## The New York Times

'M not much of a salad fan. But I'm a big believer in poetic justice, which is why I was sitting side by side with Rita Jammet in the space at the NoMad Hotel that will soon house the 20th outpost of Sweetgreen, a farm-to-table salad chain owned by her son Nicolas and two of his college friends. We were watching job applicants build towers out of marshmallows and uncooked spaghetti.

Let me explain.
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In May 2004, when the restaurant La Caravelle closed, a victim of changing tastes, it was the end of an era, a loss both cultural and personal. A former speakeasy, the place had been a New York landmark for decades, Gallic and glamorous since 1960, when Joseph Kennedy was a regular, but it was also the cherished family business of Mrs. Jammet and her husband, André, who took it over in the mid-1980s. He went on to become manager of the members' dining room at the Metropolitan Club. Mrs. Jammet took her house Champagne, produced by De Castellane, part of the Laurent-Perrier Group, and found an importer and distributor for it. La Caravelle Champagne is now sold at select stores across the country and is on wine lists everywhere from Le Bernardin in New York to Rao's in Las Vegas.

But the restaurant bug is inherited, and Nicolas got it. He worked as an intern at La Caravelle, at Union Square Cafe and at the Condé Nast cafeteria, as well as in the corporate offices of the restaurant entrepreneur Joseph Basianich. It was in his senior year at Georgetown University that Nicolas and his friends Nathaniel Ru and Jonathan Neman, all business majors, banded together with an idea, as much a product of their times as La Caravelle had been for his parents.

"The three of us are first-generation immigrants, and our fathers are all enterperseurs," Mr. Jammet said in a conversation with his partners at the Nodad "Sow identified a problem, which was there was no place healthy to eat in D.C. It was a food desert. Dean & DeLucawas the only place." He added, "Sowe said, "Let's write a business plan."

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Mr. Jammer's father is from France, his mother from Lebanon. Mr. Ru, from Pasadena, Calif., is the only child of a Chinese father and a Mexican-American mother. His father's import/export company made promotional items for companies that included Disney. Mr. Neman is the oldest of four sons whose Leurish accepts, left I yan, in the late

Jewish parents left Iran in the late

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## Chat & Chow

## Inheriting the Restaurant Gene



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

1970s; his father's import/export busi-

1970s; his father's import/export dust-ness 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 be-ginning." Mr. Ru said. "My father said, 'Do vee how many salads you!"!

ginning," 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 Jammet, 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 No-Mad branch is to open the week of July 15. The company now has 470 employees. The three original partners and cochief 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. Jammet 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 Sweet-ness, a program started by an intern that includes leaving gift cards on bicy-cle seats. And the company sponsors an cle seats. And the company sponsors an annual music and food festival (20,000

annuar music and root restrict (20,000 attendes 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 trainchests and, under the tutetage 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. Jammet ex-

plained.
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.

he said.

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

wherever possible, but it also works with organic farmers in Florida and California.

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