

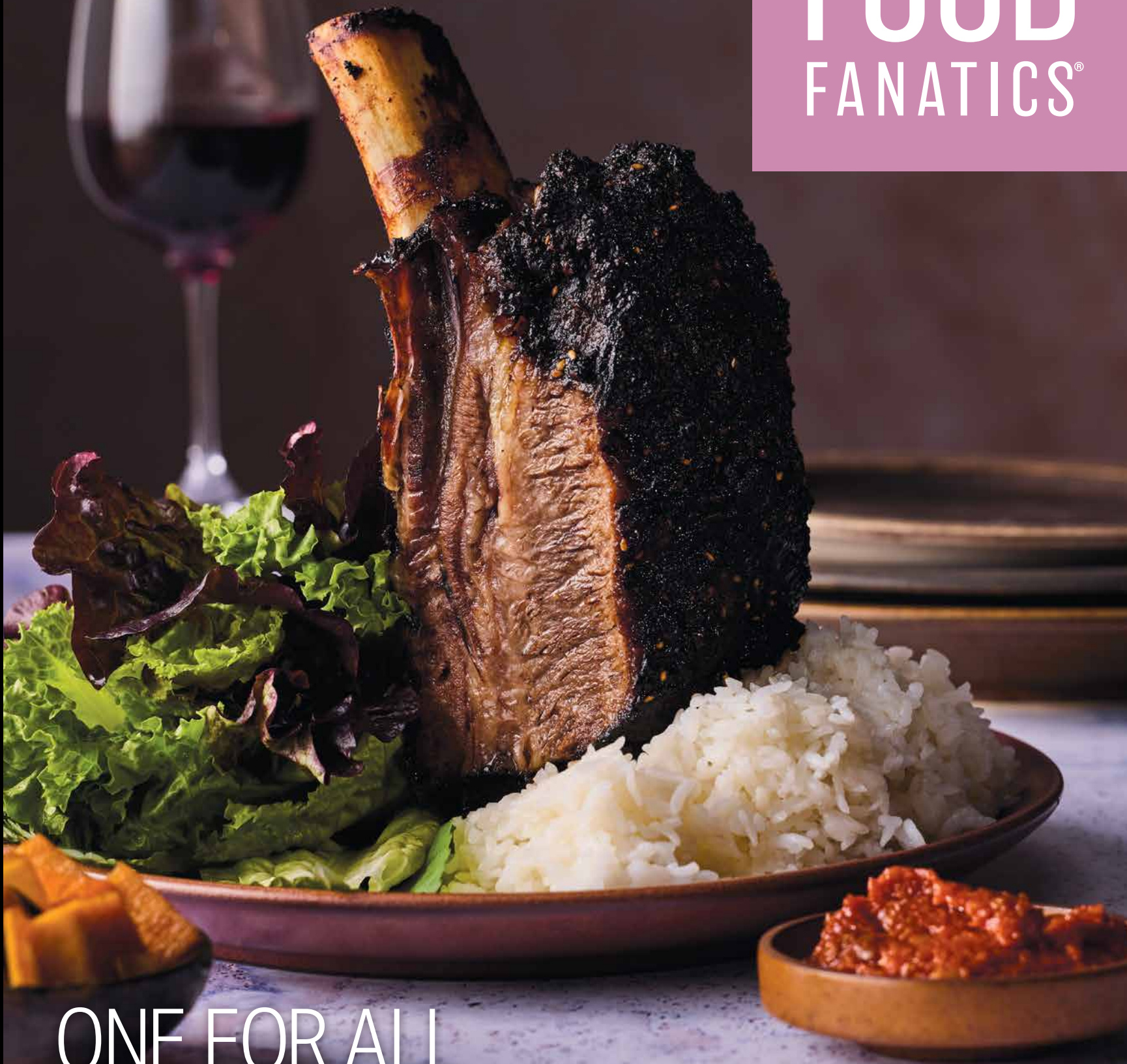
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## FOOD FANATICS®

SPRING 2025

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A large format dish, like short ribs—braised or barbecued—with supporting side dishes can be profitable for casual and fine dining operations. See page 12.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK LAWLOR

All parts of produce, including these oyster mushrooms, find their way into dishes and drinks at Daisies, a profitable sustainable restaurant. See story on page 32.

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[Holly.Johnson@usfoods.com](mailto:Holly.Johnson@usfoods.com)

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## PLATING UP PROFITABILITY

Welcome to the Profitability edition of Food Fanatics® Magazine!

Running a restaurant isn't just about great food—it's about making the right moves to drive revenue, while keeping quality and service top-notch. With rising costs, changing diner expectations and ongoing labor challenges, staying profitable has never been more important. This issue is packed with strategies to help you boost the bottom line while keeping your restaurant's unique identity intact.

**Innovation that makes an impact.** Success comes from staying ahead – and smart innovation pays off. In "How to Build a Stronger Restaurant," we explore eight key principles that help businesses thrive, from community engagement to data-driven menu decisions. "Do or Die" dives into how AI-driven tools—from predictive ordering to automated marketing—are changing the game. And "Marketing Your Restaurant on a Budget" proves that attracting and retaining customers doesn't have to come with a hefty price tag.

**Portion size plays into profitability.** The right portioning strategy can maximize margins while enhancing the dining experience. "Large and in Charge" highlights how big-format dishes like whole fish, bone-in steaks and paellas create value perception and drive check averages. On the flip side, "Mighty Bites" showcases how small plates encourage guest engagement, increase add-on orders and boost revenue. Big or small, it's all about understanding portion economics.

**Investing in people pays off.** With workforce challenges ongoing, strong hiring and retention strategies are a must. "A Better Line" looks at how engaged, loyal teams create long-term success. "The Cost of Turnover" breaks down how training, mentorship and benefits help minimize costly rehiring. And for operators looking to boost efficiency without losing their unique appeal, "Off the Chain" shares lessons from big brands that independents can apply.

**Sustainability and profitability go hand in hand.** Being eco-conscious isn't just good for the planet—it's smart business. "Lean and Green" explores how sourcing, waste reduction and operational efficiencies support both sustainability and the bottom line. "Slow Burn" dives into loyalty programs, showing how they drive repeat business and increase spending per visit.

**Profitability isn't about cutting corners—it's about making smarter choices.** This issue is filled with ideas to help you run a thriving, financially strong restaurant, while delivering the food and hospitality your guests love!

Thanks for reading,

Randy Taylor  
Executive Vice President,  
Field Operations and Local Sales  
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# Mighty

# Bites

When small wins big

By Amber Gibson  
Photography by Matt Armendariz  
Food styling by Adam Pearson  
Prop styling by Amy Paliwoda

Single-bite items like these smoked tomato tartlets filled with ricotta and cheese miso are among the highest-selling items at BATA in Tucson, Arizona.

## Serving small bites can increase profitability—a tactic based on simple science.

The first taste of a perfectly executed dish is mind-blowing, the second is great, the third is good, but taste buds become accustomed to the flavors and excitement wanes.

This science can help operators determine portion size and use it to their advantage by creating small plates with exciting, new flavors.

So when the portion is just enough, the thrill stays high and leaves diners wanting

more. That desire, chefs say, can entice guests to order more dishes, which can increase the check average.

