Top 50 Women Innovators in the Restaurant Industry
Not all heroes wear capes. This is especially true for the following women in the world of restaurants and restaurant-technology. These women strive for greatness through their tenacity, creativity, knowledge, sacrifice and drive to innovate. This greatness is apparent in the work they have done and continue to do. Whether that is in the kitchen holding a paring knife, or in a chair of a board room, each has made significant achievements. Without further ado, here is EMERGING’s list for notable women innovators who have made their mark on the industry we all know and love.
President of Zume Pizza, Rhonda Lesinski-Woolf, has brought the next level of robotics to your favorite high-tech pizza kitchen. With years of management in the food industry, Lesinski-Woolf is a force to be reckoned with.

“You need to be relentlessly focused on the customer. Do your research. If you meet a need, have something unique and deliver consistently your business will grow. And think through your business model thoroughly – if the numbers don't pencil out on paper you will just be creating a financial disaster once you are at scale.”

Jayaraman is the co-founder and co-director of Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, a group aimed to “improve wages and working conditions for the nation’s restaurant workforce.” Not only is Jayaraman an activist, but she has written three books surrounding the issues of the restaurant industry.
Waiting on your waiter should never be a problem. Wendy Jiang made sure this never happens again with her invention, Tablee, a small, coaster-size piece of technology that signals when your table needs a waiter. Brilliant. With rave reviews, Jiang hit the target only she saw coming.

Ashely Robinson is the Head of Business Development at Acutely. Acutely allows you to translate your company’s data into information that can actually be, well, of use! Using POS and mobile data Acutely helps clients make informed growth decisions because openings are a lot more fun than closings.

“Growing brick and mortar concepts can no longer be driven as solely a real estate initiative, but as a holistic approach that accounts for all major top line bottom line drivers. These variables can have a difference of millions of dollars from state to state, yet rarely get measured in a meaningful way. I make sure my clients are using all the available data sources to reduce risk and have an informed growth strategy.”
Ellen Chen, Mendocino Farms, Co-Founder

Picture this: a sandwich shop dedicated to giving back to their community through sustainable and local products. Well, Ellen Chen of Mendocino Farms had the same thought. Established in 2003, Chen and her husband, Mario, have built their delicious business from the ground up and are still going strong 16 years later.

Jeni Britton Bauer
Jeni’s Ice Cream, Founder & CCO

Now a household name, Jeni’s Ice Cream has taken it to the next level with iconic flavors such as Brambleberry Crisp to Brown Butter Almond Brittle. The mind behind the magic? Ms. Jeni Britton Bauer, a woman of many hats whose favorite just happens to be a chef’s. Now excuse me while I wipe the drool from the corner of my mouth.

“Creativity is solving problems. There are many ways to do that, but ultimately, the most intractable challenges require the most dedicated thinkers and doers across all disciplines at Jeni’s. Ideas have to be tested and that means risk. There is not another way. We are a company that wants to see new ways to approach our biggest challenges and because of that we expect that there will be failures along the way. Those failures make us stronger, as individuals and as a team, and ultimately lead to successes. Whether it’s flavors, art and design, or finance or human resources.”
Everyone has heard of the Impossible Burger, right? The ground-breaking vegan “ham”-burger? Well, meet Vanessa Ames Wittman, director of Impossible Foods, AKA the company that created one of the biggest game-changers in restaurant history. Props to you Ms. Wittman.

Kate Krader is one of the most experienced food editors on the block. Taking her talents to Bloomberg back in 2016, Krader has reviewed some of the best restaurants and chefs in the world. Kate, I would love to intern. Unpaid is more than fine.
Veronica Zemon, the VP of business development at TIPZYY, is the cool aunt on your dad’s side everyone loves. Zemon’s natural creative ability has allowed TIPZYY to provide fun incentives for bartenders and educational learning experiences through trivia and challenges between staff. Like I said: the cool aunt.

