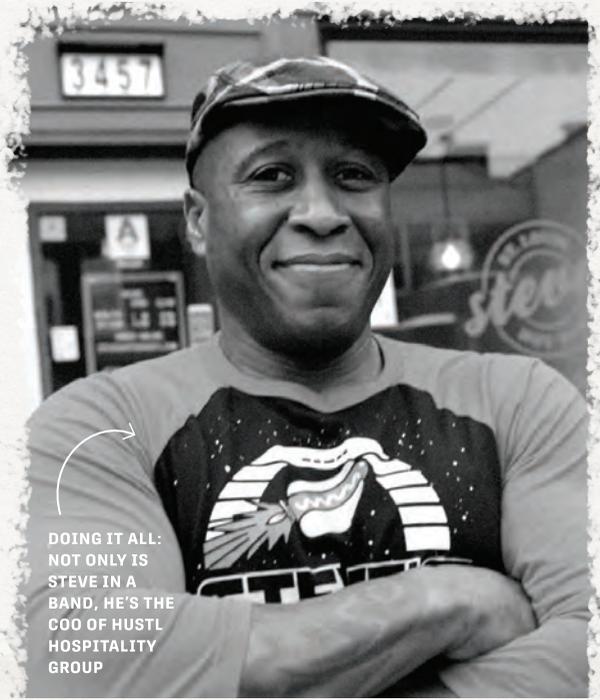
“I am the lead singer of The Urge—we’ve been playing since the late ‘80s. The band is pretty popular here; we still tour and we’ll often be playing and vending hot dogs at the same time.”

2. WHY HOT DOGS?

“As a touring musician, hot dogs are just something you can grab pretty easily. It all started with me wanting to sell food in places that were missing street food at night. I had the cart shipped to my home and strapped it on the back of a truck for shows. As soon as I got it, everyone thought I was crazy, but I was hooked. I love the energy it created—and people loved our hot dogs.”

3. WHAT'S ON THE ST. LOUIS DOG YOU CREATED?

“An all-beef hot dog cold-smoked in-house with provolone cheese, grilled bell peppers, grilled onion, smoked pepper mustard and banana peppers.”



DOING IT ALL: NOT ONLY IS STEVE IN A BAND, HE'S THE COO OF HUSTL HOSPITALITY GROUP

4. WHAT'S YOUR LOVE/HATE MENU ITEM?

“Our Storm Trooper hot dog with alfredo sauce that we make from scratch. It’s really time-consuming because we make it fresh throughout the day but it’s so good and people love it.”

5. PEOPLE SAY YOU'VE CREATED A NICE PLACE TO WORK. HOW'S THAT?

“**WE APPROACH FOOD ALMOST AS IF IT WAS A ROCK BAND—**

our recipes are fun—and that energy carries over in the kitchen. We know how to have a great time while working hard.”



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