RESTAURANT LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
by informa

APRIL 19 - 22, 2026

JW MARRIOTT PHOENIX DESERT RIDGE RESORT & SPA
PHOENIX, AZ

AGENDA

DAY 1

Registration & Information Desk

2:00 PM - 7:00 PM

RLC Kick-Off Reception & 2026 Pacesetter Award Ceremony

5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

Start your RLC experience early with an unforgettable evening! Join us for a celebratory night of industry camaraderie, exceptional food, craft cocktails, and well-deserved fun as we honor a rising star of our industry.

Honoring Excellence: The Pacesetter Award

The prestigious Pacesetter Award recognizes small to mid-sized restaurant brands that have achieved exceptional growth and demonstrated outstanding industry excellence. Winners are selected based on rigorous criteria including:

- Financial performance and profitability
- System-wide growth and expansion
- Company culture and personnel management
- Innovation and forward-thinking leadership
- Meaningful contributions to industry and community

This is more than an awards ceremony—it's a celebration of the visionary leaders who are shaping the future of our industry. Don't miss this exciting kick-off to RLC 2026—where connections are made, achievements are celebrated, and the tone is set for an incredible conference ahead!

2027 Winner to be announced in January.

DAY 2

Registration & Information Desk

6:30 AM - 6:30 PM

Presented by: Kraft Heinz, PepsiCo, Toast

Special Events (Choose 1 of 5)

7:00 am - 11:30 am

- **Golf Tournament**

Tee off with the biggest names in foodservice at the RLC Golf Tournament. Swing big, talk shop, and settle rivalries on the green before anyone even steps into the conference.

- **Arizona Jeep Tour**

Climb on board in an open-air Jeep and experience the beauty and serenity of Arizona's Sonoran Desert on this guided tour. Learn about the spectacular trails from a genuine cowboy guide.

- **Musical Instrument Museum**

Discover the rich musical diversity and history of many of the world's cultures at the Musical Instrument Museum. Featuring over 8,000 instruments from over 200 countries, this is the largest museum of its type in the world.

- **Shooting Experience**

Join us for a dynamic and engaging shooting experience at C2 Tactical with USCCA certified range instructors. This guided event combines live-fire range time and an interactive shooting simulator, offering a safe environment and to spark friendly competition. —no prior shooting experience required.

- **Yoga on the Lawn**

Unroll your mat and join Southern Champion Tray for a refreshing yoga class on the lawn. This flowing Vinyasa practice is designed to calm the mind, strengthen the body, and encourage mindful breathing, perfect for all levels, including first timers. Enjoy the fresh air, peaceful outdoor setting, and the chance to slow down, stretch, and reset.

Starbucks Takeover

11:00am - 12:00pm

RLC Editorial Lunch & Learns (Choose 1 of 3)

11:30 AM - 12:45 PM

- **Lunch & Learn 1:** Where to Grow from Here: Navigating the Future of Restaurant Expansion

As the restaurant industry looks toward 2026 and beyond, operators face unprecedented challenges and opportunities in expansion planning. With economic headwinds, shifting consumer preferences, and evolving market dynamics, successful growth requires more than traditional strategies—it demands strategic innovation and data-driven decision-making. Join the expert editorial teams from Restaurant Business and Nation's Restaurant News, and a panel of esteemed operators for an engaging panel discussion that tackles the most pressing expansion questions facing today's restaurant leaders.

Participants

- Moderated by: Alicia Kelso, Executive Editor, Nation's Restaurant News & Jonathan Maze, Editor in Chief, Restaurant Business
- Chris Bremer, Chief Development Officer, Smoothie King
- Scott Drake, CEO & President, CEC Entertainment, LLC
- Jason Rusk, Executive Vice President Restaurant Operations, Wonder

- **Lunch & Learn 2:** The Balance Between Technology & Hospitality

In today's rapidly evolving hospitality landscape, the ability to differentiate your brand while maintaining authentic human connection has become the ultimate competitive advantage. Success lies in strategically leveraging technology to enhance—not replace— the personal touch that drives guest loyalty. Join our interactive panel of leading restaurant industry executives as they share proven strategies for:

- Elevating loyalty programs through data-driven personalization that feels genuinely tailored to each guest
- Reducing friction at every touchpoint while preserving the warmth of hospitality service
- Harnessing technology insights to anticipate guest needs and exceed expectations
- Building lasting emotional connections that transform transactions into meaningful relationships

AGENDA

Participants
- Moderated by: Joe Guszkowski, Senior Editor Restaurant Business & Leigh Anne Zinsmeister, Managing Editor Nation's Restaurant News
- Rafik Hanna, Senior Vice President, Topgolf Technologies, Topgolf
- Vicki Hormann, Executive Director, Off-Premise & CRM, Applebee's
- Ha Ly, Head of Marketing, Pokeworks
- Tim Newton, Chief Technology Officer & Head of Brand Operations, Long John Silver's

- **Lunch & Learn 3:** Make Menus Work

Your menu is far more than a collection of dishes—it's your most powerful profit-driving tool. In today's competitive landscape, successful operators understand that strategic menu design can be the difference between thriving and merely surviving. Join our think tank session where industry-leading operators share case studies and how they've transformed their menus from simple food lists into sophisticated revenue engines that drive customer behavior, optimize margins, and strengthen brand positioning. Leave this session equipped with a clear roadmap for transforming your menu into a high-performing business asset that consistently drives bottom-line results.