Green Flash West Coast Double IPA and some Pork Belly Street Tacos? Just let me know the time and place. Lucky for me, Marci Rude, Chief Development Officer of Thirsty Lion Gastropub and Grill is growing the mid-American chain with her involvement in real estate and business growth management. That gets me that much closer to ordering a refreshing Aperol Spritz. Cheers to Marci.

“Be instrumental in creating a positive culture. Develop transparent, trustworthy relationships, communicate openly and effectively, and look for ways to be a positive influence on your peers. Creating a great culture will translate into creating a great guest experience.”
Emmanuelle Skala
TOAST, SVP of Customer Success

TOAST POS is one of the most highly-rated systems on the market. Especially in the customer satisfaction department. Thanks to ladies like Emanuelle Skala, SVP of Customer Success, she is the one to thank for managing those who struggle to close out of a Safari window every now and then.

Jenny Goodman, Co-founder of Tilit, is changing the way the restaurant industry dresses. With flexible, high-quality, durable materials, Goodman has catered to some of the best chefs who cannot say enough about Tilit. Thanks for making the world of restaurants a little more stylish, Jenny.

“Focus, Focus, Focus! This has always been a mantra for Tilit since Day 1. And it’s continued to ring true not only from a marketing and strategy perspective, but also in terms of product development and general business practices.”
Diane Carhart  
Stonyfield Farm, COO

From those creamy vanilla yogurts to the amazing strawberry smoothies we all love, we get to thank COO Diane Carhart of Stonyfield Farm, Inc. Carhart has served a long line of accomplishments since joining the Stonyfield in 1992 such as serving on the board of Beyond Meat, Inc.

Kat Cole  
FOCUS Brands, COO

COO and President of FOCUS Brands, a private equity firm, Ms. Kat Cole is the definition of a self-made success story. Coming from a difficult upbringing, Cole has made waves through her experience at Hooters, Cinnabon, and finally landing it big at FOCUS Brands’ franchisor and operator of some of the most iconic restaurant brands.
Jan Fields is on the Board of Directors at America’s favorite fast-food chain, McDonald’s. A former president of the corporation itself, Fields has served on a lengthy list of boards, sharing her knowledge with companies such as Monsanto, the Governance and Nominating Committee, and Buffalo Wild Wings.

Dickey’s Barbeque Pit, the family-owned chain with over 500 locations. Who helps handles this enormous, flavorsome, franchise? Carissa De Santis is the chain’s VP of Information Technology and Spark Development. Bringing a new perspective to the blue and white checkered table, Santis has an exceptional experience with a loaded resume.
What happens when you spend 30+ years in the foodservice industry and 10 years of experience in information technology? You get the founder and CEO of MenuTrinfo, Betsy Craig. Providing nutritional information for restaurants backed by dietitians and nutritionists, Craig has made her mark in the health-conscious community for the better.

Channeling her own “natural strengths”, Denyelle Bruno created Tender Greens, a restaurant dedicated to serving the most sustainable, green, products available according to location and season. With over 30 locations across the east and west coast, Bruno’s strengths have served her and Tender Greens very well.

“Start by understanding your natural strengths and checking if your career goals are in line with those strengths. If they are, learn how to be the best at whatever you do by staying curious and determined. When an opportunity for growth comes along, take it. If it’s a promotion ask for it. Rinse and repeat until you hit your career goal. The only thing that can stop you is you.”
“Feed More. Waste Less.” A motto I think we can all agree on. Jennifer Crowe thought exactly that in her green-initiative company, GoodR, a group dedicated to providing food for those in need with un-wanted, yet quality food. Killing two birds with one stone isn’t easy. However, Crowe has it down to a science. 

Upserve has been known to provide exceptional customer service through its easy-to-use POS system with remarkable growth rates as a result. CEO Sherly Hoskins not only upholds the reputation and ratings but enhances them by bringing an enforced perspective on the clientele. The proof is in the pudding*. *Sold and managed via Upserve.
Where would we be in life without Grubhub to deliver some of our favorites right to our doorstep? Nowhere I’d want to live. Well thanks to Maria Belousova, CTO of Grubhub, we don’t need to endure such absurdity thanks to her work with the company’s overall vision and design.

