

# 11 Women Leading the Future of Full-Service Restaurants

Slideshow

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Meet 11 women in restaurant leadership who are breaking barriers and reshaping the dining industry, from menu innovation and marketing and communications to operations, training, and mentorship at the highest levels.



Felicia White

Felicia White has served in various roles at Church's Chicken, Scooter's Coffee, and most recently at Ascent Hospitality Management.

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It's no secret that top positions at restaurants, from ownership stakes to executive chef roles, have historically been male-dominated. The barriers to entry are complex; not only are women up against internal biases and access to the right networking opportunities and traditional funding, but they also have to contend with an industry with long hours and late nights, making it even more difficult for those who choose to have children and don't have a partner to share the load with.

Breaking the glass ceiling into the upper echelons of restaurant chains is something few women can claim, and this gender disparity is rooted in societal norms, stereotypes, and systemic biases. Efforts to address the disparities include mentorship programs, advocacy for equal opportunities and gender-inclusive hiring policies, women-centric culinary schools, industry awards and recognition, financial support and incentive programs, educational outreach, collaboration initiatives, and more.

When FSR and our sister publication QSR created the Women in Restaurant Leadership (WiRL) platform and event, we also formed an advisory board to help inform us of the industry's biggest challenges and opportunities. They act as our eyes and ears, allowing us to get a deeper understanding of what it means to be a woman in restaurant leadership and where there is room for meaningful change. Most importantly, they play an integral role in steering the direction of the WiRL platform, harnessing the energy of its community, and welcoming new members into the fold.

As members of our WiRL advisory board, the following 11 fearless leaders are committed to elevating, educating, and empowering the full spectrum of full-service restaurants—from single-unit operators to multi-location brands—leaving a lasting impact wherever they lead. They come from all corners of the business, forging their own paths to success while paving the way for the next generation. Their stories unfold in these pages—serving as both inspiration and a roadmap to success, not just for themselves, but for their teams and communities.

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Bonnie Iavaroni

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## Bonnie Iavaroni

Chief Operating Officer

Turning Point Restaurants

Bonnie Iavaroni has played a pivotal role in shaping Turning Point Restaurants into a thriving NextGen Casual breakfast, brunch, and lunch concept. As COO, she has focused on building leadership from within, fostering a culture of mentorship, and ensuring women have access to opportunities that allow them to excel in the hospitality industry.

One of her most significant contributions has been the development of Turning Point's Growth Path Program, designed to identify, train, and promote employees into leadership roles. "One example that stands out for me of a time when my leadership positively impacted our team and organization was during a period of growth when we were struggling to find qualified manager candidates," Iavaroni says. Recognizing that many employees lacked clear pathways to management, she developed a program that included assessments to identify leadership potential and a structured curriculum guiding employees from entry-level roles to management.

"A key highlight of this program was that it encouraged collaboration among our district managers. I asked them to work together to help create the framework for the program, which not only leveraged their on-the-ground knowledge but also gave them a sense of ownership," she explains. The impact was immediate: "After rolling out the program, we were able to promote approximately 20 employees into management positions, which was five times higher than the previous year."

She adds, "The program created a culture of growth, mentorship, and opportunity, and most importantly, it significantly strengthened our leadership pipeline."

For Iavaroni, fostering environments where women can thrive in leadership roles means ensuring equity in opportunity, mentorship, and work-life balance. "It's important for women in leadership positions to actively mentor and sponsor other women in the organization," she says. "Encouraging women to take on stretch assignments and leadership projects helps build their experience." She also highlights the importance of flexibility: "Offering flexible schedules and support for work-life balance is essential. This ensures that women can pursue leadership roles while balancing other responsibilities."

Turning Point has long been a champion of women in leadership, and Iavaroni is proud of the company's commitment to equity. "We've never had gender pay gaps, and there has always been a concerted effort to ensure that women are given the same opportunities for growth and advancement as their male counterparts," she says. "By fostering an inclusive environment, we've been able to create a supportive workplace where all employees, regardless of gender or background, feel empowered to rise to leadership positions."

Looking ahead, Iavaroni hopes to see more women in executive roles and systemic industry changes that prioritize pay equity, leadership pipelines for women, and family support policies. "Women in hospitality leadership roles need to be more visible. It's important for aspiring leaders to see successful women at the top to inspire confidence and demonstrate that leadership is attainable for them too," she says. "More robust family leave policies and caregiver support systems can help women remain in leadership roles or return to them after taking time off for family obligations."

By prioritizing mentorship, diversity, and leadership development, Iavaroni continues to drive Turning Point's success, ensuring women in hospitality have the support and resources they need to thrive.

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