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Portland salad startup chasing the sun on a multi-state expansion

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A few years ago, Ana Chaud was sitting in a small Pearl District restaurant talking with her then business partner, [Chris Hanford](#), about how that space would be the perfect place for their new salad bar concept, Garden Bar.

“I remember thinking, ‘We need a space exactly like this,’” said Chaud, who’d been a business consultant in San Francisco before coming to Portland 10 years ago. “Three months later, that space came on the market.”

In an even greater stroke of good fortune, the owner of the space had been hoping to fill it with a concept like Garden Bar’s — fresh, quick salads — and had reached out to Chopt, a similar company that’s done well in markets like New York and Washington, D.C. Chopt wasn’t ready to expand to the West Coast yet, but Garden Bar was raring to go right here.

“We’d heard the space had opened, so we approached the broker,” Chaud said. “We told them the concept and our background. They took a chance, and it was great from the get-go.”

Just over four years later, Garden Bar has become a fixture in downtown’s bustling commerce



JON BELL

Garden Bar founder and CEO Ana Chaud hopes to open more locations of the popular salad spot in the metro-area suburbs before jumping into another state in about a year-and-a-half.

districts, tossing a busy lunchtime business for the health-minded set in the Pearl District, Old Town and downtown. It's also got two eastside locations, and in June, Garden Bar headed into the suburbs with new outposts in Lake Oswego and Beaverton.

Now with nine restaurants and on the path to \$5 million in revenue this year, Chaud is looking to plant a few more Garden Bars in the 'burbs before jumping into another state by 2020. She won't say which one yet — "We want to chase the sun, so whatever that means to you," she said — but whichever one it is will be just the first of what could eventually be four more states for Garden Bar.

"We are going to go to places where we can shine and make a difference," Chaud said.

Salad days

A native of Brazil and a dancer, Chaud said she's always been into nutrition and fitness, so she knew she'd always wanted to be in the health space. She honed her business chops as a management and financial consultant for more than 20 years in San Francisco before she and her husband decided, as so many other Bay Area residents have, that they wanted a different life for their family. They moved to Portland in 2008, but divorced the next year, selling their home, which left Chaud with a little bit of money and a choice.

"Do I buy a house or start a business?" she said.

After working for a bit as a controller and operations manager for a few firms, Chaud did the latter, launching her first Garden Bar in 2014. She'd gotten the idea in part from companies like Chopt and Sweetgreen, which had flourished in East Coast cities. The concept had yet to really arrive in Portland, but Chaud and Hanford wanted to set the company apart from the start, anticipating the competition's eventual arrival.

"We thought, 'What can we do differently if they come and open across the street from us?'" she said.

For Garden Bar, that meant not using "green" in the name, as well as elevating itself a bit with porcelain bowls, real silverware and ingredients like truffles and hemp seeds that the competition didn't offer. It also meant going with a carrot instead of a leafy green in its logo.

"We picked the carrot because we thought it was a friendly vegetable and it evokes happiness," Chaud said.

Year one was a little rough, Chaud said, describing the spartan first store, with a single induction burner, no hood and a vitamix. "That's what we did for a year. I can't tell you how many times the fire department came." But the wrinkles eventually ironed out. Backed by angel investors and a small loan, Garden Bar opened a second store, this one in Old Town, in 2015. To spread out even farther, Chaud raised \$500,000 in equity, largely from investors in Portland and Bend, which took Garden Bar up to six stores by 2017, all of which were then being served by a commissary kitchen. Revenue rocketed up more than 170 percent between 2015 and 2017, when it hit \$3.6 million.

Pitching forward

With the close-in Portland market fairly well penetrated with Garden Bars — there will likely be one more added to the PacWest Center — Chaud is focusing this year on the suburbs, primarily on Lake Oswego and Beaverton. The concept there is the same, but the customers and their habitats are different.

“They’re different about how long they want to stay in the store. There’s no urgency,” she said. “People are not afraid of driving to get something they want.”

Beyond a few additional locations in choice suburban areas, Chaud said Garden Bar’s next level of growth will come outside of Oregon. Opening one store in places like Bend or Eugene likely won’t make financial sense, but taking the model to other, sunnier cities that can support multiple Garden Bar locations does.

“I want to chase states that have more sunshine, because the demand you have when you have sunshine is off the charts,” she said. “Everybody wants to look good, it’s hot and all that. California is one we are looking at, but I can tell you it’s not our second market.”

In order to make that leap outside of Oregon, Chaud said she’s going to need institutional backing or a partnership. She’d like to maintain control of the company, but she’s not opposed to the right partner.

Tim Haney, managing director with local business consultancy Meriwether Group, said Garden Bar’s concept, especially in these health-conscious times, is a good one that’s worked well in Portland. However, he said investors often like to see concepts proven outside their markets before they’ll pony up.

“Institutional money, that’s one of the first questions that they’ll ask,” said Haney, who worked with Portland’s Voodoo Doughnut as it scaled up beyond Portland.

Even so, Haney said the plan to expand into a new market with multiple stores, rather than just dropping one here and there, is a solid one.

“If you go into, say, the Phoenix market with one store, you’ll very likely get drowned out,” he said. “But if you go in with multiple stores within a 5-mile radius, you can own an entire area, and the barrier for entry (for competitors) becomes much tougher.”

Over the next 18 months, Chaud plans to focus on the Portland suburbs while also shoring up her plans for out-of-state expansion. When she’s ready, she’ll go out to seek investment and hopefully have new Garden Bars up and running in another state by 2020. She joked that she’d like to see Garden Bar go global, but she’ll take five states total for starters.

“The idea for me would be to hit five states that are all good in the West,” Chaud said. “There’s so much potential and there’s a lot of great places to do it.”

Closer Look

The Company: Garden Bar

Business: Grab and go or dine-in salad bars

Founded: 2014

CEO: Ana Chaud

Locations: 9

Employees: 102

Estimated 2018 revenue: \$5 million

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Portland Business Journal

