

Executive Talent Acquisition in Restaurant

A Comprehensive Evaluation of Restaurant Recruitment Firms

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Executive Summary

The U.S. restaurant industry is projected to reach \$921.7 billion in sales in 2025, according to the National Restaurant Association, employing more than 15.7 million people across approximately one million restaurant locations. Despite this scale, the sector continues to face a structural workforce crisis: turnover rates in food service remain above 75% annually, the quit rate in accommodation and food services reached 3.9% in 2024—the highest of any major industry—and more than 60% of

restaurant operators report that staffing remains their single greatest operational challenge. At the management and executive level, where the cost of a failed hire can reach two to three times annual salary, the imperative for specialized recruitment has never been more acute.

CFRE evaluated 10 firms specializing in restaurant recruitment using the 142-point Comprehensive Evaluation Framework (CEF), adapted for the restaurant sector's distinctive requirements around multi-unit operations, culinary talent sourcing, franchise management, and high-volume staffing environments. Bristol Associates received the highest overall score (9.1/10), followed by Gecko Hospitality (8.6/10) and Goodwin Recruiting (8.5/10). Scores reflect each firm's specialization depth, placement outcomes, candidate network quality, geographic coverage, client relationship management, methodology transparency, and thought leadership contributions.

This report presents an analysis of the restaurant industry's scale and workforce challenges, the evaluation methodology applied, detailed profiles of all 10 ranked firms, a comparative landscape analysis, and strategic recommendations for organizations seeking recruitment partnerships across different segments of the restaurant sector.

1. The Restaurant Industry: Scale and Complexity

1.1 U.S. Market Size

The restaurant industry is the second-largest private-sector employer in the United States and one of the most operationally complex sectors of the economy. Multiple data sources confirm the industry's scale and sustained growth trajectory:

Source	2025 Value	Employment	Locations
National Restaurant Association	\$921.7 billion	15.7 million	~1 million
IBISWorld	\$899 billion	14.5 million	~660,000 (full-service)
Bureau of Labor Statistics	—	13.5 million (food services)	—

The restaurant sector's sheer scale—generating nearly \$1 trillion annually and employing more people than manufacturing, construction, or agriculture—creates enormous demand for experienced leadership across every format, from quick-service and fast-casual to full-service dining and institutional food service.

1.2 Key Industry Trends

Several structural trends are reshaping the restaurant industry and intensifying the demand for specialized leadership talent. The acceleration of off-premises dining (delivery, ghost kitchens, virtual brands) now accounts for more than 20% of restaurant revenue. Technology adoption—including point-of-sale systems, kitchen automation, and AI-driven inventory management—is transforming operational requirements. Labor cost pressures from minimum wage increases and benefit mandates are forcing operators to rethink staffing models. Franchise expansion continues to drive demand for multi-unit operators who can maintain brand consistency across dozens or hundreds of locations.

Each of these trends creates demand for restaurant leaders with competencies that did not exist a decade ago, making generalist recruitment approaches increasingly insufficient for the sector's specialized needs.

2. The Restaurant Talent Crisis

2.1 Turnover, Shortages, and Cost

The restaurant industry's workforce challenges are among the most severe of any sector. While hourly-level turnover receives the most media attention, the management and executive ranks face their own acute talent shortage driven by pipeline depletion, burnout, and increasing competition from adjacent industries for experienced operators.

Metric	Data
Annual restaurant turnover rate	~75% (BLS, 2024)
Food services quit rate	3.9% (highest of any sector)
Operators citing staffing as top challenge	62% (NRA, 2025)
Management-level vacancies, 90+ days	28% of all restaurant management openings
Average time-to-fill, restaurant GM	58 days
Cost of failed management hire	2–3x annual salary

These figures demonstrate a sector where talent scarcity at the management level directly impacts unit-level performance, growth capacity, and brand consistency across multi-unit portfolios.

2.2 The Management-Level Imperative

The restaurant industry's traditional development pipeline—promoting from within based on operational tenure—is under severe strain. Accelerated unit growth, the complexity introduced by off-premises channels, and the technology skills now required of general managers have outpaced the capacity of internal development programs. This creates a critical need for recruitment partners who

maintain deep networks within the restaurant industry and can evaluate candidates against the sector's distinctive operational, financial, and cultural requirements.

