

## Ones to Watch | BY LYNNE MILLER

### Freshii



Customization is the name of the game at Freshii, a quick-service chain specializing in salads, soups, and other healthy meals and snacks for people in a hurry.

Serving up nutritious meals, prepared to individual specifications, is the philosophy behind the chain of nine stores founded by Matthew Corrin, a 27-year-old Canadian-born entrepreneur. After opening eight stores in Toronto, the chain made its debut in the States this year with the opening of one store in downtown Chicago. The Windy City appealed to Corrin because of its central location, strong workforce and demographics, and geography, which is similar to Toronto's.

Corrin plans to grow Freshii through a combination of franchise and corporate stores. By the end of this year, he expects to double his store count with new locations in Toronto and Chicago. By mid-2009, he plans to open stores in a third market on the West Coast.

Menu variety sets Freshii apart from others in its segment. The eateries offer more than 70 fresh ingredients, including all-natural chicken, grilled steak, shrimp, and albacore tuna, as well as vegetarian options like grilled tofu, tempeh, Portobello mushrooms, and chickpeas. Customers have three choices of greens and can get an extra serving of chicken on their salads or extra tahini sauce for their rice bowls.

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Freshii divides menu ingredients into three categories to help guide consumers: Super healthy "24/7" ingredients can be enjoyed every day of the week. They include vegetables such as asparagus, corn, celery, and sun-dried tomatoes. Avocado, grilled steak, and feta cheese are among the "balance" ingredients, which contain essential fats. "Splurge" ingredients, including bleu cheese, smoked bacon, and croutons, should be enjoyed in moderation.

“Our mission is to be the most convenient choice for healthy meals and to give customers a choice,” Corrin says. “It’s not all about healthy food. It’s about having choices and options.”

Freshii offers a selection of soups such as Spicy Chicken Thai; Beef, Rice & Cheddar; and Asian Vegetable. The Protein soup is a hearty blend of chicken, smoked bacon, basmati rice, spinach, and broccoli in chicken broth.

Corrin had no experience operating a restaurant chain before Freshii. Previously he worked for fashion designer Oscar de la Renta and on the David Letterman Show. He came up with the Freshii concept while living in New York.

During lunch, Corrin frequented delis with self-service salad bars. While the stores attracted long lines at midday, Corrin noted the service left something to be desired and that the establishments lacked a prominent brand name. He figured he could take the concept up a notch and create a fast-service option with a hip brand that would resonate with upper-income customers seeking healthier food.

The Freshii stores look appealing and modern, with dark flooring, green doors, white walls, and stainless steel accents. Posted on the walls, newspaper and magazine articles about health and nutrition complement the chain’s focus on healthy eating. The stores don’t have dining areas; all sales are generated from takeout orders. Women generally outnumber men, though the gender gap tends to narrow after the stores get established in their markets, Corrin says.

Corrin believes a large part of Freshii’s appeal stems from its adaptability to modern tastes. Vegetarians, vegans, and other consumers with special dietary requirements, in addition to those just looking for a healthy bite to eat, can find something acceptable at Freshii.

### **Freshii**

Founder/CEO: Matthew Corrin

HQ: Chicago

Year Started: 2005

Annual Sales: N/A

Total Units: 9

Franchise Units: 0

web site:

[www.eatfreshii.com](http://www.eatfreshii.com)

Another component that sets Freshii apart from rival chains is its snack section. Customers pass through the Nutrition to Go section, which features an assortment of more than 100 energy bars, vitamin waters, fruit juices, and other snacks, on their way to the cash registers. The snacks, all packaged in single-serving sizes, generate healthy sales, Corrin says.

“I like to describe it as the best of Whole Foods,” Corrin says. “It’s a big differentiator.”

Freshii is also committed to operating an environmentally friendly business. For example, stores use organic ingredients when possible, sell reusable bags, use only recycl-able post-consumer packaging, and purchase recycled paper products.

Potential franchisees can expect to spend anywhere from [REDACTED] to open a store, depending on its size and location. The initial franchising fee, included in the overall cost, is [REDACTED] per store.

The Freshii format can be easily replicated anywhere in the country, Corrin says. While most stores are in 1,000-square-foot spaces, one kiosk location in Toronto is shoehorned into a 150-square-foot space. The small footprint is an advantage, since it requires less capital and delivers a faster return on the investment.