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perspectives trends **fast casual dining**

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Diners eat atop custom marble and steel tables at Despaña.

THE FAST AND THE FABULOUS

Packing big design punches in small packages



Although fast casual restaurants represent a relatively small chunk—about \$31 billion—of the entire \$632 billion U.S. restaurant industry, they remain its fastest-growing segment. And, predicts Technomics, which follows food industry trends, they're on track to outpace the rest of the limited-service category (which includes traditional fast food outlets) by about two to one.

Much of that total market—roughly 16,000 units—is comprised of large chains, like leaders Chipotle Mexican Grill and Panera Bread. But as entrepreneurs enter the picture—drawn by the relatively small footprint required (typically about 3,000 square feet) and the promise of using economies of scale to present fresher, healthier food with some table service—they're bringing with them the aesthetic sensibilities and commitment to design authenticity of the nation's best full-service restaurants.

Despaña

New York's Despaña, purveyors of gourmet Spanish imports, also went back to school for its newest effort, opening a branch on the main retail street of Princeton, New Jersey, not far from the ivy-covered walls of the university. Founded in 1971 as a Queens chorizo factory, the outfit gradually expanded to offer an array of wholesale products before opening a Soho retail outlet and cafe in 2006. The much more ambitious Princeton operation is a "complete destination when it comes to Spanish cuisine,"



according to Marilyn Zucosky, principal at Princeton-based Joshua Zinder Architecture + Design (JZA+D). New touches include large screen televisions for soccer broadcasts, an outdoor terrace, and wine service. Echoing elements from the Soho location, which was not designed by JZA+D, the designers turned to a local furniture maker to craft Carrera marble and steel tables—and they Venetian plastered one wall, this time in a vivid red instead of a sunny yellow as at the original.

The greatest challenges offered the most opportunity, points out principal Joshua Zinder. "Working with two floors instead of one meant we had to make sure there was a clear connection between them," he says. "And since this venue is open for dinner, we were able to use our experience designing fine dining restaurants to improve the fast casual setting." The lessons go both ways, adds Zucosky: "There's an emphasis on efficiency and moving through space that has to be designed into fast casual that any restaurant can benefit from considering."

