

The industry innovator and icon will be honored at the upcoming Restaurant Leadership Conference.

By *Restaurant Business Staff* on Feb. 14, 2018



Ron Shaich, the serial innovator who changed the restaurant business through the founding and constant reinvention of Panera Bread, has been named the 2018 Restaurant Leader of the Year, presented by Restaurant Business.

The honor recognizes Shaich for his visionary leadership of the chain, a pioneer of the fast-casual segment. Now the chairman of Panera, Shaich kept the concept a step ahead of the market for almost four decades, most recently with the transformation known as Panera 2.0.

That aggressive update of the already powerful brand involved such steps as installing self-order kiosks, which can now be found in a host of limited-service brands, and adding delivery, another amenity widely available today in part because Panera proved it could work.

The brand has also been a leader in offering clean, healthful menus, having stripped additives and artificial ingredients out of its recipes over roughly a two-year period. Brands that subsequently scrubbed their menus include McDonald's, Subway, Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts.

The innovations have kept Panera ahead of most limited-service chains in sales growth, right through the downturn still sapping the business.

“IT IS A GREAT HONOR TO BE RECOGNIZED FOR WORK THAT I AM EXTREMELY PROUD OF AND HAVE ALWAYS VIEWED AS MY GREAT PRIVILEGE TO DO.” —RON SHAIKH

Today, Panera has more than 2,300 units, 100,000 associates and nearly \$6 billion in annual systemwide sales. Its appreciation from the days of being known as St. Louis Bread Co. was dramatically illustrated last summer when JAB Holding agreed to buy the brand for \$7.5 billion.

“Panera has been the best-performing public restaurant stock of the past 20 years, generating annualized returns in excess of 25% over the past two decades and delivering a total shareholder return 44 times better than the S&P 500 from 1997 to 2017, when we undertook a deal to go private,” said Shaikh. “Most importantly, we continue to make a positive difference in the lives of all of our stakeholders.

“It is a great honor to be recognized for work that I am extremely proud of and have always viewed as my great privilege to do,” he added.

Shaikh opted at the end of 2017 to relinquish his CEO duties to longtime lieutenant Blaine Hurst. He remains active in helping set the direction of the chain, as well as working with JAB on strategic issues.

“Ron is an innovator and leader in the truest sense of the words,” said Sarah Lockyer, SVP of content for Winsight LLC, the parent of *Restaurant Business*. “With the founding and constant reinvention of Panera Bread, he disrupted the restaurant industry and led the way from menu to marketing and

from in-store service to investments in technology. His dedication to social consciousness has also created a company culture of inclusion and success.”

Past Restaurant Leaders of the Year award winners have included Paul Brown, CEO of Arby’s and Buffalo Wild Wings parent Inspire Brands; Greg Flynn, founder and CEO of Panera and Applebee’s franchisee Flynn Restaurant Group; and Danny Meyer, CEO of Union Square Hospitality Group and founder of Shake Shack.

“Our winners are the game changers who refused to believe the restaurant industry is a mature business, instead looking to growth and innovation,” said Chris Keating, group president of restaurant media and events for Winsight.

“No one embodies that drive like Ron Shaich, a leader who believes in reinventing his charge often. We look forward to celebrating his passion and leadership at the 20th anniversary of Restaurant Leadership Conference.”

The Restaurant Leader of the Year award presentation, sponsored by PepsiCo Foodservice, will be held Tuesday, April 17, at the 2018 Restaurant Leadership Conference in Phoenix, April 15-18.