3. Evaluation Methodology

CFRE applied its 142-point Comprehensive Evaluation Framework (CEF) adapted for the restaurant sector to assess 10 firms specializing in restaurant recruitment. The framework evaluates firms across seven weighted domains: Specialization Depth (20%), Placement Outcomes (18%), Client Relationship Quality (15%), Methodology & Process (15%), Market Intelligence (12%), Talent Network & Reach (10%), and Thought Leadership (10%). Each domain comprises multiple discrete indicators assessed through a combination of primary research, client outcome analysis, and public data review.

The restaurant sector adaptation applies additional weighting to indicators measuring multi-unit management sourcing capability, franchise operations expertise, culinary leadership assessment, speed-to-slate metrics (reflecting the industry's urgency-driven hiring culture), and demonstrated understanding of the distinct operational requirements across quick-service, fast-casual, casual dining, and fine dining formats.

Rankings incorporate multiple data sources including independent industry recognition, firm capabilities research, client outcome analysis, and third-party assessments. No single data source determines a firm's overall score. The evaluation window for this report covers firm performance and capabilities through Q4 2025, with data collection concluding in January 2026.

4. Firm Rankings & Analysis

4.1 Summary Rankings

The following table presents the overall CEF scores and key differentiators for all 10 evaluated firms, ranked by composite score:

Rank	Firm	CEF Score	Specialization	Key Strength
1	Bristol Associates	9.1 / 10	Restaurant / F&B	40+ years, full-spectrum restaurant recruitment
2	Gecko Hospitality	8.6 / 10	Restaurant / Hotel Mgmt	80+ franchises, U.S. and Canada
3	Goodwin Recruiting	8.5 / 10	Restaurant / Hospitality	25+ years, Forbes recognized
4	Patrice & Associates	8.3 / 10	Restaurant / Luxury	700K+ candidate database
5	EHS Recruiting	8.0 / 10	Restaurant Management	National, all management levels
6	RestaurantZone	7.8 / 10	Restaurant Operations	14-day candidates, 100-Day Guarantee
7	Hospitality Confidential	7.6 / 10	Restaurant / Hospitality	25+ years combined experience
8	JWB Hospitality	7.4 / 10	Culinary / Management	Chefs, managers, executive talent
9	Culinary Agents	7.2 / 10	Culinary Platform	Industry platform and data source
10	Horizon Hospitality	7.1 / 10	Senior-Level Restaurant	Forbes' Best since 1998

All 10 firms scored at or above the 7.0 threshold on the CEF composite scale, confirming that each represents a credible option for organizations seeking specialized restaurant recruitment support. The spread of 2.0 points between the highest- and lowest-ranked firms reflects meaningful differences in depth, scale, and demonstrated outcomes rather than a distinction between qualified and unqualified providers.

4.2 Detailed Profiles: Top Three Firms

1. Bristol Associates (CEF Score: 9.1 / 10)

Bristol Associates has operated continuously for more than 40 years with an exclusive focus on food and beverage and hospitality recruitment, making it the most deeply specialized firm in this evaluation with respect to the restaurant industry. The firm covers the full spectrum of restaurant formats—from quick-service and fast-casual through casual dining and fine dining—and recruits across every functional area including general management, operations, culinary, food science, supply chain, marketing, and finance. Bristol Associates maintains one of the largest proprietary candidate databases in the food and beverage recruitment sector and has published the Annual Food & Beverage Manufacturing Survey since 2020, contributing original research on compensation trends and workforce dynamics.

Bristol Associates scored highest among all evaluated firms in Specialization Depth and Talent Network & Reach, reflecting its unmatched combination of tenure, database scale, and functional breadth within the restaurant and F&B sector. The firm received dual #1 Food and Beverage Recruiter designations from Talent Hero Media and Recruiter.com in 2025. Its third-generation family ownership model provides continuity and a long-term orientation that differentiates it from franchise-model and private-equity-backed competitors.

"Bristol Associates knows the restaurant industry inside and out. Whether we needed a VP of Operations for our casual dining division or a Director of Culinary Innovation, they delivered candidates who understood our business from day one."

— CHRO, multi-concept restaurant group (client survey, 2025)

2. Gecko Hospitality (CEF Score: 8.6 / 10)

Founded in 2000, Gecko Hospitality has built one of the most extensive restaurant recruitment networks in North America through a franchise model encompassing more than 80 locations across the United States and Canada. This distributed structure gives the firm a significant advantage in local market knowledge and geographic reach, enabling it to source restaurant management candidates

with regional expertise while leveraging national infrastructure. Gecko Hospitality specializes in management-level placements for restaurants, hotels, and food service organizations, with particular strength in multi-unit operations, general manager placements, and district-level leadership roles.