### Small Bites Add Up

Executive Chef David Costa has two Portuguese restaurants in San Jose, California, serving a tasting menu at Adega, and snacky small bites at Petiscos. "Most guests visit

↓ Starters like these brioche waffles served with lox, horseradish creme fraiche, fried capers and dill at The Love Shack encourage sharing and more ordering



### GIVE IT TO ME QUICK

- Starters consisting of a few bites can leave diners wanting more and the likelihood of ordering additional dishes.
- Shareable starters introduce new flavors and excitement to the menu which could attract more diners.
- Make sure small bites and shareable appetizers are bold and flavorful.
- Make dishes as photogenic and as impressive-looking as possible to entice diners.

Petiscos to enjoy a light meal with wine or cocktails," Costa says. Tables order an average of four dishes per person, and the menu is divided into playful sections like "Tentacles & Scales" for seafood and "Feathers & Bones" for poultry and red meat. There's a "Let's Get Started" section of finger food as well, including pastéis de bacalhau, a popular codfish cake that's a staple in Portugal.

"We find that by offering smaller dishes, guests end up ordering more dishes and thus it leads to bigger sales," Costa says. When guests enjoy their first bites, trust is established, and they'll more readily order multiple items throughout their meal, along with more drinks, he says. "We price our menu based on the moving average food cost for a total of four dishes, rather than each entree."

### An Introduction to New Flavors

In New York, Chef Chetan Shetty separates his recently opened Indian restaurant Passerine into two sections—a drawing room and a dining room, offering a more casual experience with small bites and drinks in the former.

### Pasteis de Bacalhau

Executive Chef David Costa  
Petiscos, San Jose, California

1 pound salted cod  
1 pound potatoes  
1 onion, finely chopped  
3 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
1 tablespoon parsley chopped  
2 eggs, lightly beaten  
Pepper as needed  
Cooking oil as needed  
Herbs, such as parsley and chives,  
as needed

Soak cod in cold water for 24 hours, changing the water four times.

Remove skin and bones and boil cod in water 12 minutes; cool completely and shred.

Peel potatoes, cube and cook in water from the last rinse.

Place cod, potatoes, onion, garlic and parsley in a bowl. Season with pepper and mix in egg.

Shape into large quenelles using 2 large spoons. Deep fry in 350 F oil until golden brown. Serve as is or pair with aioli and garnish with herbs.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARTER HIYAMA



### Hummus with Tropical Pineapple-Avocado Relish

Chef Sezer Deniz  
Area 31, Miami

450 grams garbanzo beans  
½ cup water  
100 grams tahini  
1 large clove garlic, shaved with microplane  
1½ teaspoons ground cumin  
½ teaspoon ground coriander  
Juice of 1 lemon  
½ teaspoon ascorbic acid  
1 teaspoon paprika  
1 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
Kosher salt to taste  
Tropical Pineapple-Avocado Relish, recipe follows  
Crackers and crudite, as needed

**Blend together** all hummus ingredients, plate on a shallow bowl, mound relish on top and accompany with crackers and crudite.

**To make Tropical Pineapple-Avocado Relish:** Combine ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil with ½ cup each grilled red bell pepper, avocado, grilled pineapple and grilled red onion all diced small; ½ cup chopped cilantro; ¼ cup lime juice and ¼ cup sherry vinegar. Adjust seasonings with kosher salt.

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### FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Whether it's dips, skewers, sliders or dessert, flights can relieve diners from making decisions while adding surprises to the meal.

At Michelin-starred **Kali** in Los Angeles, Chef/co-owner Kevin Meehan offers a flight of seasonal seafood bites in small bowls and shells over a bed of stones. Called "**The Crowded Beach**," it's like "a little box of chocolates—visually and flavorfully diverse—meant to be impressive when it lands on the table," Meehan says.

A colorful flight of dips amplifies standard bread service, and is easy to premake in large batches, says Executive Chef Sezer Deniz, who hails from Turkey, where mezze platters are common. His **royal mezze selection of dips** is one of the best-selling appetizers at Kimpton EPIC's **Area 31**, including smoked tzatziki, hummus, muhammara and melitzanosalata.

While not new, flights give diners the chance to sample more flavors and expand the dining experience—even at breakfast and brunch. **Snooze A.M. Eatery's** signature **pancake flight** allows guests to choose any three pancakes from the menu.

"In India, it's common to enjoy snacks with drinks, and I wanted to bring that cultural touch here," Shetty says. "Small bites also serve as an approachable way to introduce diners to our cuisine at a lower price point, encouraging them to return for a full dining experience in our main dining room." His snack menu is designed to pair with cocktails and boosts profitability with customizable add-ons like caviar to his scallion uttapam pancake with aged Comte.

"Our small bites are intentionally designed to be enjoyed in two to three bites, allowing guests to sample the entire menu without feeling too full," he says. "Each dish is visually stunning and served cold, so it maintains its quality even if enjoyed at a slower pace." Shetty recommends offering snacks that don't require cutlery, and vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free options to be as inclusive as possible.

### Begin with a Bang

Single-bite items are Chef/owner Tyler Fenton's highest-selling items by quantity at BATA in Tucson, Arizona. There are always several options available, including tartlets, skewers and grilled meat priced at \$5 to \$6 each. They've even done an ice cream sandwich dessert bite, although Fenton says he found the format worked better at the start of the meal. "Guests love starting with something small and personal," he says. "We design them to pack a punch, so it's a fun and impactful way to begin."

Generally, Fenton says that single bites have higher labor cost, but because they offer a lower food cost, they result in essentially the same margins as the rest of the menu. "I wanted to allow our guests to try as many dishes as possible, and the single bites give guests the added benefit of not requiring anyone else to join them." It's also easy, and socially acceptable, to order seconds. ■

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# LARGE AND IN CHARGE

Rules for profitable big-format entrees

By Amber Gibson  
Photography by Matt Armendariz  
Food styling by Adam Pearson  
Prop styling by Amy Paliwoda



Scan the code for Whole Plate Short Rib with Ssamjang, Lettuce and Banchan from Cafe Round K by Sol in New York.

# WHEN DOES IT PAY TO GO LARGE?

At Majordomo in Los Angeles, the pork shoulder, the pork shoulder, sesame leaf and condiments that make up Smoked Half Bo Ssäm is typically shared among four to five people.



A single entree for the table to share creates a convivial dining experience reminiscent of holiday meals and gatherings. Whether it's a hefty bone-in steak, whole fish, whole chicken or a pan of paella, guests get to sample their way through starters leading up to one interactive apex dish. Chefs who have mastered the art of large-format dishes share how they choose enticing items for guests and the kitchen without cannibalizing other entree options.

## Create Value Perception

Lamb shank tagine, available in a single or double size, is among the most popular large plates at Meso Modern Mediterranean in San Jose, California. "When you see a giant platter coming

to the table, the perception of value is higher," says Executive Chef Cory Armenta. "It's fun and engaging, and guests definitely feel like they're getting their money's worth." Meso also serves whole chicken and whole grilled branzino; servers are trained to recommend small plates and side dishes to round out the meal depending on which large-format protein is ordered. Upselling sides and appetizers also keeps the check averages up and adds incremental profit.

