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## INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

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# Entrepreneurs Cook Up Tasty Restaurant Brands

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INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

Most restaurant chains begin as humble eateries. How foodies start from scratch:

**Savor the experience.** Opening Hummus & Pita in New York City was a throwback and leap forward for David Pessa.

He grew up working at his Brooklyn neighborhood bagel shop.

"My passion was being in the food business. I really loved it," Pessa told IBD.

Professionally, he was pulled into the mortgage and real estate industries until 2007 and sold his mortgage business just before the market collapse.

"I thought: Now was the perfect time to pursue my dream," he said.

**Develop unique flavor.** A restaurant franchise convention left Pessa with a stale aftertaste.

"I thought I could come up with a better concept," he said.

Recalling the eclectic Greek, Turkish and Moroccan restaurants of his youth, Pessa realized that he didn't see Mediterranean food served in a fast-casual way.

"I also saw that hummus and pita were becoming a staple in the American diet," he said.

**Establish identity.** Pessa, in partnership with his brother and mother, now has four Hummus & Pita locations in New York. Each has the same big-brand appearance. "It looks like we have 100 locations," he said.

**Be hands-on.** Restaurant labor is exceptionally personal. "It's elbow grease — pulling up my sleeves. I've done everything from running the register to working the grill," Pessa said. "Half my day is cleaning customers' tables and asking: 'How was everything?'"

**Take the heat.** Opening vegan restaurant V Burger was a pressure cooker for former banking executive Robert Cox. "I'm spending 50% more hours, and I'm certainly more physically active and challenged," he said. "I love it."

**Anticipate a trend.** Cox became a vegan 15 years ago and was drawn into the restaurant sector after experiencing a need firsthand: "Four or five years ago, I noticed vegan restaurants were getting more and

more crowded."

Cox also noticed a void: "There was no vegan fast food, (and) nothing was straight-up American."

**Tantalize taste buds.** V Burger's vegan burgers are the result of experimentation by Cox's team. "We developed a lot of the recipes," he said. His goal, after opening in New York with co-founder Reese Martin, is to expand across the U.S. and prove a point: "Vegan food can be really delicious."

**Stick with it.** With more than half of new restaurants failing within the first year, only entrepreneurs who can take the heat stay in the kitchen. "Great brands will break through," said Denise Lee Yohn, author of "Extraordinary Experiences: What Great Retail and Restaurant Brands Do."

**Deliver on words.** Yohn worked in advertising and marketing with Burger King (part of Restaurant Brands (NYSE: QSR) and Jack in the Box (NASDAQ: JACK), and learned this: "If your brand is only what you say, not what you do, customers will see through that. It's the customer experience that brings that to life."

**Honor the recipe.** Identity is the secret ingredient.

"Great brands commit and stay committed to what the brand stands for," Yohn said.

Jason's Deli did. The sandwich chain, founded in Beaumont, Texas, was winning with its lunch, dinner and catering menus. As other fast-casual restaurants dabbled in breakfast, the deli was tempted over to the morning side.

After realizing the menu expansion split their attention and ultimately hurt business, Jason's dumped the morning fare. "Great brands make courageous decisions," Yohn said.

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