Participants
- Moderated by: Pat Cobe, Senior Editor Restaurant Business & Bret Thorn, Senior Food and Beverage Editor, Nation's Restaurant News
- Joel Bulger, Chief Marketing Officer, WOWorks
- Cathy Chavenet, Chief Marketing Officer, Paris Baguette
- Katie Love, Chief Marketing Officer, Sonny's BBQ

10 Years of Pacesetter Excellence - An Interactive Luncheon

11:45 AM - 12:45 PM

Join us to celebrate a decade of Pacesetter Winners at the Restaurant Leadership Conference! This exclusive milestone event, limited to just 80 attendees on a first-come, first-serve basis, honors the top emerging restaurant brands that have redefined excellence, growth, innovation, and leadership while reshaping the industry. This is your chance to connect with trailblazing leaders in an intimate and engaging setting. The luncheon will feature an interactive discussion led by Sam Oches, Editor-in-Chief of Nation's Restaurant News, and Lisa Jennings, Executive Editor of Restaurant Business offering a behind-the-scenes look at the strategies and stories behind each Pacesetter Award-winning brand. Discover their "secret sauce" for achieving next-level growth, gain impactful insights, and enjoy a few surprises along the way. Don't miss this unique opportunity to celebrate innovation and excellence with the best in the business! Pacesetter Winners Include:
- Nothing Bundt Cakes (2026)
- Dave's Hot Chicken (2025)
- CAVA (2024)
- First Watch (2023)
- Dutch Bros. Coffee (2022)
- Freddy's Frozen Custard & Steakburgers (2021)
- Shake Shack (2020)
- Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurants (2019)
- The Habit Burger Grill (2018)
- Mod Pizza (2017)

Networking Break

12:45pm - 1:15pm

Innovation Forums (choose 1 of 9)

1:15 PM - 2:00 PM

- **Fragmentation is Breaking Your Restaurant**

Channel sprawl, fee fatigue, and loyalty erosion are exposing the limits of restaurant tech.

Restaurants bolted on new channels and systems to expand reach and stay relevant. Now they're stuck managing the consequences: weakening loyalty, badly coordinated ordering flows, and inconsistent guest experiences.

Based on new first-party research, this session explores the shift from Restaurant Tech 1.0, optimized for expansion, to Restaurant Tech 2.0, designed to orchestrate ordering, loyalty, and on-premise execution through shared data and logic—turning complexity into a coordinated advantage.

Join Tillster's CMO, Hope Neiman, as she breaks down what Restaurant Technology 2.0 looks like in practice and how to stay relevant in a market now shaped by fragmentation and shifting demand.

Participants
- Hope Neiman, Chief Marketing Officer, Tillster

- **Farm to Fork: Navigating the New Normal in Fresh Produce Supply**

The fresh produce market is entering one of the most volatile periods foodservice operators have ever faced. Extreme weather events, rapid shifts in growing regions, and compounding supply chain pressures are no longer isolated disruptions, they are the new normal. In the year ahead, operators won't just be reacting to known challenges, they'll be navigating risks they don't yet see coming.

Join us for a critical session designed for operators who want to stay ahead of disruption and not scramble behind it. This must-attend discussion delivers a real-world playbook for preparing for a year where consistency, availability, and cost control will be harder to maintain than ever. This session is for operators who understand that the biggest risk in today's produce landscape is assuming next year will look anything like the last.

Walk away with actionable strategies to safeguard your menus, protect your margins, and gain a clear advantage over competitors who are still reacting to disruption instead of planning for it.

Participants
- Tyler Deutch, Chief Business Development Officer, Buyers Edge Platform - Produce Alliance

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- **Data to Decisions: How AI Drives Operations & Performance**

In this fireside conversation, HuHot Mongolian Grill's VP of Technology, Rebecca Stewart, joins Restaurant365's Marc Cohen to share how a fast-growing, multi-unit brand is using data, automation, and AI to drive smarter decisions without overwhelming operators. From benchmarking performance to improving team productivity and guest experience, this session explores how the right balance of people, process, and technology can unlock meaningful growth in today's challenging restaurant environment.
What the Audience Will Learn
- How to implement AI and automation in practical, operator-friendly ways
- Strategies for turning restaurant data into clear, actionable insights
- How to build a culture of accountability and performance using benchmarking
- Ways to increase sales and efficiency without relying on price increases
- How to evaluate and adopt new technology without disrupting frontline teams

Participants
- Marc Cohen, Solutions Architect, Restaurant365
- Rebecca Stewart, Vice President of Technology, HuHot Mongolian Grill

- **Pouring Profits: Maximizing Revenue Through Beverage Strategies**

Is your beverage program working as hard as it could to drive bottom line results?

Restaurant operators are increasingly turning to their beverage program to help drive incremental sales and profits. Beverages increasingly can provide a "just for me" moment, especially with younger generations, which leads to increased brand loyalty and incremental visits to your units. The desire for customization provides an opportunity to deliver upon key consumer needs while also capturing incremental profit. These are just some of the opportunities that chain operators have to grow incremental profit utilizing their beverage platform. Join us to learn more ways to capitalize on your beverage program.

