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in 2000, Pei Wei now has 19 locations in Arizona, California, Colorado and Texas. Created as a quicker, more casual dining experience than its parent, Pei Wei was founded on the tradition of authentic rice and noodle dishes passed on from Pei Wei Jeng, a San

Francisco restaurateur who eventually returned to his homeland of Beijing.

Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers is a Baton Rouge, La., concept from Todd Graves, its founder, chairman and chief executive. The quick-service chain features chicken fingers served with Cane's sauce, fried coleslaw and Texas toast. The entrepreneurial Graves opened his first store in 1996 at the entrance of Louisiana State University. Today the chain has nine locations with average annual unit sales topping \$1.6 million.

Ted's Montana Grill is a classic American restaurant-tavern concept from entrepreneur Ted Turner and veteran restaurateur George McKerrow Jr. Based in Atlanta, the chain has six locations, including one in Columbus, Ohio, and Nashville, Tenn., and two in Atlanta and Denver. Each restaurant features a craftsman-style Montana bar and grill. Bison meat is a strong part of the menu.

Smokey Bones BBQ is a concept from Orlando, Fla.-based Darden Restaurants. Created in 1999, the chain has 21 locations and features casual dining that combines barbecue with an energetic

sports bar. The idea for the Smokey Bones concept dates back to 1968 when an iron worker named Duke hand-built a new kind of BBQ smoker from an old section of Rocky Mountain pipeline. The result was succulent, deep-smoked BBQ. Smokey Bones boasts a rustic mountain lodge decor.

The Hot Again winner is Arby's, the 3,200-unit sandwich chain, which was founded in 1964 and is based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. In the past two years, the company has launched key initiatives to reposition itself as a more upscale fast-casual concept offering fresh, high-quality food. Those programs include the introduction of Market Fresh Sandwiches in 2001, the launch of the "Restaurant of the Future" prototype in 2002 and a major advertising campaign that broke March 2 and focuses on oven roasting as a point of differentiation for the chain.

Now in its ninth year, the Hot Concepts! program recognizes forward-thinking companies with emerging growth potential. Each winner must be a new, clearly defined concept that appeals to consumers and positions the company at the leading edge of food-service. The 2003 Hot Concepts! honorees were selected by the editors of NRN.