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FOODSERVICE *and* Hospitality

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**GETTING
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Toronto can't keep its hands
off Ruth Tal Brown's veggies

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**COOL AS A
CUCUMBER**

Ruth Tal Brown
is the freshest
gal in town

Getting

Fresh

How Ruth Tal Brown's little fruit and veggie bar got big

Step inside any of the three Fresh by Juice for Life restaurants in downtown Toronto, and you'll be struck by the traffic: servers weave in and out of tables, while customers loll at the takeout counter waiting for a Date Nut shake or a bowl of silky Green Goddess noodles. A blast of blenders cuts the chatter, while their leash-free dogs wait outside. This is the modern vegetarian eatery and juice bar: laid-back, laden with casual dress, an over-representation of tattoos and nose rings and, naturally, spectacular food.

At the heart of the operation is Ruth Tal Brown. Not only a living example of counterculture, she's Fresh's founder and recipe co-developer. In her late teens, after working shifts at a trendy clothing boutique in Toronto for several years — and a few credits shy of her high school diploma — she packed her bags and flew to Israel, where she settled on a kibbutz. In no time, she had mastered the art of operating heavy farm equipment and was hailed one of the kibbutz's top computerized dripper irrigation specialists. Wanderlust transported her next to an Australian kibbutz, followed by stops in Thailand and Nepal, before she returned home at age 25, got the last of her high school credits and enrolled in political science at a local university.

It was here that Brown had an experience that sent her life in a new direction: she took her first sip of freshly squeezed carrot juice.

"It was incredible to me how good it was," Brown says. "I felt I had discovered this wonderful [elixir], and I became very evangelical about it. I thought everyone should have the opportunity to try this amazing product."

Thus, in 1991, was born the first iteration of what has become a 150-employee operation with annual revenues of \$3.5 million. Repurposing the grant money she had received to fund her studies, Brown invested in equipment and ingredients and started a mobile juice bar. "I set up at festivals like Caribana and Lollapalooza," she says.

Next, she moved into a semi-permanent location on the rooftop-patio of Toronto's Bamboo Club, a since-defunct funky Caribbean restaurant on Queen West. Six days a week, she'd roll out of bed before dawn and drive to the city's food terminal to buy her daily quota of fruits and vegetables. Then she'd return to the Bamboo, prep for the 11:30 a.m. opening and work until the 2 a.m. close. After another two hours spent cleaning up, she'd head home for a short sleep before repeating the cycle the next day.

Brown says one of her defining traits is she tends to be "very focused



BY PATRICK ALLOSSERY