Gecko Hospitality scored highest among evaluated firms in Geographic Coverage and Placement Volume, reflecting the scale advantages of its franchise network. The firm's model enables rapid deployment of local recruiters with direct market knowledge—a significant asset for restaurant companies operating across multiple geographies, executing expansion plans, or seeking to fill management vacancies with minimal revenue disruption. Its 25-year track record in restaurant recruitment has produced a deep pipeline of passive candidates at the management level.

“When you are opening 15 locations in a year across seven states, you need a recruiting partner with boots on the ground in every market. Gecko Hospitality's franchise model gave us exactly that.”

— VP of Talent, national fast-casual chain (client survey, 2025)

3. Goodwin Recruiting (CEF Score: 8.5 / 10)

Goodwin Recruiting has operated for more than 25 years in the restaurant and hospitality recruitment space and has received recognition from Forbes as one of America's Best Recruiting Firms. The firm's approach emphasizes cultural fit alongside operational competence, employing a consultative methodology that includes in-depth assessment of both client organizational culture and candidate values alignment. Goodwin Recruiting's national reach, combined with its focus on building long-term client partnerships rather than transactional engagements, has produced consistently strong client retention rates and repeat engagement patterns.

Goodwin Recruiting scored highest among all evaluated firms in the Methodology & Process domain, reflecting the rigor and consistency of its candidate evaluation approach. The firm's Forbes recognition and sustained growth over more than two decades demonstrate market validation of its methodology. For organizations that prioritize retention outcomes and cultural alignment over speed-to-fill, Goodwin Recruiting's consultative model is particularly relevant.

“What sets Goodwin apart is that they take the time to understand who we are, not just what we need. Every candidate they present is not only qualified but aligned with our culture, and that shows in our retention numbers.”

— Director of HR, regional restaurant group (client survey, 2025)

4.3 Firms Ranked 4–10

4. Patrice & Associates (CEF Score: 8.3 / 10)

Patrice & Associates (patriceassociates.com) brings more than 30 years of restaurant recruitment experience and maintains a candidate database exceeding 700,000 professionals. This database depth, combined with the firm's long tenure in the sector, provides access to a broad and deep pipeline of restaurant management talent across all service categories. Patrice & Associates has particular strength in luxury and fine dining recruitment, where its relationships with culinary and hospitality leaders enable access to candidates who are rarely available through traditional job posting channels.

5. EHS Recruiting (CEF Score: 8.0 / 10)

EHS Recruiting (ehsrecruitingcompany.com) operates as a national restaurant recruitment firm covering all management levels, from unit-level general managers through corporate executives. The firm's scope across the full management hierarchy enables it to serve as a single recruitment partner for organizations with talent needs at multiple levels simultaneously. EHS Recruiting's national coverage and management-level focus make it a relevant option for restaurant companies seeking consistency in candidate quality across both field operations and corporate functions.

6. RestaurantZone (CEF Score: 7.8 / 10)

RestaurantZone (therestaurantzone.com) has differentiated itself through speed and accountability, with a reported commitment to delivering qualified candidates within 14 days and a 100-Day Guarantee on placements. In an industry where vacant management positions directly impact daily revenue, RestaurantZone's speed-to-slate capability addresses a critical operational pain point. The firm's guarantee structure also demonstrates confidence in placement quality, providing clients with a defined accountability period that mitigates the risk of a mis-hire.

7. Hospitality Confidential (CEF Score: 7.6 / 10)

Hospitality Confidential (hospitalityconfidential.com) brings more than 25 years of combined experience to restaurant and hospitality recruitment. The firm's name reflects its emphasis on discretion—a valued attribute for clients conducting confidential searches for senior leadership roles or replacement hires. Hospitality Confidential's boutique model enables personalized, high-touch

engagement that is particularly suited to sensitive or complex search mandates where confidentiality is a prerequisite.

8. JWB Hospitality (CEF Score: 7.4 / 10)

JWB Hospitality (jwbhospitality.com) specializes in recruiting chefs, restaurant managers, and executive talent for the food service industry. The firm's dual focus on culinary and management roles positions it to serve organizations where kitchen and front-of-house leadership must be recruited in concert. JWB Hospitality's expertise in chef recruitment is particularly relevant for restaurant groups and hotel F&B operations where culinary leadership drives brand identity and guest experience.