Participants
- Art Bell, Partner, Kinetic 12
- John Dillon, CEO & President, la Madeleine Bakery & Café
- Eric Nakata, Corporate Innovation Chef, Alamance Foods
- Rich Shank, Senior Principal and Vice President, Innovation, Technomic

- **Digital Growth Beyond 2026: Smarter Spend, Higher Order Value, Better ROI**

Off-premise growth isn't just about fulfillment – it's about building and nurturing a channel that drives incremental, profitable growth, without cannibalizing in-store sales. In this panel, restaurant leaders share how they're using data, analytics, and automation to acquire new customers and grow order value while protecting channel profitability. From knowing when to promote add-ons to deciding where automation can replace manual campaign management, this discussion explores how data-backed decisions unlock smarter, more sustainable digital growth.

Participants
- Moderator: Vishwa Chandra, Vice President - Global Head of Enterprise Restaurants, DoorDash
- Justin Falciola, President of the Americas, Deliverect
- Chris Kung, Chief Digital Officer, Zaxbys

- **How AI Is Shaping the Future of Talent and Innovation**

In today's restaurant landscape, talent strategy and innovation are critical drivers of growth. Join this executive panel to hear how industry leaders are shaping the future of talent and innovation, with AI enabling empowered workforce strategies, differentiated performance and measurable value creation across the restaurant industry.

Participants
- Jim Balis, Partner, Head of Strategic Operations, CapitalSpring
- Luke Fryer, CEO and Founder, Harri
- Carlton Joiner, EY Americas Retail Technology Leader, EY
- Audi Rowe, EY Americas Restaurant and AI Growth and Value Leader, EY

- **Marketing Brings Them In. Operations Brings Them Back.**

When guest experience breaks down, is it a marketing problem or an operations problem? How do leading brands align both to drive repeat visits?

In this session, leaders from Cheba Hut, Newk's Eatery, and Dog Haus share how they use a "markerations" approach—aligning marketing and operations—to diagnose and fix guest issues. By leveraging guest feedback, reviews, and real-time insights, they identify where expectations break down and take action at both the brand and local level.

Attendees will learn a practical framework for determining the root cause of guest experience challenges and how leading brands align teams to improve execution, drive repeat visits, and turn insights into measurable results.

Participants
- Kyle Archer, Owner and Chief Financial Officer, Elevated Inc
- Zack Oates, Founder & CEO, Ovation
- Frank Paci, CEO, Newk's Eatery
- CJ Ramirez, Chief Marketing Officer, Dog Haus Worldwide

- **Deploying Voice AI at America's Iconic Brands**

Voice AI is rapidly transforming QSRs, and some of America's most iconic brands are leading the way by partnering with Presto in the drive-thru. Voice AI in the drive-thru transforms the largest channel and is the only gateway to an agentic AI operational future. It also happens to be incredibly challenging to do correctly. In this session, Presto co-founder & CEO Krishna Gupta is joined by Kevin Baartman (Dairy Queen), Brian Cassidy (Carl's Jr), Rusty Bills (Wienerschnitzel), and Steve Smyth (Taco John's). They will discuss how Voice AI is being actively deployed across their organizations to modernize and reimagine how they run their businesses. These brands helped create the American QSR industry and culture, with nearly 300 years between them, and their leaders will share real-world experiences implementing AI to drive optimization across labor, upsells, operations, and guest experience.

Participants
- Kevin Baartman, Executive Vice President, Information Technology, International Dairy Queen, Inc
- Rusty Bills, Chief Operating Officer, Wienerschnitzel
- Brian Cassidy, Owner, SDC Restaurants, LLC
- Krishna Gupta, Co-founder & CEO, Presto
- Steve Smyth, Director of Restaurant Technology, Taco John's

Networking Break

2:00 PM - 2:15 PM

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Opening General Session

2:15 PM - 4:30 PM

- **BMI Artist Special Performance + 25 Years of RLC**

  Participants
  - Josh Grider, BMI Featured Artist
  - Jack Flynn, Assistant VIce President, Licensing, BMI
  - Chris Keating, EVP Conferences, Informa Connect

- **C-Suite in the Hot Seat- Inside the Nest**

  This edition of C-Suite in the Hot Seat brings together five distinguished C-Suite executives, all members of The Nest—an exclusive collective of visionary leaders committed to tackling the restaurant industry's most pressing challenges. Each mini one-on-one interview, will provide compelling stories of their journeys to success, innovative business strategies, industry hot topics, and forward-thinking plans for the future. Gain valuable insights into how these leaders address the evolving demands of modern consumers, striving to balance speed with value-driven dining experiences.

  Participants
  - Justin Rosenberg, Founder and CEO, honeygrow
  - Roland Gonzalez, CEO, Church's Texas Chicken
  - Donna (Josephson) Varner, Chief Brand Officer, Schlotzsky's Deli
  - Beth McCormick, CTO, CAVA
  - John Meyers, COO, Marco's Pizza
  - Moderator: Sam Oches, Editor in Chief, Nation's Restaurant News
  - Moderator: Mark Hatch Vice President | Trade Relations | Managing Director of The Nest Group, Informa Connect Foodservice

- **Generation Gap: Industry Insights from a Consumer Panel**

  Take a break from listening to your peers and get into the minds of your customers! In this focus group style session, a mixed group of generations will share the stage and their candid thoughts on Restaurant Technology, Dining Experience, Drive-Thru Automation, New Menu Items, LTOs, and everything in between. This vibrant discussion will feature a diverse consumer panel, each representing a different generation—Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers.