Even a single lamb shank is large enough for two to share, and Armenta notes that double shanks are large enough for up to six guests. It's most popular on weekends with larger parties, compared to business

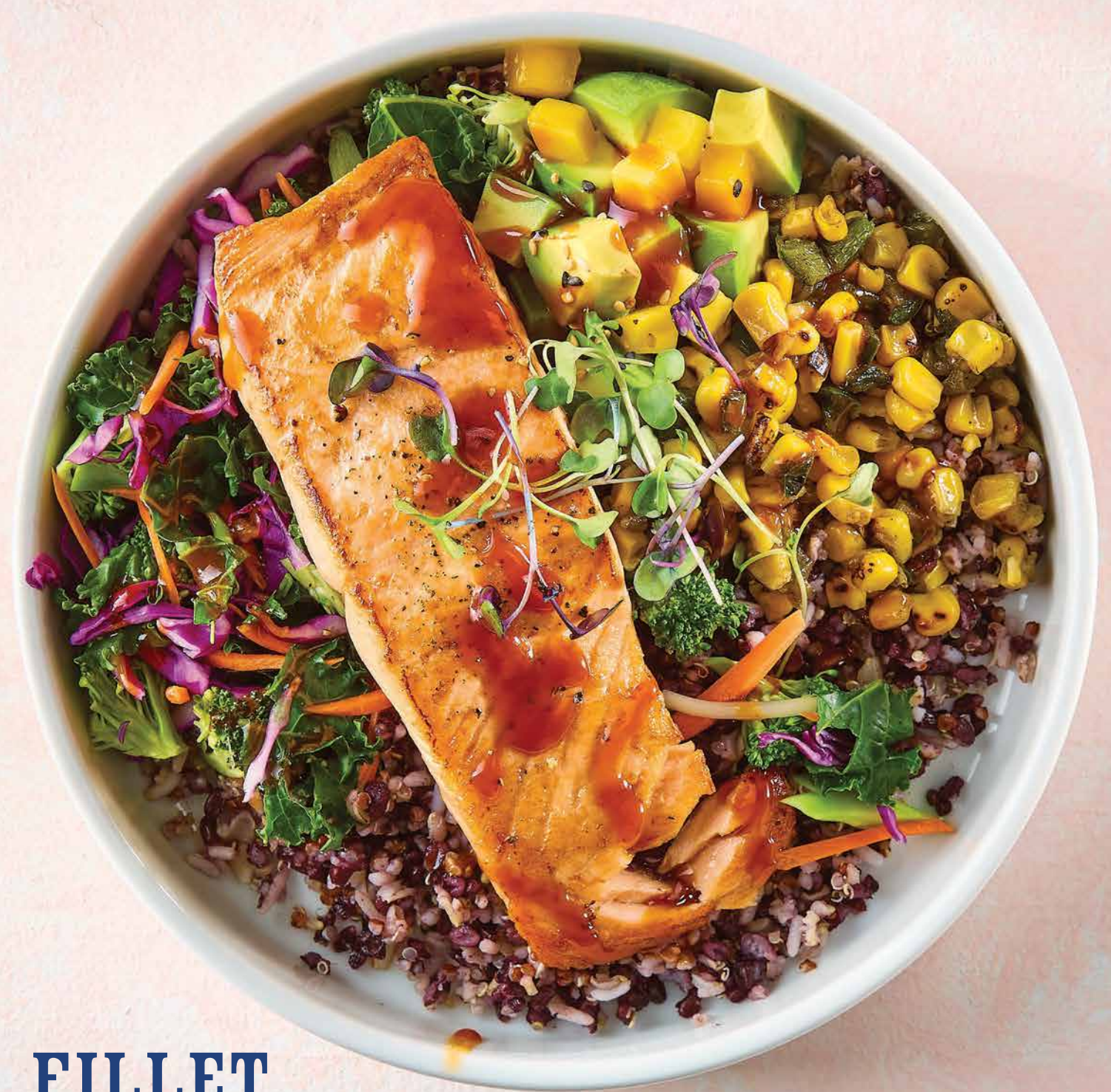
lunches, when diners might not feel as comfortable sharing.

"In some concepts, profitability depends on how quickly you can turn the table," Armenta says. "But with our style of menu, if we can keep you and your party having a good time and more drinks coming, you can have the table for four hours."

## Do One Thing Spectacularly

If the menu mix includes just one large-format entree, give it marquee billing with its own box and make sure it's the best representation of the restaurant. At Broma, a Portuguese and Spanish restaurant in Silicon Valley, Catalan Fideua is the restaurant's signature

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## Catalan Fideua

Chef Jared Gallagher  
Broma, Mountain View, California

- 4 tablespoons olive oil, divided use
- 1 garlic clove, smashed
- 10 mussels
- 8 clams
- 8 large shrimp, peeled, tail on
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- 1 link linguica, sliced
- Kosher salt and pepper to taste
- Squeeze of lemon and wedges to garnish
- ½ cup onions, diced large
- ½ cup red peppers, diced large
- 1 tablespoon shallot, minced
- 1 teaspoon garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons butter, cubed
- 16 ounces angel hair pasta, toasted and broken into 1-inch pieces
- 20 ounces broth, recipe follows
- 4 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs, roasted
- Aioli, your recipe
- 1 green onion, chopped

**Heat** 2 tablespoons olive oil with garlic and saute seafood, splash with wine, cover and steam until shells open. Toss in linguica, season with salt and pepper and a squeeze of lemon; keep warm, discard garlic clove.

**Heat** remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil in a paella pan or large overproof pan and saute onions, peppers, shallot and garlic. Add butter and salt to taste.

**Add** pasta and completely cover with broth, adding more if necessary. Boil for 1 minute, transfer to 450 F heated oven and bake 8 to 10 minutes until liquid has evaporated and pasta is slightly crunchy on top.

**Garnish** with seafood and chicken, and serve with lemon wedges and aioli mixed with green onion.

**To make broth:** Simmer for 10 minutes 10 ounces tomato juice, 10 ounces chicken broth, ¼ cup white wine, 1 teaspoon each paprika, kosher salt and pepper, and a pinch of saffron.

↪  
Catalan Fideua wows guests with its size and presentation, which turned it into a signature dish.



↳ **The grilled daily catch—rubbed in adobo and wrapped in banana leaf (tikin xic)—can be shared at Xiquita Restaurante y Bar.**

**“I love being able to pass around a plate and share in the experience of those first few bites. It adds a lot to the whole experience of dining out.”**

—Chef/owner Ras Casiano of Xiquita Restaurante y Bar in Denver

dish. Similar to traditional Spanish paella, it's presented on the table in a paella pan with sliced lemons on the side so that guests can serve themselves.

“It's one of our best-selling entrees,” says Chef Jarad Gallagher. “People are into it because it has a great story and is bountiful. Fideua is pasta, vegetables, shellfish and sausage, so there is value in the dish. It has all kinds of flavors, ingredients and textures.” A vegetarian version is available upon request, and on “Fideua Fridays,” guests can enjoy a bottle of cava, salad, fideua and flan as a set meal experience.

At Richard Blais' newest restaurant, La Zozzona in Scottsdale, Arizona, Bistecca Fiorentina steals the show as the only large-format dish. More than a kilo of prime beef porterhouse, brushed with rosemary and sage, is carved tableside by the chef for additional flair.

