

Wingstop CEO Targets Chicken Lovers Across the Globe

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It's easy to view the Buffalo wing as a quintessentially American food. But overseas markets are getting a taste of this spicy [Western New York creation](#), and more are on the way to locales across the globe.



Wingstop store

One chain eyeing diners abroad is Richardson, Texas-based [Wingstop](#). It currently has 18 shops in Mexico, with others in the works for Russia and Singapore. The company's president and CEO, Charlie Morrison, wants his Buffalo wings on your plate no matter where you are.

He's banking on an aggressive expansion plan to make this happen. The wing seller he oversees opened in 1994, and it currently has 580 restaurants. Five years from now, Morrison wants 1,000, a number he says is well within reach.

"We're trying to get that perception that it's just an appetizer out of people's minds," he says. Asked whether Wingstop will have an international presence as big as in the U.S. — currently it's in 32 states — he doesn't hesitate: "Absolutely, if not *more* international than domestic."

International markets targeted

Other wing sellers are targeting international markets as well. Buffalo Wild Wings ([BWLD](#)) is in Canada and has franchise development agreements for the Middle East and Puerto Rico (technically an unincorporated territory of the U.S.). The much smaller Wing Zone has overseas locations including Panama, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

Nowadays, wings are regularly found on casual dining menus; From Pizza Hut, Domino's ([DPZ](#)) and Papa John's ([PZZA](#)), to T.G.I. Friday's and Chili's, to individually owned bars, you can, if you choose, eat wings every day.

If you did so today, July 29, it might be particularly fitting, as it's [National Chicken Wing Day](#). Many special days, weeks or months exist to raise awareness of a host of topics, so it's little surprise that wings get their own designation. The day was decreed in 1977 by then-mayor of Buffalo Stanley Makowski.

The most popular time of the year to eat wings isn't mid-summer, though; it's around the Super Bowl. Heading into this year's installment, the forecast was that 1.23 billion wing segments [would be eaten](#) that weekend. "[Super Bowl day] really should be National Chicken Wing Day," Morrison says.

Wingstop, owned by private equity firm Roark Capital Group, has become one of the largest U.S. chains dedicated to the wing. Buffalo Wild Wings, which operates wing-selling sports bars, [had 891 locations](#) at the end of 2012, while Wing Zone has 57 domestic outlets. The Wings Over ... chain has 33 shops, focusing its attention on college towns.

Domestically, Wingstop is targeting major cities, looking to expand in markets such as Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. As for Buffalo proper, however, that's a no.

\$70 billion market

According to National Chicken Council estimates, this year will see some 13.25 billion chicken wings marketed, or about 3 billion pounds worth. When you consider that most of these will be cut into two parts, creating the flat and the drumette, it's more in the neighborhood of 26.5 billion wing pieces. Overall though, wings are still a fairly small part of the entire [U.S. chicken market](#). In 2011 about 50 billion lbs. of birds were raised, and consumer spending on chicken totaled \$70 billion.

In a year, an average American will eat [more than 80 lbs. of chicken](#). While doing so, they appear to be getting more interested in [boneless chicken](#), including on the wing side of the industry.

"Not every consumer wants to eat chicken wings off of the bone," Morrison says. "They either don't like the texture of the bone, they don't like the messiness of it [or] they want a fork and knife and cut up a tender or a boneless wing."

Morrison's view is that Wingstop can reach his growth goals because the cost to start isn't as high as some chains, and the relative lack of complexity makes it easier to set up and maintain the shops. "We are a chicken player, so I don't want to sell cheeseburgers. We're growing, and there's not as much need for us to sit back and say, 'All right, what new products are we going to create that'll get people to come in the door that otherwise wouldn't?'"

A Wingstop franchise (96% of the system) could be started for \$350,000 to \$400,000, he says. At the moment, each store averages a bit more than \$900,000 in annual sales, a number Morrison wants to hit around \$1 million.

"It's a very simple operation to run — we fry chicken wings, we make French fries and then we have a couple of side items," Morrison says. "That's it. That's all we do."

ORIGINAL LINK: <https://finance.yahoo.com/blogs/the-exchange/wingstop-ceo-wings-eaten-around-world-180718552.html>