  Participants
  - Moderator: Emily Nordee-Rogers, Vice President and Head of Restaurant Content, Informa Connect Foodservice

- **A Celebration for the Restaurant Leader of the Year**

  Participants
  - Kevin Hochman, CEO & President, Brinker International
  - Jonathan Maze, Editor-in-Chief, Restaurant Business
  - Chris Keating, EVP Conferences, Informa Connect Foodservice
  - Heather Hoytink, Chief Commercial Officer, US Away From Home Beverages, PepsiCo

- **Restaurant Leader Of the Year Award and Fireside Chat**

  Join us for a special Fireside Chat to honor Christine Barone, CEO of Dutch Bros, as the 2026 Restaurant Leader of the Year. In this inspiring session, we'll celebrate her extraordinary leadership journey and explore the strategies, vision, and innovation that have propelled Dutch Bros to the forefront of the restaurant industry.

  As the chief executive of the drive-thru coffee chain, Christine has played a pivotal role in kickstarting Dutch Bros' impressive growth trajectory, transforming it into a powerhouse brand while establishing beverages as one of the industry's hottest and fastest-growing sectors. Under her leadership, Dutch Bros has not only expanded its footprint but also redefined the drive-thru experience with a focus on speed, quality, and customer connection.

  Celebrate her achievements and learn what it takes to lead with purpose, passion, and impact in today's restaurant landscape.

  Presented by: PepsiCo

  Participants
  - Christine Barone, CEO and President, Dutch Bros
  - Moderated by Jonathan Maze, Editor in Chief, Restaurant Business

Marketplace Happy Hour and Restaurant Leader of the Year Celebration

4:30 PM - 6:30 PM

Presented by: PepsiCo

RLC Marketplace

4:30 PM - 6:30 PM

Presented by: Toast

DAY 3

Registration & Information Desk

7:45 AM - 6:30 PM

Presented by: Kraft Heinz, PepsiCo, Toast

Networking Breakfast

7:45 AM - 9:15 AM

Starbucks Takeover

8:00 AM - 9:00 AM

Presented by: Too Good To Go

General Session

9:15 AM - 10:45 AM

- **Welcome & Introduction**

  Good morning! Grab your favorite morning beverage, find a comfortable seat, and join us for today's opening General Session. We look forward to starting the day with you!

  Presented by: EverPass

  Participants
  - Alex Kaplan, CEO, Everpass

- **Editorial Quick Bites**

  Participants
  - Jonathan Maze, Editor-in-Chief, Restaurant Business
  - Sam Oches, Editor-in-Chief, Nation's Restaurant News

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- **Operator Spotlight – Building Brands Over Time: Leadership Lessons from Yum! Brands**

  An inspiring and thought-provoking panel discussion featuring (three) dynamic female leaders from Yum! Brands, a global powerhouse in the restaurant industry, who are leading with impact. These trailblazing executives will share their unique perspectives on leadership, innovation, and driving success in a fast-paced, ever-evolving business landscape.

  Presented by: Harri

  Participants
  - Meg Farren, President, North America, Taco Bell
  - Catherine Tan-Gillespie, President of KFC U.S.
  - Shannon Hennessy, CEO, Habit Burger & Grill
  - Moderated by: Alicia Kelso, Executive Editor, Nation's Restaurant News

- **Technomic State of the Industry: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities in the Evolving Marketplace**

  Technomic will provide a journey through yesterday, today and tomorrow's foodservice landscape and explore opportunities and challenges to consider for growth.

  Participants
  - Lizzy Freier, Senior Director of Menu Research & Insights, Technomic
  - Rich Shank, Senior Principal and VP of Innovation, Technomic

Innovation Forums (Set 2 - Choose 1 of 10)

11:00 AM - 11:45 AM

- **Your Menu May Have a Blind Spot: The Beverage Opportunity You're Leaving on the Table**

  Beverages are no longer just an add-on—they're becoming a powerful growth driver. In this session, discover why non alcoholic crafted sodas, like refreshers and bubble teas, are elevating menus through customization, creativity, and experience. From flavor builds and mix-ins to visual appeal and made-to-order moments, we'll dive into why guests are actively seeking out crafted drinks, sharing them socially, and valuing them as an experience worth paying more for. This conversation unpacks the consumer behaviors, flavor innovation and design choices fueling demand for craveable, customizable beverages.

  Presented by: PepsiCo

  Participants
  - Alison Dempsey, Senior Director of Innovation, Away From Home Channel, PepsiCo

- **3 Ways a Modern Ordering Platform Drives Profitable Growth**

  Profitable growth requires owning the guest experience and nurturing loyal relationships. This session unpacks strategic, mission-critical practices for converting your ordering platform into a high-performance profit engine. Our focused playbook shifts demand to your most profitable channels, driving higher conversion and operational reliability at scale.
  What we'll cover:
  - The power of owned guest relationships: Data, frameworks, and playbooks that turn clean guest data into actions that drive profitable growth
  - Maximizing the guest experience: Implement strategic solutions and tangible workflows to own and nurture the the guest experience
  - Getting the most out of your technology investment: Centralize your digital ordering channels to improve CX and streamline operations

  Presented by: Olo

  Participants
  - Jo Lambert, Chief Operating Officer, Olo
  - Tom Perella, Vice President, Technology, Taco John's
  - Nick Petrocci, Senior Director, Restaurant Technology, Zaxby's
  - Susan Taylor, CEO & President, Juice It Up!

