



El Pollo Loco Announces New York Expansion and Strengthens Leadership Team to Accelerate Growth

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*Brand signs first lease in New York (Queens)
Enters into three development agreements for 15 area restaurants over the next five years*

COSTA MESA, Calif., Sept. 29, 2026 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- El Pollo Loco, the nation's leading fire-grilled chicken restaurant chain, today announced its planned entry into New York, including a signed lease for its first restaurant in the region, targeted to open in Queens in mid-2027. The company has agreed to terms for three development agreements for 15 area restaurants over the next five years, and also announced two leadership appointments that strengthen the team supporting El Pollo Loco's next phase of growth.

New York development will be led by one longtime El Pollo Loco franchise partner and two new franchise partners. The expansion marks an important step in El Pollo Loco's evolution into a national brand and builds on three consecutive quarters of positive same-store sales growth, improved restaurant economics and continued progress against the company's transformation plan. The agreements also reflect growing consumer interest in protein-forward meals made with quality ingredients. With its signature fire-grilled chicken, El Pollo Loco believes it is uniquely positioned to meet that demand and introduce its differentiated offering to new communities across the country.

"New York represents an important milestone for El Pollo Loco and a clear proof point in our disciplined growth strategy," said Liz Williams, Chief Executive Officer of El Pollo Loco. "We have strengthened our brand and operations, enhanced our business model, and assembled an experienced leadership team to support sustainable expansion. With committed franchise partners and our first New York lease secured, we are excited to introduce the East Coast to the fire-grilled flavor and hospitality that have defined El Pollo Loco for five decades."

El Pollo Loco Appoints Damon Thomas as Chief Operating Officer and Tara Hinkle as Chief Development Officer

To support this growth, Damon Thomas has been appointed Chief Operating Officer. Thomas brings extensive experience scaling high-growth restaurant brands across the country and leading operations across large, multi-market systems. His experience includes senior operations leadership roles at Shake Shack and Raising Cane's, two high-growth restaurant concepts.

"El Pollo Loco has a distinctive brand, a strong operating foundation and significant room to grow," said Thomas. "I look forward to partnering with our company and franchise teams to drive operational excellence, strengthen the guest experience and build the systems that will support the brand as it enters New York and expands into other new markets."

Further support for the brand's growth trajectory comes from new Chief Development Officer Tara Hinkle. Hinkle joined El Pollo Loco in July 2026 and brings nearly 20 years of experience in franchising, development and operational planning. She most recently served as President and Head of Americas for The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf and previously held franchise strategy and business partnership leadership roles at Taco Bell and Starbucks.

"Entering New York is a meaningful step in building a thoughtful, scalable development pipeline for El Pollo Loco," said Hinkle. "We are working with experienced franchise partners who believe in the brand, known for delicious fire-grilled chicken and fresh, high-quality ingredients, and understand the opportunity in this market. We are focused on choosing the right sites, selecting and supporting strong operators, and growing in a way that creates lasting value for our guests, franchisees and shareholders."

The company plans to share additional location, franchisee and opening details as East Coast development progresses.

About El Pollo Loco

El Pollo Loco (Nasdaq: LOCO) is the nation's leading fire-grilled chicken restaurant known for its craveable, flavorful, and better-for-you offerings. Named by USA Today 10 Best Reader's Choice Awards as a "Best Restaurant for Quick, Healthy Food" three years in a row, our menu features innovative meals with Mexican-inspired flavors made daily in our restaurants using quality ingredients. At [El Pollo Loco](#), inclusivity is at the heart of our culture. Our community of over 4,000 employees reflects our commitment to creating a workplace where everyone has a seat at our table. Since 1980, El Pollo Loco has successfully expanded its presence, operating more than 500 company-owned and franchised restaurants across ten U.S. states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Washington. The company has also extended its footprint internationally, with licensed restaurant locations in the Philippines. For more information or to place an [order](#), visit the Loco Rewards [app](#) or [ElPolloLoco.com](#). Follow us on [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), [Facebook](#), or [X](#).

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Photos accompanying this announcement are available at

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Source: El Pollo
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