“In the early days of my career, I worried too much. I wish I could’ve reminded myself to focus on the big picture, not to be afraid to fail and try to have fun.”

Eater is the ultimate food and dining guide for the USA. As I look onto The 16 Best New Restaurants in America, I thank the editor in chief, Amanda Kludt, for providing an apt amount of articles regarding the food industry and for always pointing my stomach in the right direction.
Award-winning chef and Board Member of Women’s Chef and Restaurateurs, Elizabeth Falkner has paved the way in culinary arts through good old fashion hard work and dedication. Attributing to WCR’s giant array of educational programs, seminars, connections to prominent leaders in the industry, and cooking for charity events, Falkner is as dedicated to WCR as much as she is to sword fighting fitness (true story).

That 1, 2, 3 driven tenacity is exactly what fueled Alice Cheng to success as CEO and Founder of Culinary Agents, a website to find career-related information about the hospitality industry. With 13 years at IBM under her belt, Cheng has applied her knowledge of technology and mentorship to support this growing industry, nationwide.

Advice for Future Leaders:

“Find out how the people that you admire got to where they are. Everyone’s career path is different, but each can be inspiring in their own way and can help you figure out what your next steps may be.”

“1,3,5 - Set yourself up for success. Ask yourself: Where do you see yourself next year, 3 years from now and then 5? My father used to say “if you don’t make a plan, you plan to fail.”

“Have a sense of urgency, but don’t rush. Mistakes happen more often when you’re rushing; which holds true regardless if you’re completing day-to-day tasks or making big decisions.”
Emily Malina
Spoiler Alert, Co-Founder & Chief Product Officer

Emily Malina is changing the world one Alert at a time. Malina is the co-founder and CPO of SpoilerAlert, a tech company that assists in helping restaurateurs keep from letting their inventory go bad. This, in turn, reduces food waste. After learning some shocking statistics, Malina got to work to solve a tangible problem in restaurant revenue and food waste.

Danielle Gould
Food + Tech Connect, Founder & CEO

Danielle Gould embodies everything we love: food and technology. Taking these two ideas and mashing them together to create an all-inclusive hub for new innovations under the food industry umbrella, Gould founded and is CEO of Food + Tech Connect.
Sarah Adler and Mackenzie Barth have made their mark on 230+ campuses through their media company, Spoon University. These co-founders and CEOs have made the ultimate college-kid platform for How-To blog posts, recipes, and now a cookbook titled How To Feed Yourself. Now excuse me while I peruse through the latest lifestyle post, Stuffed Cookie Rankings.

Black Olive Brittle and Goat Cheese ice cream. Now, who else would make that combination work other than the masterful Kim Malek of Salt & Straw? Malek is an innovator of ice cream flavors all while implementing home delivery, a cookbook, and keeping up with notable classic flavors. If you’re reading this Kim, please send Almond Brittle with Salted Ganache ASAP!
Sustainability and women innovators are a combo we will never tire of. Christine Moseley, founder, and CEO of Full Harvest created a website to connect the food industry with local farmers in order to diminish food waste, lower food costs and increase revenue for said farmers.

“If I were able to give my younger self advice, I would tell her not to stress so much. Just follow your passion, embrace being different, and it will pay off.”

Bugs for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? Sign me up! Megan Miller and Leslie Ziegler are the founders and CEOs of Bitty Foods, a company that makes high protein flour out of...wait for it, crickets. Before you stick your nose up, this flour is free of gluten, grains, and dairy. On top of that, many can’t even tell a difference between Bitty flour and standard. Hey, don’t knock it till you try it!
Erin Moran is the CCO of Union Square Hospitality Group, dedicated to producing some of the top-rated New York restaurants, cafes, and bars the industry has ever seen. A company is only as good as it runs from the inside. Thankfully, Moran has it all under control thanks to her drive to keep improving the company.

“You relentlessly committed to being authentically YOU. Don't fear judgment, because whatever we do, human nature dictates that we are always being judged. Embrace vulnerability and choose to be judged in a way that is aligned with what matters most to you at your core.”