### Invest in the Experience

Some operators build their menu to include several large-format options with the goal of

selling them to every table. “We just need to get back to sharing around the dinner table,” says Chef/owner Ras Casiano of Xiquita Restaurante y Bar in Denver, who offers several large-format “grandes” dishes on the menu at his Mexican restaurant, including slow-roasted pork belly porchetta, carne asada and Tikin Xic, adobo-rubbed fish in banana leaf. “I love being able to pass around a plate and share in the experience of those first few bites. It adds a lot to the whole experience of dining out.”

Even though the large-format dishes can drop the per-person check average if servers aren't able to upsell, Casiano considers it a win when guests share in a memorable experience that they'll tell others about. He also knows that diners are increasingly looking for more experiential dining when deciding where and how to spend their money.

“We're thinking center of the table,” he says. “We want to make sure that it's one of those ‘wow’ moments as soon as it hits the table.” Housemade nixtamal tortillas are served on

the side so guests can make their own tacos, or as a vessel to pick up sauce and meat. At Majordomo in Los Angeles, large-format dishes that feed up to six guests, like whole plate short rib, smoked prime rib, smoked half bo ssam and whole boiled chicken, rule the day. “We are not concerned with cannibalizing entrees,” says Momofuku Corporate Chef Jude Parra-Sickels. “We want to sell as much large-format as possible and would only serve large-format if we could.”

The restaurant even introduced a vegetarian pastilla dish stuffed with mushroom farce, roasted eggplant and celery root puree to their events menu for a large-format vegetarian option.

“For the kitchen, it allows for a more manageable and streamlined service because we are feeding multiple people with just one dish,” Parra-Sickels says. “It makes the dining experience more festive, celebratory, communal and adds a great energy to the dining room.” ■

### Scallion Uttapam

Executive Chef Chetan Shetty  
Passerine, New York

50 grams neutral oil  
10 grams mustard seeds  
250 grams scallions, chopped  
25 grams ginger, chopped  
7 grams Thai green chili, finely sliced  
9 grams curry leaf, finely chopped  
6.5 grams kosher salt  
250 grams heavy cream  
800 grams potatoes, peeled, mashed and sieved  
100 grams Amul cheese, grated  
100 grams 18-months aged Comte, grated  
Uttapam batter, recipe follows  
Chives, chopped, as needed  
Kaluga caviar, as needed

**Heat** pan with oil and toast mustard seeds; crush and add scallion and ginger. Saute and add green chili, curry leaf and salt. Cook 3 minutes, add cream and lower heat.

**Add** the potatoes and mix well, followed by the cheeses; keep warm.

**Make** pancakes with uttapam batter until golden. Spread potato mix on half of the uttapam and fold it to a half moon.

**Garnish** with chives and Kaluga caviar.

**To make uttapam batter:** Combine 5 grams fenugreek seeds with 1,000 grams sona masuri or other small grain rice and soak for 5 hours; soak 250 grams white lentils separately for 3 hours. Drain and grind separately to smooth consistency of a pancake batter. Combine and ferment at room temperature for 6 to 8 hours.



↳ **When menu items aren't categorized, scallion uttapam can become large format by adjusting the amount and price.**

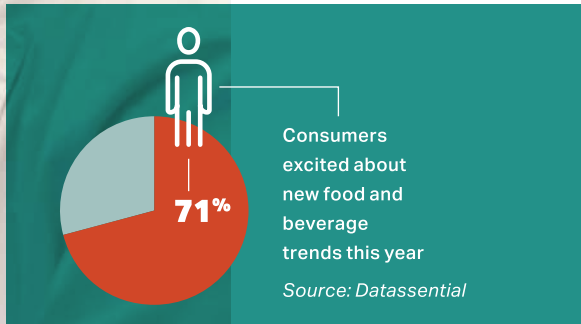
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# BUILD **A STRONGER** RESTAURANT

**8**  
**POINTS**  
to consider for success

By Bret Thorn



# THE RIGHT STUFF

**The restaurant industry** has never been easy, but challenges like ever-rising food costs, an unpredictable work force, demanding customers and an overall decline in restaurant traffic mean operators need to be smarter when it comes to opening or growing a business.

Experts say restaurants need a more strategic approach that spans far more than food. Operators enjoying success even in tough times offer some insight.

**1 Embed yourself in your community.**

Juan and Gee Smalls opened three locations of Virgil's Gullah Kitchen and Bar in the Atlanta area between 2019 and 2022, the last two while pandemic-era restrictions were still in place. However, they worked with their community and received support from their neighbors.

"Our local community really, really rallied behind us, purchasing hundreds of meals at a time for us to give away (to people in need). That's how we were able to open the second one (in summer of 2021) so quickly," Juan Smalls says.

Get involved with local sports, such as little league and high school teams. Consider offering discounts or free low-cost items such as fountain drinks. Buying Girl Scout cookies and donating to raffles, for example, will be noticed—and rewarded—by the community.

**2 Don't be afraid to invest in your business.**

"If you don't make an investment in the business, you won't see a return," Juan Smalls says. Hire people who are smarter than you and pay them what they're worth. For example, investing in an operations veteran might mean you take a hit in profits at the outset, but that person will understand how to streamline the business and make it more profitable.

**3 Be consistent.**

"Be consistent with the service, food, atmosphere, and music, so people know what you're good at. Then they'll come back to you for that," Juan Smalls says.

To do that, document everything. Write down recipes, of course, but also create a manual that provides a checklist of what to do when opening the restaurant, how to close, policies for handling different types of customers, and other day-to-day details that your staff needs to know. Eventually, you're going to want to take some time off, and having procedures in place will go a long way in letting you do that."

**4 Pay attention to numbers from the beginning.**

Food and labor costs can run away from you quickly, says Teneshia Murray, who opened her first T's Brunch Bar in Atlanta in 2022 and has since expanded to four locations.

"I wasted \$1 million letting someone else handle my labor and food. It was a hard lesson," she says. "Now, I do payroll myself and I watch everyone's orders." Juan Smalls agrees.

"Constantly be on top of numbers—the number of guests, the amount of labor—and cut where you need to," he says.

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**5 Don't expand too fast.**

Although Murray opened four restaurants in two years, she wouldn't recommend it.

"I wasted and lost a lot of money by getting too big too fast," she says. "If I could do it again, I'd open one restaurant and then wait two, three years. You need to give your restaurant time to simmer. You need to get your food cost and labor in order. You need the right people in the right jobs, and make sure the food tastes the same all the time."

**6 Hire the right people for each job.**

"Hiring the wrong people is so expensive," Juan Smalls says. According to an estimate from the Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University, turnover for a key employee can cost an employer an average of \$5,864. To help prevent turnover, come up with a list of criteria for each position, including personality. Consider how a new hire will fit into the culture and add to the energy of the restaurant.