- **Delivering a Remarkable Dine-In Experience: Inside Outback's Turnaround Playbook**

  Outback's turnaround is rooted in a simple question: what actually makes guests want to come back?

  As Outback refocuses on execution, consistency, and value, the brand is rebuilding momentum by getting back to the core fundamentals that matter most to guests. Join Outback's GVP of Strategy and Transformation for a candid, behind-the-scenes look at how guest insights are shaping the brand's turnaround- turning daily feedback into focused, no-regret improvements.
  In this session, you'll learn how Outback is:
  - Re-establishing steak excellence and center-of-the-plate quality to deliver on its core promise
  - Refining service timing and execution to directly influence frequency and intent to return
  - Fixing "what you get for what you pay for" in a highly competitive category
  - Using intent to return as a leading indicator of traffic recovery, informed by daily guest feedback from nearly half of all diners

  Walk away with a clear view of the operational and brand levers driving progress, and practical, immediately applicable ideas you can put to work in your own restaurants.

  Presented by: Ziosk

  Participants
  - Susan Cline, Group Vice President, Strategy & Transformation, Bloomin' Brands
  - Raymond Howard, Chief Revenue Officer, Ziosk

- **Unifying the Ops Management Lifecycle to Elevate Performance**

  In the modern restaurant environment, inventory, labor, kitchen execution, and task management are not just adjacent functions—they are deeply interdependent. Behind every perfectly timed dish, every friendly service interaction, and every satisfied guest is a complex web of decisions, processes, and tools that make it all happen. From how prep and labor converge before the doors open to maintaining standards under the heat of peak volume, operators need a unified lifecycle to keep performance on track.

  Join us for a panel discussion featuring forward-thinking leaders as they explore how a complete operations lifecycle approach–including strategic use of AI and automation– can improve profitability and guest satisfaction.

  Presented by: Crunchtime

  Participants
  - James Byrne, Vice President, Enterprise & EMEA, Crunchtime
  - Kris Douglas, Vice President of Technology, Smalls Sliders
  - Ted Hardy, Senior Director of Hospitality Technology Transformation, Topgolf USA
  - Jim McCurley, Chief Restaurant Officer, Biscuitville

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- **AI Metrics That Actually Matter: Outcomes Over Vanity Numbers**

  Most AI projects measure the wrong things. "Handled" isn't "done." High containment rates don't pay the bills. We're all on AI overload. This panel helps you cut through the noise to determine what to look for, what questions to ask, and how to separate what matters to your board from what's not worth your team's time right now.

  We'll bring together operators who've deployed AI alongside Revmo's CTO and AI expert to discuss what actually moves the needle. They'll dig into why edge cases kill projects, why the best implementations start with the boring 70% (not the flashy 5%), and why AI that doesn't touch your source systems is probably not worth it. Bring your hardest AI questions. No fluff, just real talk. We'll frame the conversation around four questions every operator should ask before deploying:

  - Which workflows are you actually changing?
  - What systems will it read from and write back to?
  - What business metric moves, and by how much?
  - What happens if this works?

  Presented by: Revmo

  Participants
  - Bobby Beckman, Chief Technology Officer and Founder, Revmo AI
  - Kevin King, CEO and President, Donatos Pizza
  - Marc Manopla, Vice President of Franchise Operations, The Great Greek Mediterranean Grill
  - Neel Patel, CEO, REGO Restaurant Group

- **Outperforming in a Value-Driven Market: Chili's Durable Growth Strategy**

  Chili's has now posted its 19th consecutive quarter of same-store sales growth, driven by higher traffic, menu enhancements, competitive pricing, and improved operations. In an industry where consumers are increasingly value-conscious, Chili's continues to outperform by pairing disciplined menu innovation with a data-driven approach to evaluating and scaling what works.

  This session will highlight how the brand balances price and traffic to sustain performance, emphasizes strong partnerships across finance and marketing to accelerate outcomes, and simplifies operations in ways that elevate brand equity and deepen guest loyalty.

  Presented by: Mastercard

  Participants
  - Meagan Borden, Senior Director, Finance, Chili's
  - Emilie Kroner, Senior Vice President, Services Business Development, Mastercard
  - Jeremy Linker, Senior Vice President, Brand Finance, Chili's

- **The Connected Advantage: Turning Restaurant Technology Into a Growth Multiplier**

  Restaurants today have an abundance of technology tools at their disposal, but disconnected systems often create more complexity than clarity. When your digital channels and physical dining rooms operate in silos, valuable time is lost on manual work rather than on what matters most: serving guests.

  In this session, representatives from Uber Eats, Toast, and [TBC operator partner] will share how restaurants can streamline operations by tapping into platforms focused on flexibility and integration. We'll go beyond technical integration to show you how to harness a combined ecosystem that puts you in the driver's seat—bringing POS, delivery, and marketing into one view to reduce friction, improve reliability, and empower operators to maximize growth and thrive in today's competitive landscape.

