STANDALONE ESSAY · RESTAURANT INDUSTRY ANALYSIS

Boston Market Had More Than a Chicken Problem

How a once-dominant restaurant chain lost its competitive edge while its name found a second life in supermarket freezers.

BY DAVID AMBROSE · NOVEMBER 6, 2026

In November 2026, Business Insider published an account of a visit to one of the last remaining Boston Market restaurants in the United States. At a Philadelphia location, writer Haley Paskalides and her husband spent $31.97 before tax on two meals and dessert. The portions were generous, several dishes were enjoyable, and there was enough left over for another meal. The dining room felt dated, the menu was overwhelming, and the signature rotisserie chicken disappointed. But the experience was hardly a disaster. For a restaurant chain that had nearly disappeared, Boston Market could still provide a reasonably priced dinner.

At its peak, Boston Market operated approximately 1,200 restaurants. By November 2026, its website listed just six, although how many remained operational was uncertain. The familiar explanation for its decline is that supermarkets made rotisserie chicken cheaper and more convenient, leaving Boston Market with little reason to exist. There's truth to that argument, but it doesn't explain why a company that spent decades adapting to competition eventually struggled to pay its bills. Nor does it explain a curious development: while Boston Market's restaurants were disappearing, its name continued appearing on frozen dinners in supermarket freezers.

Boston Market had a competitive problem long before it experienced a corporate catastrophe. The distinction matters because the brand and the restaurant business were not necessarily suffering the same fate.

The Convenience Business

Founded in 1985 as Boston Chicken, the company offered something different from conventional fast food. Customers could purchase rotisserie chicken, mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and the cornbread that became one of the brand's most recognizable offerings. It wasn't simply a place to buy chicken. It was a place to buy dinner, complete with the sides that made the meal feel closer to something prepared at home. The concept expanded rapidly during the 1990s, eventually becoming Boston Market as its menu broadened beyond chicken. But aggressive growth brought substantial financial obligations, and the company filed for bankruptcy in 1998. McDonald's acquired it in 2000, later selling it to private equity firm Sun Capital Partners in 2007.

Supermarkets eventually became formidable competitors. Grocery stores expanded their prepared-food offerings, making rotisserie chicken and ready-to-eat sides available during an ordinary shopping trip. They also enjoyed an economic advantage. An inexpensive chicken could attract customers who purchased other groceries, allowing retailers to consider the profitability of the entire shopping basket rather than the chicken alone. Boston Market had to support the costs of operating a dedicated restaurant, making it difficult to compete on price.

But Boston Market hardly ignored convenience. By 2015, approximately 200 of its 456 restaurants had drive-thru windows, according to Nation's Restaurant News. Online ordering was available, the company was experimenting with car-side service and delivery, and takeout represented roughly three-quarters of its business. Boston Market understood how customers wanted to purchase dinner and had invested in making that experience easier.

The company was also improving its operations. In a 2015 interview with Nation's Restaurant News, then-CEO George Michel described practical changes, including pre-sliced pies, chilled rather than frozen turkey breasts, and gravy production moved to a commissary. These adjustments reduced preparation work and addressed inefficiencies. The company had even resumed opening restaurants after years of contraction.

Those improvements coincided with measurable sales gains. In 2015, Fortune reported that average annual restaurant sales had increased from approximately $1 million in 2010 to $1.3 million. Michel hoped to reach $1.5 million. Much of the growth reportedly came from increased customer traffic rather than higher prices. The figures suggested progress, although stronger sales did not necessarily establish that the restaurants were sufficiently profitable.

A restaurant generating $1.3 million in annual sales still has to cover food, labor, occupancy, utilities, maintenance, and other expenses. A supermarket can offer an aggressively priced rotisserie chicken because customers may purchase an entire

basket of additional products. Boston Market had to make the economics of the meal work within a dedicated restaurant. Its drive-thrus addressed convenience, but they could not eliminate that structural disadvantage.

Boston Market understood how customers wanted to buy dinner. What remained uncertain was whether it could give enough of them a reason to keep buying it there at a price that supported the business.

The Brand Beyond the Restaurant

There was another complication in Boston Market's relationship with supermarkets. The brand had been selling frozen meals through grocery stores for decades. Its HomeStyle products, originally marketed by Heinz, became a substantial retail business, with Heinz reporting approximately $150 million in combined retail sales in fiscal 2001. The frozen-food business subsequently operated through separate licensing and manufacturing arrangements, allowing the Boston Market name to reach customers without requiring them to visit a restaurant.

In March 2024, as the restaurant chain was rapidly disappearing, Bellisio Foods announced an expansion of its Boston Market At Home frozen-food portfolio. The company introduced new entrées, side dishes, and snacks, including chicken cordon bleu, mashed potatoes, and chicken pot pie bites. Bellisio described the independently operated frozen-food business as experiencing double-digit sales growth in recent years.

The contrast was striking. The Boston Market name was supporting new supermarket products while the restaurants that made it famous were struggling to survive.

The frozen-food business operated under different economics. Manufacturing, distribution, labor, real estate, and pricing bore little resemblance to running restaurants. Its success did not establish that Boston Market restaurants could have been profitable under different ownership. But it demonstrated that the brand retained commercial value beyond its original operating model. Supermarkets were not merely competitors selling similar food. They were also a place where Boston Market's identity could continue reaching customers.

The Limits of Reinvention

Boston Market spent years attempting to restore its restaurant business. Under Sun Capital's ownership, the company introduced marketing campaigns, expanded its menu, and experimented with new dining occasions. Chicken sandwiches, additional entrées, and late-night offerings were among its efforts to attract customers beyond the traditional family dinner business. These were reasonable strategies to explore, but adding products is not the same as creating demand. A restaurant known for rotisserie chicken does not automatically become a sandwich destination simply because sandwiches appear on its menu.

