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Togo's at 50: From SJSU campus favorite to West Coast chain (with lots of pastrami)

Q&A with Glenn Lunde, Letha Tran on how a 3.0 tech refresh helped them weather the pandemic



The Togo's on Meridian Avenue in San Jose displays the brand refresh, with a new color scheme. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

By [LINDA ZAVORAL](#) | lzavoral@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: November 12, 2021 at 8:00 a.m. | UPDATED: November 12, 2021 at 12:56 p.m.





Two San Jose State University students eat lunch at the original Togo's, with the wood facade, on its last day of business in February 1998. Stu Fretz, the owner of that location at that time, used his VW Beetle with the TOGO plates to deliver sandwiches. (Gary Reyes/Bay Area News Group archives)

Fifty years ago, San Jose State student Mike Cobler bought a sandwich joint with a funky wooden exterior named Togo's on East William Street near campus. He set about making sandwiches stuffed the way he liked them — and figured dormitory dwellers and others would go for them too. The lines ran out the door to the street.

Cobler soon opened another. And another. By 1986, he had built a sub empire of 100 in California. Since then the company has embraced the franchise model, changed ownership a few times, expanded, contracted.



But over the years, the Togo's way — lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, peppers — has endured, and the early sandwich favorites remain, along with their treasured numbers on the menu board. If you ordered your first No. 16 many decades ago, you can rest assured that today's No. 16 still will come stacked with Italian cold cuts — salami, capicola, mortadella and more.

We talked with CEO Glenn Lunde, who ate his first Togo's sandwich when attending Stanford, and San Jose franchise owner Letha Tran, who remembers childhood visits to Togo's when she couldn't see over the counter, about the challenging 2020 and 2021 years — and what the future holds for this self-styled “West Coast original.”

Here's an edited version:

Q: How did Togo's respond when the pandemic hit in 2020?

Lunde: We supported our franchisees by securing Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF) grants, Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL), employee tax credits, and we provided our guests with the options of online ordering, curbside delivery and delivery service providers.

Q: Your sales dropped by 45% during those early days of office shutdowns. How did you and your franchisees bounce back?

Lunde: By supporting our employees and providing guests with the safest and easiest ways to still access their Togo's favorites. By Q4 our sales were only down 4% vs. 2019. In fact, our 2021 sales through September are up +2% vs. pre-COVID 2019 results.

Q: How did the Togo's 3.0 system upgrades factor in?

Lunde: When site sales from online orders and third-party delivery doubled to nearly 30% of sales, Togo's 3.0 was able to keep up with the influx of orders by offering self-ordering kiosks and a Speed Line kitchen system. It's an entirely new operating system, going from a deli style 1:1 counter to a speed-line assembly that improved speed and accuracy for our guests. There are also easier ways to order with self-order kiosks and a new app for mobile orders.



Letha Tran, who grew up in San Jose, bought multiple franchises after a career in corporate PR. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

Q: For a franchisee, how is the 3.0 brand refresh working out?

Tran: I was one of the first franchisees to remodel to the Togo's 3.0 model. It was a complete revamp from the design of the kitchen to the aesthetic of my location. We have a new color scheme (blue, orange and white), and we have implemented new technology such as self-ordering kiosks. The remodel has also allowed our mobile ordering to evolve. In addition to the changes on the consumer side, we now have a streamlined kitchen that allows for faster service with minimal mistakes. It's allowed us to become even more consistent with our service and made it easier to execute for our employees. In addition, our customers have responded very positively.



Lunde: We signed 14 new store agreements and opened two stores in 2020. We did delay our launch of the Cheese Steak Melts until 2021. The sandwich has been a huge success since the launch in June with both steak and chicken options.

Q: In the crowded sandwich space occupied by lots of saucy newcomers, family delis and one humongous chain, how does Togo's differentiate itself?

Tran: Togo's was founded in the Bay Area, which sets us apart from the competition. We pride ourselves on making the best sandwiches with the freshest ingredients, such as avocados hand-mashed daily, crisp veggies and perfectly soft, locally sourced bread.

Q: How did you decide to become a franchise owner?

Tran: When I was in college, I saw a local Togo's that was for sale and thought, wow, this is a great opportunity. I then sat outside and counted customers before I presented the idea of buying it to my mom. Her only response was that I needed to finish college and then I could do it on my own. Fast forward, I started working in corporate America in an HR role, but I really wasn't fulfilled. It was perfect timing because that's when I saw another Togo's location up for sale. Seven years later, I now own five Togo's locations throughout the Bay Area.



Togo's employees Leticia Gasca, left, and Mariana Rosales make sandwiches at one of the Togo's shops in San Jose. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

Q: Tell us about your bestseller, the good ol' No. 9, hot pastrami.

Tran: It's without a doubt our bestseller! We get out-of-towners who come to Togo's solely for this sandwich. I think it's so popular because the recipe for the pastrami is a Togo's secret and cannot be found anywhere else. We have three variations of the pastrami sandwich and all include over a quarter-pound of fresh beef pastrami sliced daily.

Next, the Turkey Avocado (No. 24). It was first introduced in 1974. But recently, our new Cheese Steak Melts have been increasing in popularity.

Q: What does the future hold for Togo's expansion, geographically speaking?

Lunde: Togo's has signed nine store agreements for Nevada. We opened our first store in Las Vegas in September, and our second this month. Our first of three stores in Reno will open in early 2022.

Q: And what's coming to the menu?

Lunde: In 2022, we are going to extend our Cheese Steak line with a Pastrami Cheese Steak and offer a line of Caprese sandwiches. There are some other ideas also in the works to feature our fabulous soft pretzel roll. Stay tuned!



Owner: Southfield Mezzanine, a private equity firm

Headquarters: 18 N. San Pedro St., San Jose

Address of first location: 336 E. William St., San Jose

Price paid for original Togo's: \$19,000

Year the original location closed: 1998

Price of a No. 24 in the early 1980s: \$2.49

Price of a No. 24 today: \$8.95

Sources: Togo's, Mercury News archives



In this February 1998 photo, employees work in cramped quarters at the original Togo's restaurant on East William Street in San Jose. Mike Doung takes a phone order while Nasir Malick brings out chips and Marcus Rosette makes sandwiches. This Togo's building, which opened in 1968 and was purchased by Mike Cobler in 1971, was built around 1919, according to archives. (Gary Reyes/Bay Area News Group archives)



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Linda Zavoral | Assistant features editor

Linda Zavoral is a Features reporter and editor who writes about restaurants, libations, travel and the arts for the Eat Drink Play and Eye/Timeout sections. She's a Bay Area native and a San Jose State University journalism graduate. Her previous roles at the Mercury News include Lowell Thomas award-winning editor of the Travel section, Alameda County bureau chief and Getting Ahead editor.

lzavoral@bayareanewsgroup.com

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