You couldn't measure Kesha William’s brilliance if you tried. This amazing female coder has been the software engineer manager at Chick-fil-A for the past 14 years. In charge of new technology such as facial recognition, William's has inspired and paved the way for future female coders in and out of the restaurant industry.
Kathryn Podobnik
CoInspect, CCO

CoInspect is an app needed by every restaurant. Designed to manage food safety, CCO Kathryn Podobnik leads sales and services across the country to spread the word on this ground-breaking app. With the ability to generate detailed inspection checklists with intricate reporting and analytic features, Podobnik has a laundry list of selling points.

Elizabeth Meltz
Dig Inn, Senior Director of Environmental Health

“Be brave”. A motto to preach not just on Sundays. Elizabeth Melz, Senior Director of Environmental Health at DIG INN, wants nothing more than to leave the world a little better than how she found it. By empowering the underdogs of the farming world, Melz has implemented local, seasonal, produce backed by a green-initiative. Hallelujah!

“After working as a line cook for many years I saw a need in our industry for a position that focuses solely on food safety and sustainability, and I was fortunate enough to be working for a company at the time that was forward-thinking enough to support my vision. That idea for a job has become my career and how I landed in my position at DIG. It’s really important to be bold- just because the dream position might not currently exist, doesn’t mean it cannot be created. Be brave and be willing to do the work”
Helen Lao: powerhouse, founder, president and mother. Creating ClearPath from the ground up, Helen leads a dynamic team across the U.S. in matchmaking different growth brands with top leaders within the industry. Their teams focused strategy within the industry has allowed them to become one of the most trusted executive search firms within the industry. Their modern approach, allows them to positively impact executive search – one match at a time.

If you haven’t heard of Girl & the Goat (or any of the “Goat” restaurants for that matter), 1. You need to get out more and 2. Order some goat empanadas, stat! Stephanie Izard has been recognized as one of the best chefs in Chicago, a winner of Top Chef, and the recipient of multiple awards and nominations thanks to her bold flavors and a worldly approach.
Donna Lee is responsible for Chicago’s beloved Brown Bag Seafood restaurants. CEO and founder, Lee has given us even more incentive to eat healthily and within a budget. Lee has cracked the code on providing fresh seafood (over 10 menu options) to the Windy City. Thanks for choosing my city to bless your food, Donna. I owe you.

“Your best time spent is investing in people and tools to help you grow. Do your best to find the people who compliment you and see the same vision that you do. Also, have fun (people know if you’re faking it)!”

Nicole Marquis, founder, and CEO of HipCityVeg, made it her mission to “eat well” and “feel good”. Marquis makes flavorful vegan food through a strict organic-only philosophy, delivery via bike, and a focus on composting and reusing materials. With some pretty incredible menu items, I highly recommend checking them out and visiting if you’re the area. Hey Nicole, you dropped your crown.

“Food service is important enough to make it your mission in life because it effects your health, the health of the planet, and the presence or absence of needless suffering in the world. So, approach every day in this industry with a sense of purpose.”
Victoria Vaynberg
Resy, CMO

“The wait is going to be around sixty to ninety minutes”. AKA, the worst words to come by as a hungry customer. Victoria Vayberg heard it loud and clear. Getting the message to the right people, Resy’s CMO marketed the reservation system as the go-to-spot for discovering local faves and sharing educational articles to spread the collective love we have for food.

Clare Reichenbach
James Beard Foundation, CEO

Roll out the red carpet. Clare Reichenbach, the CEO of the one and only James Beard Foundation, is the one responsible for granting restaurants and chefs alike the prestigious honor of a James Beard Award. This has also been rightfully described as the Oscars of the food industry for a reason.
Dawn Sweeney is a name one would recognize if remotely in the restaurant business. Sweeney is the president and CEO of the National Restaurant Association, the largest food trade association for over 500,000 U.S restaurants, is geared to “advance and protect” the industry as a whole. Sweeney oversees almost every aspect and has grown said aspects in one way or another. Thanks for keeping the world delicious, Dawn.

