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Tossed's Chicken Caprese Salad

"Every May, we do our National Salad Contest to celebrate National Salad Month via our website, Tossed.com. We allow our guests to enter their own perfect salad—their dream salad—using our ingredients. At the end of the month, we judge them on taste, presentation, the wow factor, how we think it will sell, and the cost factor. In 2011, our winner was the Chicken Caprese Salad from Sarah Wilson of Boston. We offered it as a limited-time offer in July, and it was such a big seller that guests came in after July ordering it and designing it using our design-your-own-menu process. People would say, 'Can I still get it?' and it became a big hit. So we had no choice but to put it on our menu. It was a good thing. The fans had spoken."

"The combo of tomato and Mozzarella is one most people love, but adding the spice and kick of the blackened chicken and the texture of the avocado makes it a little party in your mouth. It's not like a traditional Caprese salad; it's our twist on it."

—Brian Chodash
VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING, TOSSED

List of Players:

- ROMAINE HEARTS
- BLACKENED CHICKEN
- AVOCADO
- CHOPPED TOMATOES
- FRESH MOZZARELLA
- BALSAMIC VINAIGRETTE

ber of ingredients is only limited by space in the display case.

Because Saladworks's ingredients don't have preservatives, Scardapane says, the company makes sure there's food turnover by using the point-of-sale system, which traces all salad ingredients to determine how they've sold. "We're constantly monitoring that. If it's not moving, sub it," he says.

Brian Chodash, vice president of marketing at Tossed, the Florida-based make-your-own salad concept with seven locations and 68 under development throughout North America, credits the company's gourmet ingredient offerings for making it different.

"Anyone has cucumbers or onion," he says. "We use jicama, for example. It's a unique root, which, like an apple, adds a nice crunch."

While Tossed hasn't abandoned those cucumbers and onions on its menu, they may be overshadowed by banana peppers, roasted onions, smoked bacon, mango, plantain chips, and cayenne shrimp. "We want to give our guests a lot of options to build their dream salad," Chodash says. "People say, 'Wow, you have so much,' but it's a good 'wow.' You want them to keep coming back to try new things."

Ingredients on Tossed's assembly line are always tracked to gauge popularity and ensure the company stays on trend. Goat cheese is definitely in right now, Chodash says, and blackened chicken is one of its most popular items. When people design their own salads, he says, proteins are of utmost importance, so Tossed strives to stay different in these offerings. It offers five varieties of chicken, including Tarragon Chicken Salad and Pesto Chicken. There is also Smoked Turkey, Black Forest Ham, Cayenne Shrimp, and Tossed Tuna (tuna mixed with dried cranberries, apples, and mayonnaise).

Having the ability to build their own entrée from scratch gives customers the choice they crave, but pre-designed items also do very well at assembly-line concepts.

"All of our sandwiches are like building blocks," says Les Winograd, company spokesman for Subway. "A lot of people have something in mind. They know what they like and don't like—we allow them to weed it out. Knowing they can get anything they want keeps them coming back. It becomes their sandwich."

At Quiznos, chef-created sandwiches are the biggest sellers, says Susan Lintonsmith, chief marketing officer. "The majority of our customers order a recommended sandwich the way it is," she says, but she adds that there are many who enjoy customizing them.

The sandwich basics come down to bread, meat, cheese, vegetables, and dressings, Lintonsmith says, of which Quiznos offers a wide variety, including signature meats, four kinds of bread, and 22 sauces. Still, "people sway toward the familiar," she says.

Quiznos offers limited-time offers in which the focus is mostly on innovative protein options, with items like lobster, pulled pork, and apple-smoked bacon offered throughout the year. "We see an increase in traffic during our LTOs," Lintonsmith says.

Even with enough ingredients to create more than 37 million possible varieties of sandwiches, Subway is always looking for new offerings, Winograd says. One of the R&D team's focuses is

trying ingredients already in the restaurant but in different combinations, even something simple like pepperoni as an add-on to a turkey sub or something more detailed like the chef-created Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki sandwich that Winograd says is "breaking the mold" in terms of innovative sandwich design. That sandwich is roasted chicken in a teriyaki glaze with a fat-free sweet onion sauce.

When it comes to specific dietary needs, whether it's fat-free, low-sodium, gluten-free, or dairy-free, Subway can help customers build their sandwiches to whatever need they request. Mixing in several healthy ingredient options means customers can make something healthy that also tastes good, Winograd says, or, "if you're looking for something indulgent, we can do that, too."

Variety is served up with quirky vibes at Which Wich, the Dallas-based sandwich concept with more than 200 stores and 300 in development across 30 states and four countries. More than 50 varieties of customizable "wiches"—from the signature Wicked sandwich with five meats and three cheeses to the sub-400-calorie healthy sandwiches—are on the menu, with the ability for customers to choose from among more than 60 toppings, 10 cheeses, and three sizes, all of which can be served on white or wheat bread, in a bowl, or wrapped in lettuce as a handheld, portable salad. That makes for about 56 trillion different entrée combinations.

"We have tremendous bandwidth in ingredients, which allows for a high level of customization," says James Pa, vice president of operations. "Our fans tell us it's our vibe that really encourages them to express themselves."

In fact, customers are responsible for some underground menu items that have evolved at Which Wich. Fans created a Waldorf salad by tweaking a couple of ingredients in one of the bowl salads; a cheeseburger 'wich; a California roll 'wich; and a pepperoni pizza 'wich, to name a few.

Despite all of the possible creativity, the most popular item at Which Wich is the Turkey Wich, a traditional turkey, lettuce, tomato, and mayo base that can be built up or down as desired. Meanwhile, the gyro with tzatziki sauce is the No. 2 best seller, followed by the Wicked and the Thank You Turkey, with stuffing and cranberry sauce.

Built Custom Burgers is a new fast-casual concept from The Counter, the Los Angeles-based full-service build-your-own-burger chain of 37 restaurants. Guests move from station to station, selecting a protein, cheese, toppings, sauce, and style (on a bun or in a bowl, salad-style), as well as sides and drinks.

Guests expect quality ingredients and a better burger, says Mike Costello, director of marketing, and the variety of an ever-changing menu with "a new featured cheese, topping, and sauce that rotates regularly so guests can have a different Built experience each time they visit. Last week, it was Manchego cheese, roasted sea salt corn, and sweet sriracha sauce. This week it's soft-ripened Brie, grilled pineapple, and sesame ginger dressing."

Still, customers lean toward tradition, he says. "Lettuce, red onions, pickles, and tomatoes still rule the day," Costello says. "For cheese, it's Cheddar and American." But Costello says customers will often mix things up by adding something new to their