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McDonald's named Canada's favourite restaurant

The QSR fared well in BrandSpark's inaugural restaurant study, but ironically didn't place in the Best Tasting Burger category.



Josh Kolm

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BrandSpark has handed out its first Best Restaurant Awards, although the results have more to do with what Canadians think of the chains' meal offerings instead of actual food quality.

BrandSpark **determined the winners** based on a survey of 6,000 Canadians who were asked about the first restaurant that came to mind in each category, dividing the results between quick-service and full-service chains.

The list of winners features a lot of golden arches, as McDonald's won in 10 categories and tied in four, including Favourite QSR and Best Tasting Food, which Denis Hancock, director of consumer insights at BrandSpark, says is to be expected from a brand that does more advertising than its competitors.

"Name recognition plays a major part of it," he says. "[The survey] was based on open-ended responses and what first comes to mind, and a lot of that is based on how long you've been around and how much advertising you do. But it's not everything. If it was, they would have taken all the other categories too."

Hancock attributes a big part of McDonald's presence to its strength with families: in the Best QSR for Dinner category, the results spiked among 34- to 49-year-olds, which he says shows the chain dominates the top-of-mind thinking for those with young children who still think of the chain as a convenient place to bring the family.

Despite its burger roots, McDonald's fell off in the Best Tasting Burger category, but won in categories for things like wraps and chicken sandwiches, coming off of a greater focus on quality food offerings with its McCafé branding. Hancock says this not only shows that messaging is key, but that the way restaurants have been positioning themselves over the last few years is breaking through with Canadians.

A&W's lone win came for Best Tasting Burger as the chain has emphasized its hormone-free, naturally-raised beef. Tim Horton's won in five Best New Menu Item categories, which is in line with it trying to grow its lunch and dinner business.

Although this is the first year it has done this study, BrandSpark (which grew out of the insights and strategy team at Cara Operations), has been following the restaurant business close to enough to offer some insight into how these opinions have changed over the years.

Boston Pizza (BP) is one of the rare full-service restaurants that has managed to break out across provincial barriers, which typically tend to do well primarily in their home provinces, especially with families. Ranking fourth nationally for Favourite Full Service Restaurant in 2008, BP is now tied for second, which Hancock says might have something to do with adding an element of fun for the full range of its target.

"They've got that design where it's half for families and half for adults at the bar. It doesn't make sense to some people, but it really puts that fun social element at the centre of the brand. A lot of established restaurants had been falling off on that fun experience."

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