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Acclaimed Harlem chef lands capital to add up to 8 locations

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In 2019 fine-dining chef JJ Johnson scraped together enough money to open a fast-casual restaurant on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. He thought he could find an audience to enjoy his rice bowls topped with ingredients inspired by a variety of the globe's rice-eating cultures.

"I barely had enough money to open that location," Johnson said. "I was being really gritty, hoping that the food would be delicious enough for people to enjoy."

Despite doubters who told him that people don't open fast-casual spots in Harlem, diners came through the door, and great reviews in the city's food press followed.

Johnson expanded to Midtown, proving to the city and himself that a Black founder could build a brand that resonated beyond a majority Black and brown neighborhood.

He now has the chance to expand even bigger. Today his company, Fieldtrip, announced it had raised its first round of capital to expand in New York City and eventually beyond.

Two firms are funding the expansion: the Founders Table Restaurant Group, which focuses on fast-casual food companies, and Pendulum, which seeks to help build minority- and woman-led companies.

Fieldtrip did not disclose the size of the investment nor the valuation of the firm, but it said the money was enough to open six to eight locations in the next four years.

Counterintuitively, Johnson jumped on two opportunities to grow during the Covid-19 pandemic, branching out last fall to Rockefeller Center and Jack & Co., the food hall at a newly built Long Island City office complex.

It was at [Rockefeller Center](#) that success felt like a vote of confidence in his concept, Johnson said.

"People eating culturally driven food at Rockefeller Center isn't something you see," he said. "You might see it in street food, but to see a brick-and-mortar location where folks from corporate America are walking in and eating your food that's culturally driven, that also exists in Black and brown communities in urban markets ..."

The restaurants were hitting sales goals in both a commercial district and an uptown residential one, he said.

"If it is working in both," he said he thought to himself at the time, "then maybe I do have something special."

Unlike some fast-casual concepts, in which patrons customize their salads or sandwiches, at Fieldtrip, all the dishes are designed by the chef. There is a [seafood](#) gumbo, a dish with shrimp and green curry, one with fried chicken and barbecue sauce and another with steamed salmon, pineapple black fried rice and piri piri sauce.

Johnson does not treat his main ingredient—rice—like a commodity. Instead, he sources the grain carefully, getting Carolina Gold from Anson Mills in South Carolina, and his brown rice from Texas.

"He's an amazing chef," said Nick Marsh, chief executive of Founders Table, which is the parent company of two other New York-grown fast-casual brands: [Chop't Creative Salad Co.](#) and Dos Toros Taqueria.

Johnson grew up in Pennsylvania, the son of two New York-bred parents. He worked throughout the city's restaurant industry, most recently at two other well-received sit-down Harlem restaurants, the Cecil and Minton's, as well as Henry at Life Hotel.

Expanding

Once Fieldtrip proved out its culinary concept, Johnson said, he began to look for outside capital.

He tried to work backward from success stories such as Chipotle.

"Who gave them access, money and knowledge?" he asked. He began to think that he would be best served by an investor who could also be a sounding board on supply-chain optimization and add technical capabilities to help with planning and sourcing.

The two investors fit that bill, he said.

Because Founders Table has two decades of experience in restaurant operations, including in digital assets, Johnson "can now focus his investment on building new restaurants, because we can help with the other parts of the business," Marsh said. That would get the company to its next stage of growth—around a dozen stores—a perch from which it could plan its next steps.

Fieldtrip is not the only Harlem-based food brand to grow in recent years. When Whole Foods opened on West 125th Street in 2017, it featured dozens of packaged goods made by companies in the neighborhood, through a collaboration with business group Harlem Park to Park. Charles Pan-Fried Chicken, known for its chicken and sides, announced in the spring that it was expanding to the Upper West Side and a new Harlem spot, even as it closed its original Harlem location. [Melba's](#) has a line of sauces and a new gig running the concessions at Wollman Rink, among other ventures.

For Fieldtrip, the trick will be sustainable growth. Johnson said he plans to launch a line of packaged sauces early next year, followed by two more stores, likely near Columbia University and in Washington Heights.

He said he looked at the success of other fast-casual brands that were [growing during the pandemic](#) and realized he didn't want to take a breather—he wanted to push forward.

"One thing I hope I bring to New York, or the world, is that young Black kids realize they can raise money too," he said. "I want to create a footprint of fast casual led by Black founders that will create more opportunity."