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ICSC unveils winners of 2008 Hot Retailer Awards: Nine to be honored

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Nine retailers from around the world have received a Hot Retailer Award this year, following a survey of the organization's 75,000 members. The ICSC Hot Retailer Awards honor innovative or one-of-a-kind retailers.

This year four food-and-beverage concepts are winners: Five Guys Burgers and Fries, Pinkberry, Pollo Campero and Stir Crazy. The other winners are women's fashion boutique Apricot Lane, Australian board-sports chain Billabong, Tesco's U.S. convenience grocery concept Fresh & Easy, L.L.Bean and build-your-own-toy-car retailer Ridemakerz.

"The winners this year represent a fabulous cross section of interesting retailers," said Michael Kercheval, ICSC's president and CEO. "Tenants like these make shopping centers fun and entertaining places to be."

The winners range from very new concepts to vintage mainstays. Pinkberry was founded just three years ago by two Korean-Americans in Los Angeles. It has since mushroomed to about 50 units throughout California and New York and, in the process, has single-handedly restored the flagging fortunes of the frozen-yogurt sector. Outdoors gear and apparel retailer L.L.Bean for most of its 96 years relied almost exclusively on its famous catalog, but is opening elaborate stores at select centers around the U.S.

Apricot Lane does what nearly all other chains forbid: It allows franchisers to customize their stores. Each unit has the ambience of a one-off, independent specialty shop, according to Ken Petersen, CEO of Country Visions, Apricot Lane's Vacaville, Calif.-based parent company.

Five Guys Burgers and Fries also tries not to be like its competitors. Its burgers are never frozen and are hand-patted from 80% lean beef. The french fries are cut and prepared daily. Even the buns are baked in-house. And the restaurants-about 230 around the U.S.-serve little else.

Billabong's merchandise, mostly apparel, is sold in some 10,000 stores around the world. But the chain has been making waves with its own stores too: There are some 200 company-owned stores and about 55 franchised ones.

Tesco's ambition is to reinvent grocery shopping in the U.S. with its 10,000 s/f Fresh & Easy stores, which offer Whole Foods-quality groceries at Wal-Mart prices. Tesco has opened about 60 stores since November and plans to open 150 more this year.

"This is going to be absolutely huge," said Phil Lempert, a food industry analyst and the founder of SupermarketGuru.com. "Eventually, Fresh & Easy could have more of an impact on American health than any other retailer."

The chicken prepared by Guatemala-based Pollo Campero developed such a following throughout Latin America that expatriates living in the U.S. were having it flown over to them. Now they no longer have to. Pollo Campero has 36 restaurants in the U.S., part of its total of 260 units in 11

countries and on three continents. Its goal is to open 500 restaurants in the U.S. by 2012.

The recently launched Stir Crazy Asian-fusion restaurants are designed as much to entertain guests as to feed them, with a chef performing over a flaming wok at diners' tables. There are a dozen restaurants open now, and the company plans to open 50 to 60 more over the next five years.

Ridemakerz allows kids to build their own model cars. Sound familiar? None other than Maxine Clark, founder of the Build-A-Bear chain, is a Ridemakerz shareholder. There are nine stores currently, but the company's ambitions are for 250 in the U.S. and 100 overseas.

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