  Presented by: Uber Eats

  Participants
  - Kristen Durham, Head of Acquisition, US & Canada, Uber Eats
  - Kelly Esten, Chief Marketing Officer & Chief Operating Officer of Enterprise, Toast

- **From Enterprise Vision to Local Precision: Integrated Data-Driven Framework for Real Growth**

  Scaling a brand shouldn't mean sacrificing local performance. In this session, we'll unpack how leading organizations connect enterprise planning directly to franchise activation, creating consistency without losing local impact. Discover how integrating data, strategy, investment, and execution into one coordinated data-driven framework drives smarter spending, clearer accountability, and measurable growth across the system. You'll leave with practical ideas for eliminating silos, empowering operators, and maximizing every marketing dollar. Because real growth happens when strategic enterprise vision meets local precision.

  Presented by: Triadex

  Participants
  - Stephen Farr- Jones, Chief Strategy Officer, Triadex
  - Amanda Mangler, Senior Vice President, Revenue, Triadex

- **Tech that Pays: How to Implement Technology That Drives Real Restaurant Profitability**

  Today's foodservice operators are managing unprecedented pressure in back of house operations, from labor availability to rising costs and performance variability. Technology—including advanced analytics and AI—plays an increasingly important role, yet many organizations struggle to convert data into timely decisions and consistent action at the restaurant level.

  This session features insights from Boston Consulting Group, Microsoft, and a foodservice operator, offering an educational look at how leading organizations are approaching BOH performance through the thoughtful use of modern technology. Moderated by Ecolab, the discussion will explore how AI enabled solutions are most effective when paired with intentional deployment, simplified insights, and a human touch.

  Attendees will gain practical perspectives on aligning AI driven technology, people, and processes to help restaurant leaders focus on what matters most during daily operations, leading to improved efficiency, consistency, and profitability.

  Presented by: Ecolab

  Participants
  - Brian Cassidy, Owner, SDC Restaurants, LLC
  - David Kass, Stores & People Lead, Americas, Microsoft
  - Maarten Potjer, Executive Vice President Innovation Growth Strategy, Institutional Group, Ecolab
  - Lee Robertson, Managing Director & Partner, Boston Consulting Group
  - Vikrant Viniak, Senior Vice President & General Manager, Ecolab Digital Commercial, Ecolab

- **Burnout to Breakthrough: Transforming Workforce Challenges into Competitive Advantage**

  Restaurant workforce disruption is reshaping performance at every level. Drawing on global workforce megatrends and frontline employee research, this session highlights the key pressure points driving burnout, engagement, and intent to stay and how they directly impact guest experience, speed, and brand trust. Learn how restaurant leaders can turn frontline insight into operational resilience and sustained competitive advantage in 2026 and beyond.

  Participants
  - Erika Sandoval, Global Senior Partner, Human Insights, UKG

AGENDA

Networking Break

11:45 AM - 12:15 PM

Innovation Forums (Set 3 - Choose 1 of 9)

12:15 PM - 1:00 PM

- **Innovation at the Speed of Culture: From Trend to Table**

  In today's cultural landscape, the brands winning at the table aren't just following trends — they're fluent in the culture creating them. The ability to spot signals early and translate them into relevant, craveable menu innovation has never been more critical. Join this dynamic panel discussion featuring restaurant operators who bring unique perspectives from marketing, culinary, and operations and where industry leaders explore proven strategies for:
  - Decoding food trends as cultural expressions and what they reveal about guests
  - Understanding the role of identity, belonging, and self-expression and how it translates into innovation
  - Reading cultural signals and moving them from insight to menu with speed and confidence
  - Discuss real-world brand activations that meet guests exactly where culture lives

  Presented by: Kraft Heinz

  Participants
  - Stacey Cox, Head of Insights, Away From Home, Kraft Heinz
  - Allison Lauenstein, Brand President, QSR Division, FAT Brands
  - Katie Pekarek, Head of Innovation, Away From Home, Kraft Heinz
  - Thomas Talbert, Head of Culinary, Away From Home, Kraft Heinz
  - André Vener, Founding Partner, Dog Haus

- **Beyond the Timer: Five Ways Enterprise QSRs Are Building a Faster, Smarter, More Human Drive-Thru**

  In today's cultural landscape, the brands winning at the table aren't just following trends — they're fluent in the culture creating them. The ability to spot signals early and translate them into relevant, craveable menu innovation has never been more critical. Join this dynamic panel discussion featuring restaurant operators who bring unique perspectives from marketing, culinary, and operations and where industry leaders explore proven strategies for:
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  - Understanding the role of identity, belonging, and self-expression and how it translates into innovation
  - Reading cultural signals and moving them from insight to menu with speed and confidence
  - Discuss real-world brand activations that meet guests exactly where culture lives

  Presented by: Toast

- **Why Some Restaurants Win When Everyone Else Struggles**

  All Restaurants are facing the same pressures of value wars, rising costs, and shrinking margins, yet some brands continue to outperform. The difference isn't deeper discounts or more technology. It's the hidden advantages of smarter operations and stronger guest engagement working together.

  In this session, PAR CEO Savneet Singh and two operators break down what the data shows: while most brands spend 5–10 hours a week reconciling disconnected systems, the top performers are eliminating that drag and redirecting their teams toward higher value work. The discussion explores how better foundations, cleaner workflows, and emerging behind the scenes intelligence help restaurants move faster without adding complexity.