Menu expansion also introduces costs. Additional ingredients require inventory, storage, preparation procedures, training, and equipment capacity. Those investments make sense when they generate sufficient sales, but they can complicate operations without providing a compelling reason to visit. The Business Insider review offered a small illustration of that tension. Paskalides encountered an extensive menu that included chicken, meatloaf, ribs, sandwiches, and other offerings. Rather than making the restaurant seem more versatile, the selection struck her as overwhelming.

One visit cannot explain the decline of an entire chain, but it raises a reasonable question about Boston Market's attempts at reinvention. In trying to offer customers more reasons to visit, had the company made its original reason less compelling?

There was no obvious solution. Emphasizing rotisserie chicken meant competing with supermarkets that could sell it for less. Expanding into other categories meant competing against restaurants already established in those markets. Boston Market might have found a sustainable future as a smaller, more focused business, but such a turnaround was far from guaranteed. Its competitive disadvantages were real. What happened after its final ownership change, however, went beyond the challenges of repositioning an aging restaurant concept.

When the Bills Come Due

In April 2020, Sun Capital sold Boston Market to Engage Brands, associated with businessman Jay Pandya's Rohan Group of Companies. The chain was already struggling, and any new owner faced a difficult turnaround. The acquisition was presented as an opportunity to improve operations and resume growth.

The years that followed told a different story. In September 2023, Restaurant Business published an investigation into Pandya's restaurant holdings and financial practices. The reporting described demands for steep discounts on outstanding bills, in some cases as high as 70%, and financial administration concentrated in a small operation using QuickBooks. It also documented earlier disputes with lenders, investors, and franchisors. Pandya disputed various allegations concerning his

business dealings.

The problems at Boston Market became increasingly visible. By March 2024, Restaurant Business reported that the company had faced more than 150 lawsuits since the acquisition, many involving unpaid bills. US Foods, a major distributor, obtained a multimillion-dollar default judgment in litigation involving unpaid obligations. Boston Market appealed, but the appeal was dismissed in September 2024. New Jersey labor authorities had ordered 27 restaurants to stop operating after finding wage violations involving 314 employees. The state subsequently recovered more than $630,000 for those workers. Former employees also described missing paychecks, interrupted benefits, and purchasing ingredients from retailers after normal distribution relationships deteriorated.

These were not simply the consequences of customers choosing supermarket chicken. They involved the basic financial and legal obligations of operating a business.

The financial turmoil extended beyond Boston Market. In December 2023, Pandya filed for personal Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, listing between $10 million and $50 million in assets and a similar range in liabilities. That case was dismissed. Separate litigation involving Corner Bakery, another chain he had acquired, included allegations of improper financial transfers. Those allegations did not establish that Boston Market itself had been deliberately stripped of assets.

The available reporting leaves important questions unanswered. Was Boston Market's collapse the result of an undercapitalized turnaround, aggressive management of outstanding obligations, or other financial decisions? The evidence documents serious failures, but it does not establish a definitive explanation of Pandya's intentions. Boston Market also disputed US Foods' account of their distribution problems, alleging that pricing practices and product shortages contributed to its difficulties.

Even as the problems mounted, Boston Market continued announcing new initiatives. In January 2024, the company introduced an unconventional owner-operator program without traditional franchise fees and outlined plans to introduce internationally inspired menu items every six weeks. These proposals were presented as opportunities for renewed growth, despite extensive litigation, unpaid obligations, and a rapidly shrinking restaurant base.

The contrast was difficult to ignore. Boston Market was discussing new menu items and alternative ownership structures while struggling to maintain the supplier relationships and financial obligations necessary to operate its existing restaurants.

At the beginning of 2023, Boston Market had approximately 300 restaurants. By March 2024, Restaurant Business reported that only about 27 remained, although Pandya disputed that figure. Even allowing for uncertainty, the contraction was

staggering. A chain that had spent decades gradually losing its competitive position had lost the overwhelming majority of its remaining restaurants in little more than a year.

What Was Actually Lost

There is a difference between closing underperforming restaurants and losing the infrastructure necessary to operate those that remain. The former can be part of a deliberate turnaround. A smaller company with profitable locations, manageable obligations, and a clear identity may be better positioned than a larger one struggling to support an unsustainable footprint. But a business that cannot reliably pay employees, maintain vendor relationships, or meet its financial obligations faces a problem that no new menu item or advertising campaign can resolve.

That is the larger question Boston Market leaves behind for the restaurant industry. When a legacy chain begins losing customers, executives must determine whether the concept itself has become economically unworkable or whether a smaller, better-run version might still have a future. Those possibilities require different responses. One may call for an orderly exit. The other may require closing weaker locations, simplifying operations, and rebuilding around restaurants that can support themselves. Announcing growth is not evidence of a turnaround, particularly when the company has not demonstrated that its existing operations are financially sustainable.

Boston Market did not need another 1,200 restaurants to remain relevant. It needed enough customers willing to choose the restaurants it could sustainably operate. Whether that was achievable became increasingly difficult to evaluate as financial and operational problems overwhelmed the business.

Meanwhile, Boston Market-branded frozen meals continued reaching customers through grocery stores, demonstrating that the name retained commercial value even as the restaurant chain nearly vanished. That did not mean the restaurants themselves deserved to survive. Some concepts genuinely lose their place in the market, and closing them may be the most responsible decision. But competitive weakness and corporate failure deserve separate scrutiny.

Boston Market didn’t need to convince Americans to eat rotisserie chicken. They were already doing that. And its frozen dinners demonstrated that the brand could still reach customers without a restaurant at all. What Boston Market needed was a compelling reason for customers to visit its restaurants, and a company capable of staying in business when they did.