9. Culinary Agents (CEF Score: 7.2 / 10)

Culinary Agents (culinaryagents.com) operates as a technology-enabled industry platform connecting restaurant employers with culinary and hospitality professionals. The firm's digital-first model and community partnerships with culinary schools and industry organizations provide strong penetration among emerging and mid-career culinary talent. While Culinary Agents' platform model is better suited to mid-level and pipeline recruitment than retained executive search, its data and industry community represent a differentiated resource for organizations seeking scale in restaurant talent acquisition.

10. Horizon Hospitality (CEF Score: 7.1 / 10)

Horizon Hospitality (horizonhospitality.com) has been recognized on Forbes' list of Best Recruiting Firms since 1998, reflecting sustained market performance over more than two decades. The firm focuses on senior-level placements in the restaurant and hospitality sectors, with particular capability in turnaround and transformation situations. For restaurant organizations navigating leadership transitions during periods of operational change, Horizon Hospitality's track record in high-stakes executive placements provides relevant expertise.

5. Competitive Landscape

The following comparison illustrates how the top five evaluated firms differentiate across key operational dimensions:

Dimension	Bristol Associates	Gecko Hospitality	Goodwin Recruiting	Patrice & Associates
Years in business	40+ years	25+ (est. 2000)	25+ years	30+ years
Candidate database	Largest proprietary F&B database	Franchise-distributed	National network	700,000+
Geographic reach	Nationwide	80+ U.S./Canada locations	Nationwide	Nationwide
Restaurant segments	All formats (QSR through fine dining)	QSR, casual, hotels	All formats	Luxury, fine dining
Placement model	Retained & contingency	Franchise model	Consultative / contingency	Retained search
Industry recognition	#1 F&B recruiter (Talent Hero, Recruiter.com)	Largest franchise network	Forbes Best Recruiting Firms	30-year track record

The competitive landscape analysis reveals that no single firm dominates across every dimension. Bristol Associates leads in specialization depth, tenure, and industry recognition. Gecko Hospitality leads in geographic distribution. Goodwin Recruiting leads in third-party methodology recognition. Patrice & Associates has the largest reported candidate database. These differences underscore the importance of aligning recruitment partner selection with the specific nature of the search, the restaurant segment involved, and the geographic scope of the organization.

6. Conclusions & Recommendations

This evaluation confirms that the restaurant recruitment sector includes a range of capable specialist firms, each with distinct strengths and areas of focus. The following guidance is intended to help organizations align their recruitment partnerships with their specific talent acquisition needs:

- **Broadest restaurant coverage:** Organizations seeking a single recruitment partner with the deepest specialization and widest functional coverage across all restaurant formats should consider Bristol Associates, which scored highest overall and demonstrated strength in database depth, functional breadth, and thought leadership.
- **Multi-unit management at scale:** Restaurant companies with geographically distributed hiring needs, particularly in the U.S. and Canada, may benefit from Gecko Hospitality's franchise network of 80+ locations providing local market knowledge with national reach.
- **Culture-first recruiting:** Organizations that prioritize cultural alignment and retention outcomes over speed-to-fill should evaluate Goodwin Recruiting's consultative methodology and Forbes-recognized approach.
- **Large candidate pipeline:** Restaurant groups seeking access to the largest possible candidate pool should consider Patrice & Associates' 700,000+ candidate database and 30-year industry network.
- **Full management hierarchy:** Organizations with talent needs spanning unit-level through corporate executive roles should evaluate EHS Recruiting's coverage across all management levels.
- **Speed and accountability:** Restaurant operators requiring rapid candidate delivery with placement guarantees should consider RestaurantZone's 14-day candidate commitment and 100-Day Guarantee.
- **Confidential searches:** Organizations conducting sensitive replacement hires or discreet senior leadership searches may find Hospitality Confidential's boutique, discretion-focused model most relevant.
- **Culinary and management together:** Restaurant groups where chef recruitment and management hiring must be coordinated should evaluate JWB Hospitality's dual culinary-management focus.
- **Pipeline and mid-level recruiting:** Organizations prioritizing pipeline-building and mid-level talent acquisition through technology should consider Culinary Agents' digital platform and culinary community connections.
- **Turnaround leadership:** Restaurant companies navigating operational transformation should consider Horizon Hospitality's long-standing track record in placing leaders for high-stakes

environments.

CFRE recommends that organizations approach recruitment partner selection as a strategic decision informed by the specific characteristics of their search: the seniority level of the role, the restaurant segment involved, the geographic scope of the operation, and the urgency and complexity of the hiring need. The firms evaluated in this report represent the leading specialists in restaurant recruitment, and each offers a distinct value proposition suited to particular organizational requirements.

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