

Chat & Chow

Alex Witchel

Inheriting the Restaurant Gene



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Above, the creators of Sweetgreen, from left, Nathaniel Ru, Nicolas Jammé and Jonathan Neman, with their Guacamole Greens salad. A New York location is opening in July. Below, Mr. Jammé and his mother, Rita Jammé.

1970s; his father's import/export business designs fabric for fashion brands.

The business plan for Sweetgreen started with a vacant house near the university that the students often passed, 560 square feet, with no utilities.

"We got some tough love in the beginning," Mr. Ru said. "My father said, 'Do you know how many salads you'll have to sell to pay the rent?'"

Still, all three men received \$10,000 contributions from their parents; they raised the rest of the \$375,000 needed to start Sweetgreen from friends and business contacts, and opened their first store in the Georgetown section of Washington on Aug. 1, 2007. Among the original investors were Mr. Bastianich and, eventually, Seth Goldman, a founder and the chief executive of Honest Tea, where Patrick Jammé, Nicolas's twin, is the director of field market-



ing.

By spring 2009 the three partners had opened a second store, on Dupont Circle in Washington, and a third, in Bethesda, Md. They added a Sweetgreen truck and more branches in the Washington area, along with two in Philadelphia. This March they raised \$8 million to ex-

pand further. On Wednesday the first Sweetgreen opened in Boston. The NoMad branch is to open the week of July 15. The company now has 470 employees. The three original partners and co-chief executives are all 28.

Although I am allergic to people who speak as if enchanted about building their teams or brands, I found myself tuning in to their method because it appears to have a heart.

"People expect food that's quick, affordable and tastes good," Mr. Jammé said, "but they don't expect to be moved. Ingredients are important, but the experience in the store should leave them happier than we found them." At Sweetgreen, he said, that means "one person on the line is empowered each day to surprise and delight; that can be offering a free meal, a free umbrella, a taste of a local strawberry."

There is also Random Acts of Sweetness, a program started by an intern that includes leaving gift cards on bicycle seats. And the company sponsors an annual music and food festival (20,000 attendees this year) as well as a nutrition program in Washington's public schools.

Which brings us to the marshmallow towers. Here in the Sweetgreen space, 20 job applicants wore numbers on their chests and, under the tutelage of a training team, they were exhorted to do everything but the hokeypokey. They danced, they clapped, they formed a line in order of birth dates without speaking. "Communication is hard, visual cues are great!" shouted a team leader. It was like a bad episode of "The Apprentice."

"No one went to culinary school, so we want them to feel like they're part of something bigger," Mr. Jammé explained.

Mr. Neman added, "A happy employee makes a happy customer." He watched the tower building. "The team that wins is always a team with a plan," he said.

Mrs. Jammé and I sampled some salads. Sweetgreen uses local produce whenever possible, but it also works with organic farmers in Florida and California.

"The avocado and lettuces we can't play around with," Mr. Jammé said.

The Guacamole Greens, their best seller at \$9.65, is a bowl of organic mesclun with roasted chicken, avocado, grape tomatoes, red onion and crushed tortilla chips, topped with a lime-cilantro-jalapeño vinaigrette and a squeeze of lime. It was shockingly delicious — for a salad — and huge. I wasn't hungry for hours.

Mrs. Jammé was an oasis of professional detachment. "I was very involved in the beginning, advising them how to put the whole thing together," she said. "They bring a lifestyle along with the food, but it's the hospitality that is the defining element, the common ground we have."

She allowed herself a maternal moment. "Nicolas took what he grew up with," she said, "and combined it with his vision and personality, then translated that to his own thing."

We looked at the applicants who, two hours on, were waving their hands in the air. What did she think about that?

She smiled sweetly: "I think this is a very long job interview."