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The 40/40 List for 2021: America's Hottest Startup Fast Casuals

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Everyone wants to find the next big thing in restaurants. That's the very reason we launched this list back in 2017, in fact; the industry stands to benefit by knowing who's carrying the torch with innovation. But while the past decade provided a fairly consistent stream of intriguing food ideas and concepts, 2020 completely shuffled the deck, decimating some of those concepts while supercharging others.

With the end of the pandemic possibly in sight, here's a look at the 40 fast-casual concepts with fewer than 40 locations that survived COVID-19 and—barring any future crises—are primed for success in our new normal.



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CHILL-N NITROGEN ICE CREAM

Chill-N Nitrogen Ice Cream

Units: 8

Ice cream might seem like the kind of category that suffers from social distancing and quarantine. But at least at Chill-N Nitrogen Ice Cream, which freezes its signature product in front of customers using liquid nitrogen, business has been steady, and it's managed to pivot to an off-premises-friendly model. Now Chill-N is looking to grow through franchising across the Southeast U.S.