

It used to be that either you ate fast food or healthy food. But not both at the same place. Now, almost everywhere you turn, the paradigm is shifting. Restaurants are clamoring to find the right mix to appeal to the new carnivore/vegan/pescetarian who wants conscientiously-sourced ingredients that have health value and address issues of sustainability and social justice – what we’re starting to see is an improved Fast Food category that will pave the way for what will hopefully be a new, nearly sustainable lineup of inexpensive fast food, that is evolving thanks to the powerful engine of customer demand.



Reference sources: CNN,
The New York Times.

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Here are a few examples of promising new players.



Freshii is one of the pioneers in the category of fresh, healthy, organic foods delivered in a quick-serve model. Its fare includes salads, quinoa, spicy lemon-grass soup, kale dishes, brown rice, tofu and lots more. It's not for everyone. But it is just the thing for a growing number of Millennials and others who are looking for such fare – fast and cheap. Started by Matthew Corrin (himself a Millennial at age 31) in Toronto in 2005, he moved the headquarters to Chicago in 2007 with the goal of going global. By the end of 2013 there will be 120 stores, mostly franchise-owned, in eight countries.

The distinguishing element that positions Freshii as likely to succeed is that Corrin found a way to standardize healthful dining in scalable, franchisable proportions. His menu is manageable and the dishes show calorie counts and more detailed information including the kinds of fats used in preparation – just the types of foods and information that many Millennials are seeking.

And it's not just the model but the timing as well that bodes well for success in startups like Freshii. The transformation of palates in Generation Y is formidable. Once considered hippie granola fringe food, a brown rice and tofu platter has a more mainstream appeal to today's young adults, circling back to the flower children of the 60's who now make up the aging Boomers. So, in a portentous irony for healthy fast food entrepreneurs, the cycle of über-healthy eating has come full circle and represents an important niche in the emerging foodservice scene among two of the most influential generations.



Veggie Grill offers Americans transitional vegetarian food that more closely resembles the fast food that Americans are accustomed to – burgers and fried chicken sandwiches with decent fakes that satisfy a diverse customer base.

About 70% of its customers eat meat or fish, an important point when considering its success as a vegan establishment. Dishes such as Thai Chickin' Wraps made from soy-based Gardein, and VG-Cheeseburgers – the meat made from soy with wheat and pea protein and the cheese made from tapioca-based Daiya – seem to appeal to customers who want to eat healthier but aren't quite ready for the tofu and kale concoctions that hard-core vegans prefer.

By offering this kind of crossover cuisine to vegans and omnivores alike, Veggie Grill is poised to gain popularity without the need to strictly define its target audience, which, by recent accounts, seems to include those with a wide range of dietary preferences.



Lyfe Kitchen (Love Your Food Everyday) has an extensive menu that appeals to just about everyone looking for healthy choices, with or without strict parameters. With its first two locations in California and 250 more planned within five years, LYFE Kitchen is showing signs of being grounded from the outset by staying true to its values and committing only to the kind of growth it can sustain.

Headed by chefs Art Smith (formerly Oprah's personal chef) and Tal Ronnen, one of the country's most notable vegan chefs, LYFE Kitchen seems headed for success before it even leaves sunny California. With its mission clearly stated on its home page (www.lyfekitchen.com), LYFE Kitchen sets out to create delicious food that is sustainable, helps growers and farmers, aids social justice and appeals to carnivores, vegans, vegetarians, pescetarians and everyone else.

What's not to love? The menus are large and comprehensive, and offer a wide range of tastes using conscientiously sourced products. And the good news for those who live in states that are not California is that LYFE Kitchen has a line of frozen selections available in several regions across the United States, and growing. So, chances are reasonably good that LYFE Kitchen will become a household name either via a franchise or through a grocery channel.

New players eager to jump on the franchisable healthy food bandwagon have an eager public awaiting their next move. And the great news for the produce industry is that the proliferation and success of these types of restaurants bespeak the inevitable increase – exponentially, perhaps – of all manner of fresh vegetables and fruits. 🌱

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The logo for California Avocados features the word "California" in a large, orange, cursive script font. Below it, the word "AVOCADOS" is written in a smaller, blue, all-caps, sans-serif font. The background of the logo is a blurred image of several green avocados.

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