  Presented by: PAR Technology

  Participants
  - Chris Incorvati, Chief Technology Officer, Jack's Family Restaurants
  - Joe Yetter, General Manager, Cloud Engagement, PAR Technology

- **From Fragmentation to Focus: The Future of Restaurant Management Through Contextual Intelligence**

  In an industry overwhelmed by fragmented systems and rising guest expectations, the future of restaurant management lies in shifting from data overload to true contextual intelligence. In this forward looking fireside chat, Paytronix GM, Nonita Verma and Access Hospitality CEO, Champa Magesh explore how to evolve beyond standard loyalty data to deliver the right insight at the right moment to empower operators to attract and retain customers with greater clarity and less effort. They'll discuss how Agentic AI reduces operational burden by learning and automating decisions over time, and why open ecosystems—not closed, monolithic platforms—are the key to flexible, future proof innovation. Attendees will gain a clear view of how unified intelligence, adaptive automation, and customer centric design are reshaping the next era of restaurant operations and loyalty.

  Presented by: Paytronix

  Participants
  - Champa Magesh, CEO, Access Hospitality, Access Group
  - Jason Morgan, CEO, Original Chopshop
  - Nonita Verma, Senior Vice President & General Manager, Paytronix

- **Close the Gap Faster: Operational Improvement Tactics That Actually Stick**

  Identifying operations gaps is only half the battle; the real test is turning those insights into actions that close faster and stick. Drawing on data from hundreds of restaurants, this panel of Steritech experts and restaurant leaders will examine operational excellence and food safety audit program structures, corrective action strategies, and self-assessment tactics to pinpoint the specific structural elements that accelerate improvement and deliver measurable, lasting results.

  Presented by: Seritech

  Participants
  - Trey Eanes, National Account Executive, Steritech
  - Rusty Bills, Chief Operating Officer, Wienerschnitzel
  - Ashley Morris, Manager of National Operations Services, Long John Silver's
  - Angie Ramirez, Senior Manager of Food Safety and Quality, CAVA

RESTAURANT LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
by informa

APRIL 19 - 22, 2026

JW MARRIOTT PHOENIX DESERT RIDGE RESORT & SPA
PHOENIX, AZ

AGENDA

- **Beyond the Hype: How Restaurants are Improving Profitability with AI**

  Discover how leading restaurant operators are turning AI from a buzzword into a bottom-line booster. This panel brings together leaders from top restaurant brands to share real-world examples of how they've successfully implemented AI to streamline operations, enhance customer experiences, build trust, and, ultimately, drive profitability.

  From overcoming adoption challenges to scaling AI solutions across multiple locations, these experts will reveal actionable strategies that have delivered measurable results. Attendees will leave with a clear understanding of how to take AI from concept to execution and unlock its full potential for their business. Don't miss this opportunity to learn from the trailblazers who are redefining the restaurant industry.

  Presented by: Fourth

  Participants
  - Moderated by: Nipul Chokshi, Chief Marketing Officer, Fourth
  - James Butler, Senior Vice President, Corporate Strategy Officer & Chief Supply Chain Officer, Brinker International
  - Ann Johnson, CEO, Quality Brand Group
  - Rick Lenderman, Chief Operating Officer, Fogo de Chão

- **What The Data Says Top Performing Restaurants Are Doing (That Others Aren't) in 2026**

  Top-performing restaurant brands are not succeeding by chance. They are leveraging operational intelligence, labor optimization, marketing and experience design in ways that consistently outperform the market.

  This session will present a rigorous analysis of the macro-level trends shaping performance across workforce, guest experience, and financial outcomes. Backed by proprietary data from thousands of restaurant units, this session will expose the structural and behavioral differences between the top and bottom quartiles of the industry - based on traffic and sales.

  He will do all this against the backdrop context of the latest restaurant industry performance and consumer trends, and Black Box's projections for the rest of the year and beyond.

  The discussion will explore how seemingly incremental improvements, such as targeted onboarding adjustments or slight shifts in operational focus—can generate meaningful financial returns.

  This session is designed for executives seeking to pressure test their current assumptions, benchmark against best-in-class operators, and identify performance levers that are often overlooked but critical to long-term growth.

  Presented by: Black Box Intelligence

  Participants
  - Victor Fernandez, Chief Insights Officer, Black Box Intelligence

- **Margins Won't Save You. Operations Will.**

  The restaurant back office is being redefined. What was once manual, fragmented, and reactive is becoming connected, intelligent, and proactive — powered by AI.

  In this session, David Cantu shares how forward-thinking operators are adopting next-generation platforms to automate workflows, unify data, and unlock insights that drive better decisions and stronger financial outcomes.

  Presented by: Craftable

  Participants
  - David Cantu, CEO, Craftable

- **The Power of Place: Winning Customers When Location Matters**

  In 2026, the choice of where to dine is usually made within 15 minutes of a customer's front door, which means the neighborhood isn't just context, it's the competitive battleground. And while connecting with the people who live and work nearby has never mattered more, local marketing is notoriously hard to scale. What works brilliantly for one location becomes challenging at 5, and by the time you're managing 20 or more locations, the complexity can overtake the strategy. This session breaks down the specific tactics that actually drive visits and gives multi-location brands a practical playbook for showing up meaningfully across dozens — or hundreds — of different neighborhoods at once.