Nicole Centeno is a godsend for the busy mom, working dads, college kids, and everyone in between. Centeno is the CEO and founder of Splendid Spoon, a customizable meal-kit delivery service that creates amazingly-healthy plant-based soups and smoothies. After her pregnancy with her son, Centeno found the best way to feed both herself and her little guy: simple, clean, nutrient-dense ingredients packed into a bowl. Easy as pie... or better yet, soup.
Krystle Mobayeni is BenoBox’s CEO, a group dedicated to website and POS design that fits all the requirements of the love-child you call your restaurant. Mobayeni decided to get ahead of the curve with her realization that technology is the driving-force behind restaurant progression. With that, she became dedicated to providing customizable and beautiful design formats for those who are as technologically challenged like me.

“Keep your customers’ needs and workflow in mind every step of the way. Don’t try to force technologies or behaviors that are not effortless to them. It’s easy to mistake what you want for what is the right step forward, but ultimately serving the customer will be what drives success. This is something that has been a guiding principle at BentoBox from the beginning and really shaped our growth.”

Alexis Schulze is the founder of Nekter, a juice company dedicated to making juicing available for all. Not just moms in yoga pants. Before you head to the “been there, tried that” mindset, know that Schulze is doing it differently with a menu for all levels of juicers and health junkies. Come for the juices, stay for the in-house vegan ice cream.
From the makers of Sally the Robot, Chowbotics has more than meets the robotic eye. Mara Behrens, VP of design, is a huge reason why we get to interact with the bowl-curating Sally. With a background in e-commerce, Behrens credits her success to her own ability to “adapt” along with her branding.

“My advice for future leaders in the industry is to embrace change and what that implies for their customers. In the past few years, we’ve seen a dramatic transformation in the restaurant landscape; delivery has become mainstream and high tech options are providing new and better ways to deliver customized convenient dining options. Core to the success of new technology adoption is an understanding of customer hesitancies and the ability to demonstrate how change enables positive impacts at a personal level. It’s hard to say what the future holds, but technology will certainly continue to push the industry in new directions. Leaders who successfully adapt, and help their customers to embrace this change, will be the ones who are able to take their brands to the next level.”

CEO of True Food Kitchen, Christine Barone, has made waves across the country with 40 locations and counting, there’s a reason Oprah invested. Barone ensures True Food stays true to its mission statement: food should make you feel better, not worse. Her and the TFK team are doing all the heavy lifting of calculating nutrition and nutrients so you can sit and enjoy your Moroccan chicken -- one of Barone’s personal favorites.
Need help tracking wine inventory or help to make a bottle suggestion to a friend? Pam Dillion, CEO, and founder of Wine Ring has got you covered. For those in the restaurant business, this nifty app allows you to look into customer preferences and restock based on data-driven recommendations. For the everyday connoisseur, you can use the app to get recommendations based on your favorite pinot.

Pamela Wizner, president of the United States Bartender Guild, has dedicated herself to providing not only the tastiest cocktails, but also education for all bartenders through conferences, competitions, and seminars.
Roxanne Pronk  
Lazy Dog Restaurant, COO

What happens when you combine food and dog lovers? You get the pup-friendly Lazy Dog Restaurant. For the human patrons, you get a full menu of dishes such as a PB + J Burger and the Pig Candy Grilled Cheese. COO Roxanne Pronk is responsible for such a mouthwatering chain that has locations across the country. With her exceptional management skills, Pronk is every chain's dream.

Carrie Luxem  
Restaurant HR Group Inc, CEO

Restaurant HR Group Inc will do exactly as the name describes, handle all your restaurant's HR needs. Genius. And who is this genius? None other than CEO Carrie Luxem who came up with the idea after working as Director of HR for Potbelly. Since then, the rest is history and Luxem has made life just that much easier for restaurant owners and administrators alike.

“Do something that you love and surround yourself with positive people. Take risks, put yourself out there, and don’t make your career about your gender. Work hard, show your passion, and be sure to enjoy the journey. Create your own work/life balance, be a problem solver, simplify everything, and focus on adding tremendous value to the people (company) you lead.”