

TECH EXCLUSIVE

# Chipotle founder Steve Ells eyes fast-food comeback with robot-powered startup Kernel

By Thomas Barrabi

Chipotle founder and ex-CEO Steve Ells is plotting a return to the fast-food scene — with a plant-based, robot-powered chain whose restaurants could operate with as few as three employees, The Post has learned.

Ells has been pitching investors since at least last year on a startup that “fundamentally rethinks labor, technology, real estate and menu” and uses “automation with a human touch,” according to draft investor materials obtained by The Post.

The pitch deck includes mock-ups and photos of Kernel’s compact kitchens — with three employee workstations surrounded by computer screens, robotic arms and an array of slots and chutes for moving food through an assembly line.

Steve Ells is leading the new startup and described it as a “tech-enabled fast-food concept that leverages software and robotics,” but declined further comment about its technology.

Kernel appears likely to operate in a manner similar



to rivals such as Dig and Little Beet, where the majority of food is prepared at an offsite location and then delivered to stores for final assembly and sale to customers, according to Arlene Spiegel, a New York-based restaurant, retail and food-service consultant and president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates.

Spiegel likened Kernel’s proposed automation-heavy model to “a makeshift factory, almost like the Willy Wonka of takeout foods.”

“At the storefront, it’s completely portion-controlled, automated and logistically connected to all of the ordering platforms for a consistent fast pick-up and delivery,” Spiegel told The Post.

The startup sees Shake Shack, Sweetgreen, Dig, Cava and Ells’ former company Chipotle as its competitors, according to the materials.

Kernel declined to comment on the size of its founding team and who else, besides Ells, is currently involved in its operations.