

## How an Eclectic Denver Eatery Became an Expanding Restaurant Empire

Ed Sealover | May 24, 2019

<https://www.bizjournals.com/denver/news/2019/05/24/troy-guard-tag-restaurant-group.html#i/11325576>



*Troy Guard in the kitchen of TAG. With him are chefs who have worked for him and gone on to become known as restaurateurs in their own right.*

For someone that's just turned 10 years old, [TAG Restaurant Group](#) is one precocious pre-teen. After stumbling so badly out of the gate that his investors sat him down a month into his tenure as a restaurant operator and gave him two weeks to turn things around, [Troy Guard](#) is in a very different place a decade later. The man who lost \$40,000 in his first 30 days because of budgeting woes now runs 12 eateries spanning eight concepts in the Denver area. He will [expand into Texas](#) on Nov. 1 and already is thinking about what markets he can conquer next and how he can take his two-location fast-casual Bubu and open 25 more of them in the next five years.



To celebrate his making it to a second decade, Guard just welcomed back a bevy of chefs who have worked for him and gone on to become known as restaurateurs in their own right. The Hawaii native calls them “ohana,” his family who has helped him grow to a staff of 450 and who has played a big part in launching him into the next phase of his adventure that will give one of Denver's shining culinary stars the opportunity to see if the rest of the nation is as drawn to his

eclectic cooking and supernova-sized aspirations.

“I didn’t even think I would open a second restaurant, to be honest with you,” Guard said recently after prepping food at TAG, the Larimer Square hot spot that has been his constant throughout his journey. “Ten years ago, it was just my dream to open one restaurant. And from there it’s led to amazing things.”

For those counting along at home, Guard now operates four [Los Chingones](#), two Bubu locations and one each of the concepts TAG, TAG Burger Bar, Guard and Grace, FNG, Hashtag and Mister Tuna. Lucky No. 13 will be the second iteration of his [nationally acclaimed](#) Guard and Grace steakhouse, opening in a two-floor, 15,000-square-foot space in the heart of Houston’s financial district that he believes is larger than all of his restaurants combined, aside from Denver’s Guard and Grace.



### **Gallery: A look at Guard and Grace steakhouse in downtown Denver**

Guard didn’t choose Houston as much as Houston picked him; Brookfield Properties, which owns the 1801 California building where he set up his first steakhouse in Denver, was looking for an anchor restaurant for a Houston project and thought the concept would be a good match.

But while Guard and his business partner/wife, [Nikki Guard](#), have spent years getting to know the Houston community and planning out this one restaurant, he believes it quickly can become a multiconcept city, like Denver has been. Los Chingones, his cutting-edge Mexican joint, seems ripe for an expansion there, as does Bubu, a build-your-own bowl fast-casual concept that expands beyond the traditional Asian influences of such dishes and offers bowls of Indian, Mexican and “OG Colorado” cuisine.

From there, he believes there are other markets to enter and other concepts to scale up. But even as Guard says in one breath that “I don’t know how many more restaurants we could do in Denver,” he admits just minutes later during an interview that he’s in negotiations for four to five new locations — both concepts that have worked and new ones he has yet to reveal, as his desires to build businesses with scalability sometimes clash with his itch to find the culinary rock he has yet to turn over.

That longing to explore new territory is, in many ways, an extension of his pre-ownership career. Celebrity chef [Roy Yamaguchi](#) sent Guard from Hawaii to Hong Kong, Tokyo and New York to open eateries for him. And then [high-profile Coloradan Richard Sandoval](#) hooked up with Guard and dispatched him to California and Las Vegas before bringing him to Denver in 2002 to debut his now-closed Zengo.

Guard has had his share of successes. He turned TAG into a profitable enterprise in his fourth month and never looked back. His original Los Chingones site on the edge of RiNo has grown every year, despite being in one of the most competitive restaurant neighborhoods in Denver.





But he's also learned lessons that help him to be cautious about where he locates and how he goes into new neighborhoods. The Los Chingones that opened in mid-2017 in the Stapleton neighborhood has grown more slowly than Guard hoped because the lack of office density around it depresses lunch crowds and because the family nature of the surrounding community (where Guard lives) means that most of the dinner crowd comes at the same hour, versus the all-night crowds that populate his downtown and RiNo spots.

To Guard, though, these aren't roadblocks that stop his expansion or even slow it down significantly, so much as they are valuable considerations to know as he stretches his reach further. Much like his decade-old lesson that an exquisitely curated wine list won't move unless you have accessible options on it, he simply notes these factors, corrects and moves on, ready and excited for the next challenge.

There's just one thing Guard won't do as he plots his second 10 years — create another TAG, a restaurant that reflects both his initials and the name of his late bulldog. Though it was in jeopardy of disappearing before anyone cared exactly what that acronym meant, it now symbolizes where all of this began, and it needs to stand alone, whatever may come next.

"I didn't know if I'd ever get my own restaurant, so I had to name my dog that," Guard explained while pointing to a portrait of the pooch that hangs on the wall in Larimer Square, a location for which he's in the process of negotiating a 10-year lease extension. "It's so chef-driven. It's so [Troy Guard](#). It's got too many personal pieces here. And I'm really happy with this space on Larimer being the flagship."