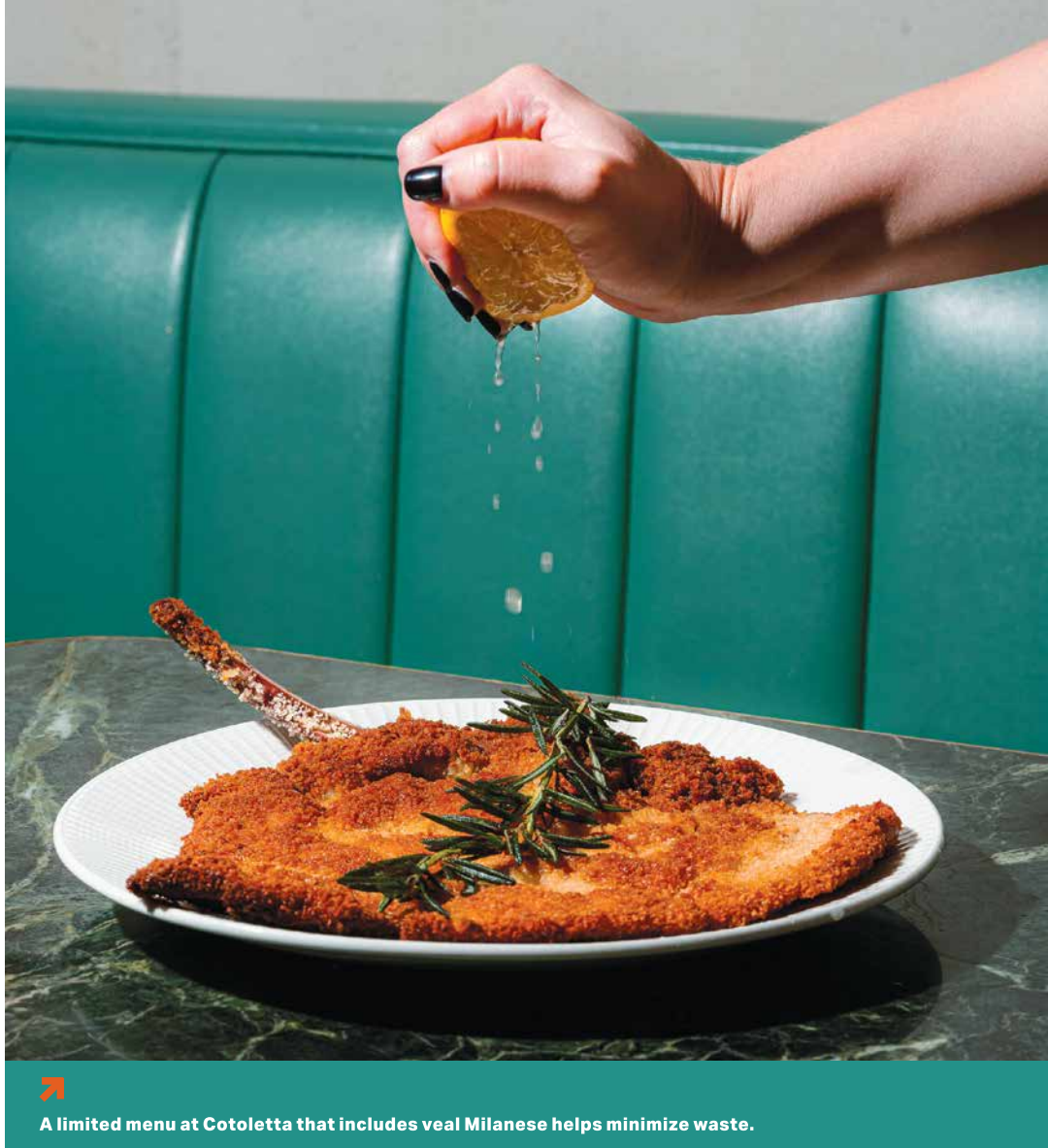
"That has become a huge focus," he says, adding that if someone isn't a good fit, they should be moved out of that position as quickly as possible.

**7 Scout out your competitors.**

It's common practice for large restaurant groups to assess the businesses around them before they open, and smaller operators should do that, too. Understand which types of food or styles of service are missing from the neighborhood and figure out what other restaurants charge for staples, such as burgers and margaritas. Assess gaps in the area that could be filled.

**8 Be thoughtful about menu development.**

Hospitality companies often want to be all things to all people because operators generally want to make everyone happy. But that's becoming increasingly impractical. Many new



**A limited menu at Cotoletta that includes veal Milanese helps minimize waste.**

fine-dining restaurants focus primarily or even exclusively on tasting menus. That's because it makes for easier inventory control: People have few or no choices—but diners know that going in—which can better control reservations. That has been the approach of Sushi by Scratch, an omakase restaurant that owners Phillip Frankland Lee and Margarita Kallas-Lee have expanded to a dozen restaurants.

With a fixed menu, operators can streamline purchasing, reduce waste, and maximize efficiency in the kitchen, critical factors in an era of rising food costs. It also allows for better portion control, a more predictable labor schedule and a consistent guest experience.

Other restaurants have limited menus, like Cotoletta, which restaurateur Andrea Fraquelli opened in the Miami neighborhood of Coconut Grove. It offers one entree—veal Milanese—

accompanied by two antipasti to start and two sides, priced at \$80 for two people.

Fraquelli's model minimizes ingredient waste and kitchen complexity while maintaining a high check average, and Lee says it has been a resounding success.

Of course, most restaurants fall somewhere in the middle, but should think about each ingredient purchase. Can trim from steak be made into a steak tartare or a burger? Can fish scrap be reworked into a ceviche or the bones used to make a chowder? Maybe leftover brisket can turn into chili or used lemon rinds reworked into a cocktail or limoncello.

Implementing small efficiencies can mean the difference between struggling with slim margins and running a profitable, resilient restaurant. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF COTOLETTA



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## ON THE RADAR



### Milk Brew is the New Cold Brew.

Already popular in Japan, steeping coffee beans directly in milk rather than water creates a full-bodied drink entirely different from an iced latte.

**Last seen:** 1022 Cafe & Gelateria in Oceanside, California, serves a banana bread milk brew with organic banana milk.



### Tech-Created Restaurant Concepts.

EMERGING, a growth capital fund, says its services use AI to determine every facet of a restaurant—including location, menu, labor and operations—and then spits out a concept designed to achieve significantly higher margins.

## HIGH ALERT



### On a Roll.

Simple to execute, hand-roll sushi spots show no signs of slowing down.

**Last seen:** Chef Paul Qui's Top Roe in Austin and Akira Back's Norikaya in Los Angeles recently opened, joining the ranks with Houston's Kira and New York's Wabi Nori.



### Girl Dinner to Game Day

No matter the occasion, to-go pantry or larder boxes curated with ingredients already in the walk-in or on the menu are potential revenue streams.

**Last seen:** Chicago's Michelin-starred Atelier recently started boxing up goodies like blue cheese and bacon canelés, lavender chamomile scones, whitefish tarts and venison pate for pickup.



### Steak for a Steal.

Red meat that avoids being in the red.

**Last seen:** Hawkmoor launched a \$25 rump steak dinner deal in New York and Chicago available for lunch and happy hour, while steak omakase restaurant Bonyeon in Chicago offers an abbreviated five-course "omakase select" menu for \$70, compared to \$255 for the full tasting.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA QUIRK

### When a Little Is Just Enough.

Mini martinis and doll-sized cocktails are all the rage. **Last seen:** Coral Club in Nashville and W Philadelphia.

## FADING OUT



### Ease Up on Eggs.

Videos of cutting into oozing egg yolks are unimaginative and overdone on social media—and menus.

