

MODERN LUXURY

HOUSTON

FASHION'S TROMPE L'OEIL

GRAPHIC GARMENTS
IN THE SPOTLIGHT

FUNNY GIRL

GLEE STAR JANE
LYNCH HITS UP
H-TOWN

LEADING THE PACK

6 FORWARD-THINKING
ENTREPRENEURS MAKE
THEIR MARK ON HOUSTON
& BEYOND

PLUS

GALVESTON'S POSH
BEACHTOWN BECKONS
SAKS FIFTH AVENUE OPENS
ITS CHIC NEW DOORS

ENTERPRISING MINDS

From launching a cutting-edge crowdfunding platform to reinventing the way we snack, Houston's newest entrepreneurs are questioning tradition and making things happen on their own terms.

By Ray Dennison

THE NEW CHAIRMAN

A young local designer pulls his seat up to the table, jumping at the chance to start his own furniture line.

Local interior designer **Ben Johnston** founded Avondale Design Studio in 2011. He and his partners have worked on dozens of award-winning home interiors, from Memorial to River Oaks to Galveston. This year, they've even scored their first project on New York's Upper East Side. Johnston, who studied architecture at Texas A&M and UT before working at prestigious firm Cesar Pelli & Associates in Tokyo, has a clear eye for design. He even taught interior design classes at HCC for several years. Lately, though, he's noticed something is lacking.

"As a designer, you have rare opportunities to see what excellent manufacturers are out there," the tall, handsome 35-year-old explains. "You also get to see what's not represented in the market." In that space

between what exists and what's possible, Johnston has found his latest project—his own furniture line. "I really want to lend my voice and my perspective to furniture design," he says. Johnston has created custom pieces before, but this will be his first foray into large-scale production. "I've happily daydreamed about chairs, then done my research to find [that] nothing like them exists," he says. As he rolls out his first dining chairs within the next year, that's about to change.

For inspiration, he's looking to contemporary design houses like Holly Hunt and Donghia, as well as classic masters like Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles and Ray Eames. "It seems a lot of great architects start out with chairs. It's a way to revisit really iconic pieces with a fresh eye," Johnston says. In his collection, silhouettes are elegant, unique and often a bit retro. He notes: "It's all about exploring and thinking about material connections in a new way." avondaledesignstudio.com

THE BEST SEAT
IN THE HOUSE
Chairs in Ben
Johnston's new
furniture line,
currently in the
development
phase, will start at
around \$1,800.



PHOTO BY JULIE SCHERER

THE POP STAR

The founder of local sweet-treats empire Ricca Co. goes on a health kick with her frozen post-workout snack, B Pop.

For an entrepreneur whose first company, Ricca Co., made it big selling decadent macaroon-ice cream sandwiches, starting up a health food revolution could possibly be seen as a contradiction. **Tallent Ricca**, however, doesn't see it that way. "The trend right now is toward healthier versions of your favorite treats," the 30-year-old Pilates addict says with conviction. "When we noticed a void between the shower and running to work after morning workouts, we saw a fun way to put popsicle desserts into a healthy snack form."

Enter B Pop, Ricca's latest brand, a line of frozen popsicles made with a cashew and chia seed base. "Because they're frozen, we don't have to add anything that doesn't need to be there," she explains. Unlike with power or granola bars, B Pop can skip all the preservatives and added sugars, resulting in what's essentially a frozen homemade smoothie of just raw fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. "We only put in things that contribute to health or flavor. That's what makes us different."

Ricca and her partners, Melissa Eason and Victoria Franco, started selling the pops at local stores, including New Living, Big Yoga and Nourish Juice Bar. Then a local forager from Whole Foods got a taste and was hooked. "When [they] approached, it was a very easy decision," Ricca recalls. B Pop is now carried in local Whole Foods stores here in H-Town and plans are in the works to expand into more Texas markets—just in time for the summer heat wave—and eventually the entire country. Looks like America is in for a treat. bpobetterpop.com

BIG FREEZE
Tallent Ricca's new frozen B Pop snacks can be found at local Whole Foods stores. They'll expand to Austin and other Texas markets in the next few months.





THE CROWD FAVORITES

Two savvy college teammates launch the first Securities and Exchange Commission-approved nationwide crowdfunding portal after a successful start in the Texas market.

Abe Chu and Youngro Lee, both 32, met years ago on the basketball team at Simons Rock College. “We were the nerdiest, most unathletic basketball team you’ve ever witnessed,” Chu remembers, laughing.

