

Restaurant Brands with Buzz

Social ranking of emerging chains finds focus on organics and health

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Bareburger and La Colombe aren't household names like McDonald's and Starbucks, but these niche brands are strong social performers.

According to [eMarketer's Retail Database](#), the top five US restaurants ranked by total revenues are probably the ones you'd expect: [McDonald's](#), [Starbucks](#), [Chipotle](#), [Olive Garden](#) and [KFC](#). But revenues don't tell the whole story when it comes to popularity.

Indeed, a list of emerging brands just released by restaurant analytics company [Fishbowl](#) looks very different. Restaurants were rated on a scale from 1 to 10 using an index based on social features, like consumer feedback, online ratings and customer check-ins, as well as online sentiment aggregated from Yelp, TripAdvisor, Facebook and Foursquare.

By this measure, the top five were True Food Kitchen (9.8), Bareburger (9.7), Harvest Seasonal Grill and Wine Bar (9.6), Firebirds Wood Fired Grill (9.6), Tupelo Honey (9.5) and La Colombe (9.5). The top three all focus on organics, health or sustainability, while Tupelo Honey serves Southern food and La Colombe is an independent coffee roaster.

Social media success isn't necessarily synonymous with sales, of course. Only two restaurants in Fishbowl's top 10—Cava and HopCat—are also in [Restaurant Business'](#) "Future 50" top 10, which is based

on a combination of sales growth and store openings. Cava, a modern Greek chain, and HopCat, which emphasizes craft beer, took third and fourth places on the 2017 Restaurant Business list, with sales growth rates of 76.3% and 57.3%, respectively, and unit increases of 92.3% each.

The most represented segment in Fishbowl’s rankings was fast casual, making up 37% of the 30 brands included. That number was down from 2017, though, when fast-casual restaurants took a 67% share. This year saw the rise of what Fishbowl calls “polished casual,” which consists of more upscale brands like [Del Frisco's Grille](#).

According to [Technomic’s](#) monthly Chain Restaurant Index (CRI) for March 2018, the casual and fine dining segment saw declines in both sales (1.2%) and traffic (4.0%) year over year. Fast casual saw the largest sales growth, at 6.8%.

US Restaurant Traffic and Sales Growth, by Type, March 2018
% change vs. same period of prior year

	Traffic	Sales
Casual & fine dining	-4.0%	-1.2%
Fast-casual	2.1%	6.8%
Midscale	3.3%	1.6%
Quick-service	2.8%	4.7%

Source: Technomic, Chain Restaurant Index (CRI) as cited in press release; eMarketer calculations, March 28, 2018

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This segment, which is a step up from fast food but does not offer table service, has long been a bright spot in the restaurant industry. In fact, [Dave & Busters](#), which Wednesday reported a stronger drop (5.9%) in Q4 2017 comparable sales than expected, is planning to test a new fast-casual format in the second half of this year to address value and speed issues.