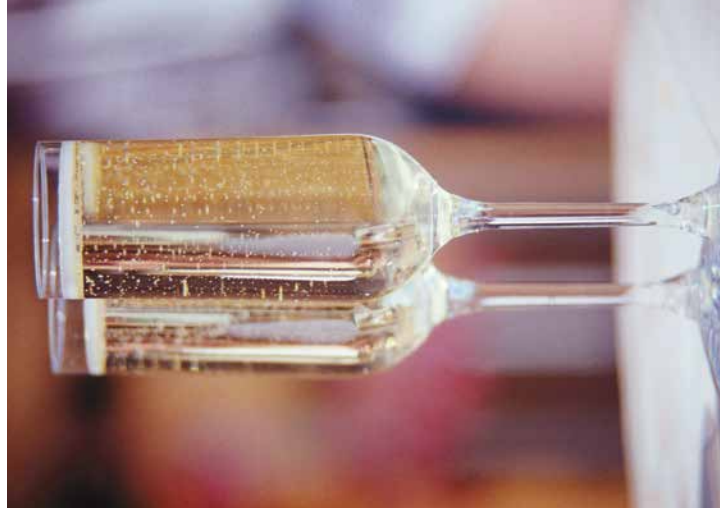
**Try this instead:** With eggs prices higher than ever, go for pops of flavor from soy eggs or salted egg yolks for salads, creamy pastas and even dessert.



### Seedy Oils.

Vegetable seed and palm oils are cheap, but chefs are looking to alternatives.

**Try this instead:** Sister restaurants Juniper & Ivy and fried chicken mini-chain The Crack Shack in San Diego replaced all seed oils with rice bran oil, which has a higher smoke point and results in a less greasy fry.



### Bubbling Up.

Champagne pairings are competing with wine pairings, popping up as an alternative so diners can enjoy a bounty of bubbles throughout the meal.

**Last seen:** Aubergine in Carmel-by-the-Sea, Sezanne in Tokyo and multiple Michelin-starred restaurants.



### Bland Bread.

What's in a sandwich doesn't matter if the bread is boring.

**Try this instead:** Milk bread, seeded loaves or even a concha Mexican sweet roll, which Super Star Farm in New York serves as a bun for a burger.



### Every Day is the Same Day.

More people are searching for restaurants open Mondays, but it's not the only option to consider more deeply.

**Last seen:** Wednesday is enjoying an 11% increase—the largest of any day—as the most popular time to dine, so says OpenTable.

### Winning Hearts and Minds.

Groups of six or more diners are up 8% year over year, according to data from OpenTable. See page 12 for ways to increase profits with large-format dishes.





# OFF THE CHAIN

## Unlock the efficiencies of the big guys

By Bret Thorn

**Independent restaurants possess** unique personalities, local connections and some of the best food in the world, but profitability is a challenge, especially compared to the well-oiled machines of restaurant chains.

A recent report by restaurant strategy firm Aaron Allen & Associates put the average profit margin of an independent restaurant at 7%, compared with McDonald's at nearly 50%. Restaurant Brands International, the parent of Burger King, Popeyes, Tim Hortons and Firehouse Subs, comes in at 35%.

Increasingly, the differentiating factors lie not so much in volume pricing but in technology. With deep pockets, chains can afford to leverage all that tech has to offer. Not so much with mom-and-pops, but that doesn't mean independents can't tap into the big guys' playbook.

### Streamline your menu

Brendan Mullan, corporate chef of 20-unit Iron Hill Brewery & Restaurant recently cut his restaurants' menus in half from 87 to 40 items. He eliminated items that didn't sell well plus those that required too much finesse, leading to

uneven execution or slower kitchen operations. He also paid attention to the sales mix, focusing on menu items that moved quickly and thus featured fresher ingredients.

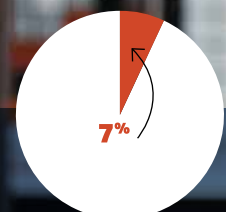
Streamlining also allows kitchen staff to master a limited number of dishes, improving consistency and efficiency.

A more focused menu can also make it easier for guests to order, preventing the quandary of too many choices. For example, chefs say a choice of four pasta dishes is plenty; concentrate on those and the result will likely be better food and faster table turns.

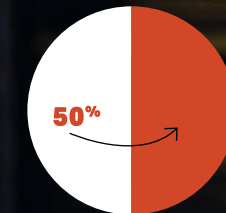
### Test your food

Chains often spend large sums on multi-stage menu testing, including focus groups and limited rollouts. For example, Matt Burton, the corporate chef of Dickey's Barbecue Pit, tests new items in two company-owned restaurants and then expands to 10 additional locations, including high-volume airport units, to measure performance in fast-paced environments.

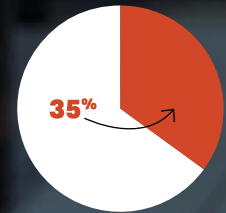
That's not practical for independent operators, but small-scale testing can work. Workshop menu items as family meals, offer



Average profit margin at independent restaurants



Average profit margin at McDonald's



Average profit margin of Restaurant Brands International, the parent of Burger King, Popeyes, Tim Hortons and Firehouse Subs



**Pay attention to online reviews and respond to comments—positive and negative—on social platforms to build rapport with diners.**

as a private tasting event open only to regulars to make it exclusive and then sell as specials, tweaking every step of the way. Pay attention to the real-world food cost, not the theoretical one, and see if they gum up kitchen operations. Also consider other factors: Do they result in a better bottom line or are they cannibalizing more profitable existing items? Do guests order them more than once? Do they finish their meals?

Looking closely at how customers as well as cooks and servers respond to new items will help evolve the menu logically.

Additionally, bring staff into the development process. Offer bonuses to employees whose dishes make it onto the menu. Front of house staff can also offer additional data by providing feedback on customer reactions, helping them feel like a valued and appreciated part of the development process.

#### **Cross-utilize ingredients for maximum efficiency**

Burton uses the trim at Dickey's to make chili, turning potential food waste into a profitable item he added to his core menu. Similarly, Mullan of Iron Hill sources high-quality

burrata for various preparations, and he uses the same vodka sauce for different pasta and eggplant dishes. Cross-utilization also reduces the risk of spoilage and improves profitability.

#### **Leverage supplier and distributor relationships**

Distributors have chefs and specialists available to support research and development with test kitchen visits, as well as operations consultants who can offer insights on issues that may be affecting profitability, and they partner with technology companies to offer discounted services to their customers. This means that mom-and-pops can receive competitive pricing on tools that the chains use but may have previously been out of reach.

#### **Use sales and social data to your advantage**

Chains spend a fortune analyzing their spending as well as their standing in the world through social media and point-of-sale data and menu-costing software—actions that independents can take. Pay attention



### **GIVE IT TO ME QUICK**

- Independent restaurants might not have the same resources as large chains, but smart strategies can help maximize efficiency without sacrificing quality or creativity.
- By streamlining the menu, testing new items effectively, cross-utilizing ingredients, leveraging supplier relationships, using data wisely and collaborating with peers, profitability can improve without sacrificing the heart and soul of your restaurant.

to sales reports, identify the most profitable items and encourage servers to market them. Are there loss-leaders on the menu? Consider raising prices or finding more profitable alternatives.