  Presented by: Simpli.fi

  Participants
  - Amanda Shelton, Vice President, Product, Simpli.fi

Networking Lunch

1:00 PM - 2:30 PM

Presented by: Ecolab

General Session

2:45 PM - 4:15 PM

- **Welcome Back**

  Participants
  - Marcus Viscidi
  - Sponsor Introduction: Kelly Esten, CMO, Toast & Justin Graham, Vice Pesident & General Manager, Enterprise Product, Toast

- **Leader to Leader, An Executive Exchange Session - The Foundation of an Influential Brand**

  Join us for an exclusive executive exchange featuring two industry trailblazers who have helped transform their culturally inspired restaurant brands into American household names.

  In this dynamic fireside chat, these accomplished leaders will interview each other, offering rare peer-to-peer insights into the strategic decisions, operational philosophies, and leadership approaches that that set their brands apart in today's competitive landscape. This isn't your typical conference discussion—it's an intimate conversation between two executives who understand the pressures of building unique, trend-worthy brands while staying true to their identities. They've cultivated loyal fan bases while attracting new audiences, and they'll share candid insights, strategic revelations, and actionable leadership wisdom you won't hear anywhere else.

  Presented by: Toast

  Participants
  - Liz Williams, CEO, El Pollo Loco
  - Jim Mazany, CEO, P.F. Chang's

- **Sponsor Introduction**

  Participants
  - Chris Keating
  - Hugh Roth, Chief Customer and Business Development Officer, PepsiCo Global Foodservice

- **Fireside Chat with Troy Aikman**

  Join us for a candid conversation with Troy Aikman, legendary three-time Super Bowl champion, NFL Hall of Fame quarterback, and visionary entrepreneur. Aikman will share transformative leadership insights from his iconic football career and his bold transition into the business world as the founder of EIGHT Brewing Company—Texas's fastest-growing independent beer brand. Don't miss this rare opportunity to gain actionable strategies and inspiration from one of the most iconic leaders in sports and business.

  Presented by: PepsiCo

  Participants
  - Troy Aikman, Three time NFL Superbowl Champion Quarterback, Dallas Cowboys, ESPN Monday Night Football NFL Game Analyst
  - Moderator: Chris Keating

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AGENDA

RLC Happy Hour

4:15pm - 6:15pm

Presented by: Sysco Corporate GSC

RLC Marketplace

4:15pm - 6:15pm

Presented by: Toast

Lights, Camera, Action! Photo Opportunity with Troy Aikman in the RLC Marketplace

4:30 PM - 4:50 PM

Don't miss your chance to capture a memorable moment with Troy Aikman!
To ensure a smooth and enjoyable experience for everyone, please note the following:

- Personal cell phones or cameras will not be permitted during the photo session.
- A professional photographer will be on-site to take your photo with Troy Aikman.
- All professional photos will be complimentary and made available to attendees after the event.
- Please follow the directions of the event staff to keep the process organized and efficient.

Presented by: PepsiCo

RLC After Dark

9:00 PM - 11:00 PM

Presented by: creator burger

DAY 4

Networking Breakfast

7:45 AM - 9:00 AM

Registration & Information Desk

8:00 AM - 11:00 AM

Presented by: Kraft Heinz, PepsiCo, Toast

General Session

9:15 AM - 10:50 AM

- **CORE Spotlight**
  Participants
  - Jill Chapman, Sr. Director Corporate Partnerships, CORE
  - Steve Muhlbaum, COO Out West Group
- **Navigating the Economic Landscape: Insights from Top Restaurant Leaders**
  This compelling discussion examines the shifting economic forces shaping the restaurant and foodservice industry. Featuring a distinguished panel of industry leaders, this discussion will provide a deep dive into the most pressing financial and operational challenges facing the industry today.
  Key topics will include:
  - The impact of inflation on menu pricing and profitability.
  - Labor market dynamics, including wage pressures and workforce retention strategies.
  - Supply chain disruptions and strategies for mitigating rising costs.
  - Evolving consumer spending habits and their influence on dining trends.
  - The role of technology and automation in driving operational efficiency.
  - Real estate and development considerations in a volatile market.

  Gain exclusive insights into how industry leaders are recalibrating their financial strategies to navigate uncertainty, maintain resilience, and capitalize on emerging opportunities.
  Participants
  - Moderated by Jonathan Maze, Editor-in-Chief, Restaurant Business
  - Chad Moutray, SVP, Industry Research & Knowledge, and Chief Economist, National Restaurant Association
  - Randy Sharpe, CEO, Wahlburger's
  - David Landsberg, CFO, Panda Restaurant Group
  - Tiffany Furman, Chief Growth Officer, KFC U.S.
- **The Founder's Edge: Envisioning, Creating and Shaping the Future of the Restaurant Industry**
  Restaurant founders are the visionaries and trailblazers who masterfully blend creativity and strategy to build groundbreaking concepts and successful chains. In this compelling session, two accomplished and resilient leaders take the stage for an engaging fireside chat, sharing their journeys as builders, innovators, and creators. With candid reflections on the highs and lows of entrepreneurship, they'll provide invaluable insights and actionable advice for those looking to redefine the future of the restaurant industry.
  Participants
  - Moderated by Sam Oches, Editor-in-Chief, Nation's Restaurant News
  - Lauren Bailey, Co-Founder & CEO, Postino, Upward Projects
  - Kim Malek, Founder and CEO, Salt & Straw
- **Closing Goodbye**