

FORTUNE

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The 8 wackiest franchise stores you could own

At the industry's annual expo, the array of companies that offer franchising runs the gamut — from alligator jerky to pizza in a cone.

If you had, oh, \$100,000 or so in your pocket, where would you invest it?

You might want to skip the buzzy stock pick and look at a food or retail franchise.

You'll pay a one-time franchising fee (anywhere from \$10,000 to \$40,000, depending on the sector), foot the bill to set up your location, and pay royalties to the parent company (typically 4-7 percent of your sales). And now you're the proud owner of a [insert your dream here] store! The parent company gains expanded brand recognition; the entrepreneur gains training and a sense of ownership, if not always independence.

Franchising has become an increasingly popular mode of business expansion. For each of the past two decades, the number of franchises has risen, according to the International Franchise Association, by 50 percent. In 2014, franchises are expected to add 221,000 new jobs to the market. To accommodate this growing industry, Manhattan's Javits Convention Center plays host to the annual International Franchise Expo, and this year over 500 franchises showed up, seeking to whet the appetites of bold entrepreneurs—the kind of entrepreneurs who might love to get a piece of a ... pizza-in-a-cone business?

Read on for 8 of the wackiest franchising options around.

The Melting Pot

Fondue can be traced back as far as Homer's *Iliad* in 800 BC, and this is what The Melting Pot specializes in. With 135 locations in the US, Canada, and Mexico, The Melting Pot is rewriting restaurant guidelines. The chain serves anything from a quick meal to a four-course dinner – a cheese fondue, salad, entrée cooked tableside, and chocolate fondue to finish. In addition to the cheese and chocolate fondues, it offers bread, fruit, and cake for dipping. One of its most popular dishes is the Flaming Turtle chocolate fondue, which combines milk chocolate, caramel and pecans. It sure looks like a fun way to eat. But to invoke "Seinfeld" again: no double-dipping.