Pay attention to online reviews. Negative comments might hurt, but if they're consistent, they can help pinpoint problems. Consider software and platforms that use machine learning and artificial intelligence for targeting better labor costs and overall efficiency.

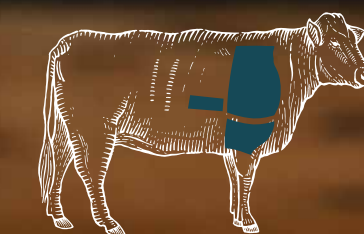
#### **Work with other restaurateurs**

Chains and multi-concept restaurant operators have the purchasing power to negotiate bulk discounts, which independents can do with fellow small businesses.

Neighbors are indeed competitors, but they're also colleagues and are often in the same boat. Consider working together and establishing purchasing cooperatives to increase purchasing power. Some cooperatives already exist across the country, but if one doesn't, consider forming one or contact the local restaurant association to help coordinate such an organization. ■

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# Lean and Green

How to stay true to sustainability while keeping the bottom line in check

By Heather Sennett  
Photography by Frank Lawlor



➔ For Executive Chef Joe Frillman, every part of oyster mushrooms plays a part on the Daisies menu.



➤ **Nicole Yarovinsky, Daisies' fermentation specialist, prepares a mushroom stock from the fungus's stems, above, while various discard makes up SCOBY (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast), upper right, for kombucha and drinks.**



## A restaurant can't engage in sustainable practices if it's not sustainable for its long-term business goals.

Drizzling honey produced by bees from on-site hives, biodegradable takeout containers to cradle local produce, and state-of-the-art, energy-efficient coolers to reduce the operation's carbon footprint are some of the ways restaurants may want to be green, but none of that matters if you can't stay in business.

"These things are not cheaper," says Devon Quinn, chief culinary officer at Eden in Chicago. "It's certainly more expensive to be buying products from the local farmers market or from farms that will deliver to us. You're talking about sometimes twice the cost on items."

But sustainability and local sourcing are at the very heart of Eden, which Quinn believes are valued by his guests.

So, how does a restaurant hold true to its sustainable mission while also keeping the bottom line firmly in check? Here are some tips from chefs running some of the country's most sustainable establishments.



➤ **Herb stems, orange rinds and vegetable peels go into making syrups for drinks at Daisies in Chicago.**



➔ Discard is an integral part of the beverage program at Daisies.

### Educate the staff

While conveying the message of sustainability on the menu and reinforcing it in all marketing efforts are essential, start with staff training. "It's teaching them how to respect the product," says Oscar Diaz, executive chef-owner of Little Bull and Aaktun in Durham, North Carolina, with more concepts on the way. "This thing came in perfect and now we have to respect it."

### Pay attention to every penny in and out

Real-time accounting is key in running a sustainable business, especially when food costs can be so variable, Quinn says. "It's really important that you're up to the day, to the hour, where your finances stand," he says.

That thinking also applies to green packaging. For example, it doesn't make sense to buy commercially compostable to-go containers or straws if that commercial service is not offered in the area. Regular recyclable products would then be a better choice.

### Become proactive, rather than reactive, in the kitchen.

"Let's address the problems that we know are going to come with buying tons of fresh tomatoes," Diaz says. "They're not all going to make it for the star dish, so it's wise to make those plans for sauces, confits, Bloody Mary mix, dried tomatoes and more—before the withering produce forces the issue."

### Sustainability applies to the staff

The sustainability of employees should be considered, says Joe Frillman, executive chef/owner of Daisies in Chicago. "The restaurant industry is notoriously not sustainable for a lot of people," he says. "We can't just be sustainable through our products. It also has to be sustainable for the people who work here." That care and respect, in turn, creates a low turnover rate, another bottom-line booster.

At Daisies, a pop-up box on the website informs diners of a 25% service charge applied to all dine-in checks to ensure all staff members "receive equitable pay and benefits." "We try to get this to be a career," Frillman says. "Before, it's just a job."

**"We are one of the more profitable restaurants I've worked in. We feel like, if you do things the right way, everything else kind of falls in place. We really try to have that philosophy."**

—Joe Frillman, executive chef/owner of Daisies in Chicago

### The price needs to be right

Some operators believe the cost of sustainability should be worked into the costs of goods, but others feel the market doesn't always support that approach when a restaurant isn't practicing the same level of earth-friendly practices. They say the answer lies in adding a service fee, like Daisies and a growing number of other restaurants. Regardless of the approach, be sure to communicate it on the menu and on the website.

### Add (or strengthen) your catering program.

It's easier to plan and control costs with catering, Quinn says. "In catering, you're selling before buying," he says. "In a restaurant, you're buying and trying to sell. So, there's a drastic difference in profit margins." Plus, operating in a sustainable fashion will be a draw to many types of catering customers.

### Shout out the sustainable mission

Recognition for sustainability is a draw for both diners and prospective employees. Eden is a green-certified business while Daisies earned a Michelin Green Star designation. Always remember to play up sustainable practices on social media and your website to capitalize on SEO and attract new, relevant customers. ■



➔ Mushroom discard adds umami to cocktails, like this mushroom sour at Daisies.

# SLOW



# BURN

By Heather Lalley  
Photography by Frank Lawlor

Loyalty programs take time, but the payoff is worthwhile

Summer House in Chicago contributes part of its success to its loyalty program.



**Restaurants that follow loyalty program best practices, such as offering rewards, discounts gamification and hyper-personalization, are 1.6 times more likely to experience double-digit revenue growth, according to a 2024 Forrester Consulting study.**

But not all loyalty programs are structured the same. The approach that might work best depends on your restaurant concept and goals. Consider Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises; its loyalty program covers its 60 concepts and more than 120 restaurants nationwide. Its rewards program based on earning points for dining is considered among the most successful.

Everything must be done with hospitality in mind, says Jennifer Bell, LEYE's chief marketing officer. Customers can take points



**Determining what guests value most should play into the benefits of a loyalty program.**



**Structuring a loyalty program around hospitality has led to its ongoing success for restaurants under Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises.**



**Reward programs entice diners to frequent the concept more often and lead to larger check averages.**

**“So over and over again, what we see is whether you’re a light, medium or heavy user, when you’re in the rewards program, you come more frequently and you spend more.”**