Now, after more than a decade apart—Chu pursued an MBA at Rice, while Lee became an international private equity attorney jetting from New York to Moscow to Shanghai—they’ve reunited, and last year they launched Texas’ first major crowdfunding website, NextSeed. The portal, which functions like a small stock exchange, allows individuals to invest in private companies. It’s already funneled more than \$1 million into local independent

businesses, and with new federal legislation passed just last month, it’s moving into the national market as well. “We are the first portal to receive nationwide approval by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission,” Chu says, “and we’re now focusing on projects across the county.”

To help, they’ve also brought on fellow college teammate and tech whiz Bob Dunton. “A lot of investors focus on striking gold, getting in on the next Facebook early,” Chu says. “That’s exciting, but we also want tools to support restaurants, bars and gyms—local businesses that we go to and use daily.” So far, it seems to be catching on. Success stories include South African restaurant Peli Peli in the Galleria, and up next are a luxury flotation spa and an EaDo gastro pub. “It’s a new option—off of Wall Street—that lets people reinvest in Main Street.” Mom-and-pops rejoice! nextseed.com



MANNING THE FORT Jay Bhatti's new Citadel on Kirby event venue readies for the Super Bowl, and his new energy trading app prepares to launch.

THE ENERGIZER

Carrying on a family tradition of entrepreneurship, a former commodities trader opens a swanky event space and prepares to launch a revolutionary energy trading app.

Entrepreneurial spirit is genetically ingrained in Citadel on Kirby banquet hall developer and owner **Jay Bhatti**. Not only did his father run a plastics manufacturing company, but his grandfather was one of the first businessmen to bring televisions to India in the '50s. It was only natural that after several years in commodities trading at J.P. Morgan he'd branch out on his own.

"My jobs have always centered [on] the idea of risk-taking and understanding what the market wants," the 41-year-old father of two says. So when he and his wife, Sara, picked up on a common complaint among banquet planners, they saw a niche. "People were tired of the

cookie-cutter hotel venues." Most of all, they were tired of the same tacky multicolor carpet. The Bhattys' solution: a 20,000-square-foot venue with a 26-foot-high ceiling and white Italian marble floors. The venue has been a roaring success, and with the Trees for Hope gala and Super Bowl LI up next, it's set to fete.

Now, Bhatti's ready for an even bigger project: his new energy trading app, Enercross, which launches a beta version in six to eight months. "App developers are focusing on social media, food, travel," he explains, "but they're not focusing on business." Enercross changes that, aggregating hundreds of websites, and showing the cheapest prices for supplying, transporting and storing natural gas. "Think of it like Expedia or Kayak for a specific industry. With this app, you can move energy around the country while sitting in the park or playing soccer." Goal scored! citadelonkirby.com, enercross.com

PHOTO BY LAURIE PEREZ



NOW OR NEVER
Former lawyer Kathleen Jennings' BeautyNow app prepares for a major national deal.

THE BELLE

A busy mom's smartphone beauty app attracts a major investor and prepares for yet another national makeover.

Kathleen Jennings' BeautyNow—a smartphone app that allows users to view and book available appointments at nearby salons and spas—has doubled its network since launching in 2014 and now covers more than 8,000 salons and spas across the United States. Whether you're here in Houston looking for a last-minute blowout or trying to find a spa in New York during a girls' weekend, scheduling a beauty appointment couldn't be simpler. "There's really no easier way," the blue-eyed 35-year-old former lawyer says.

It's obvious that the startup grew quickly, and by the end of the first year, she and her husband knew they needed outside investors to supplement their personal funding of the project. "We didn't want just anyone, though," she says. "We needed someone strategic." So, being an internet natural, the tech-savvy beauty posted on Facebook asking Austin friends if anyone knew John Paul DeJoria, co-founder of Paul Mitchell, America's largest privately owned haircare brand. Within hours, a friend's husband was able to connect her. "[DeJoria] and I hit it off and went from there."

Today, with the backing of one of the world's top haircare and beauty moguls—who has ties to more than 100,000 salons nationwide—BeautyNow is slated for huge growth. Locally, it has added Beautique, Persona Medical Spa and Hue Salon to its listings. National spa brand Massage Heights also joins the roster later this year. And soon, the Jennings family will also grow. "We're expecting our third child this fall," Jennings says, glowing. beautynowapp.com