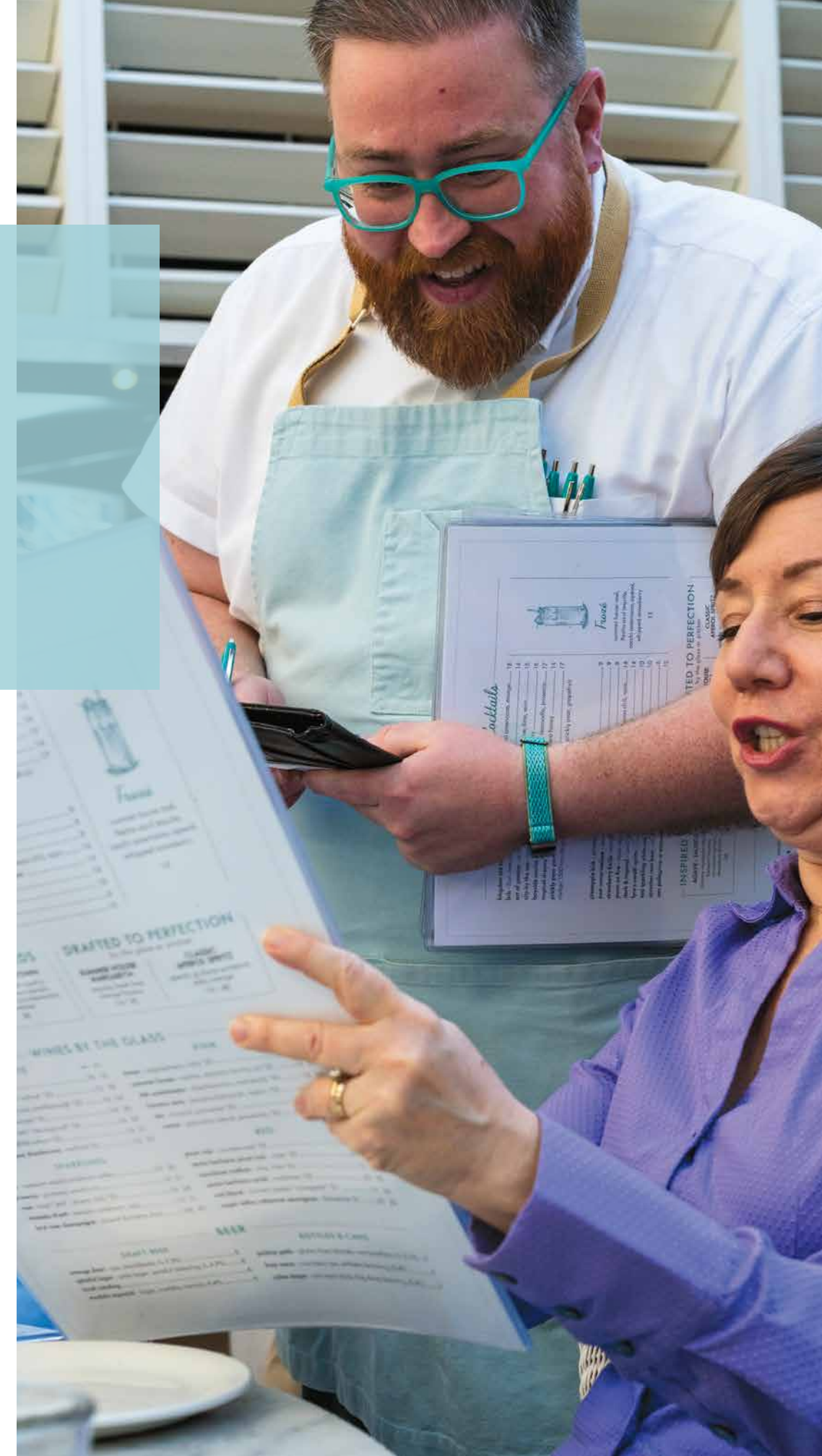
—Brian Niccol, Chipotle’s then-CEO

they earn at one concept and redeem them at others and use the loyalty/rewards app to purchase gift cards and track points. But the game-changer came, Bell says, when LEYE added takeout and delivery to the program.

“It’s that incrementality that really drives our profit,” she says.

Other restaurant operators often ask Bell how to start a loyalty program. “It’s a marathon,” she says. “Running the loyalty program is the single most difficult thing I’ve ever done in my life. It’s complex. These are our best guests ... There’s a lot of variables that could go wrong. It’s very important to stay on top of that ... Loyalty is tough. You’ve got to be in it for the right reasons. You’re not going to see the return immediately.”

Fast-casual chain Chipotle Mexican Grill, one of the industry leaders in loyalty, launched its rewards program at the beginning of 2019. It now has nearly 40 million members, and those members come in more often than nonmembers, and spend more during those





↙
**Adding takeout and delivery to the loyalty app has been a game changer for restaurants under Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises.**

visits, Brian Niccol, Chipotle's then-CEO, said during the chain's fourth-quarter earnings call in February 2024.

"So over and over again, what we see is whether you're a light, medium or heavy user, when you're in the rewards program, you come more frequently and you spend more," Niccol said during the earnings call. "Even when people are redeeming entrees, what we're seeing is they're still buying sides."

Sometimes loyalty is less about discounts and more about making regulars feel special.

San Francisco wine bar El Lopo debuted its Take-Care-of-Me Club in 2021. The Spanish restaurant, which opened in 2019, already had a menu item called "just take care of me," that involved the kitchen crafting a menu based on a diner's budget, dietary restrictions, time constraints and even hunger level, says owner Daniel Azarkman.

A restaurant subscription marketplace called The Third Place approached El Lopo about creating a program that would be a good fit for the restaurant, especially as the world was reopening from pandemic lockdowns.

"How would we create a subscription program that drives dine-in traffic and leverages this already popular experience we offer?" Azarkman says.

El Lopo currently has 31 members in the club, and Azarkman says he probably wouldn't want more than 35. "A major selling point of it is making it a personalized experience, having all of our staff know the names of all of our members, so that when they walk in the door, we can already have something for them," he says.

The program has two tiers, one at \$89 and the other at \$175 per month. The former offers \$100 in food-and-drink credits per month, the latter \$200 in credits. And there are some fun perks: On every visit, members can send a free drink to a stranger, and registration fees are waived for special tastings and events.

"Apart from that discount, the main selling point is seamlessness," Azarkman says. ■



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Wheatberry's earthiness complements the sweet and sour kale, braised short rib, runny egg and ssamjang mayo for a hearty all-day menu option.

# Bread winners



**Fresh, flavorful thick-sliced varieties are having more than a moment**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT ARMENDARIZ. FOOD STYLING BY ADAM PEARSON. PROP STYLING BY AMY PALIWODA

**Consumer preferences** may indeed be fickle, but when it comes to bread, this carb remains a fan favorite. As bread programs have risen in popularity during the last decade, chefs and restaurateurs have kept diners hooked through freshness, flavor and innovation.

Freshness, which consumers say is among the top reasons for ordering bread, can be a constant when vendors ship frozen and restaurants can thaw as needed, keeping waste nearly nonexistent and labor in check. Cross-utilization among dayparts also helps, especially thicker-sliced bread for breakfast sandwiches, grilled cheese or even desserts.

The wide-ranging flavor of grains has given bread a health and flavor boost followed by growing ubiquity of higher-protein loaves and sourdough. Innovation, according to food research firm Datassential, will continue to drive trends this year.

## Meaty sandwiches

Several years ago, when braised short ribs began to proliferate on menus, Denver Chef Alex Seidel of Mercantile called his lunch menu iteration "fine dining between the bun," combining the tender meat with French onion ju, Gruyere fondue and arugula. With the ever-rising costs of ingredients, many operators are getting ahead of customer pushback against higher prices by offering "lunch for dinner."

Cross-utilization allows for customization: rye sourdough grilled with two types of cheese, tomato, avocado and Sriracha mayo.

Positioning a lunch item as an entree that allows for a lower price but still presents a solid food cost benefits the bottom line.

For example, Evviva Trattoria, which has multiple locations in Massachusetts, offers a \$19 rendition with the makings of an entree. Served on a toasted herb ciabatta roll, slow-cooked beef short ribs are paired with crispy fried cherry peppers, braised leeks, provolone, balsamic aioli and arugula that could be easily substituted with a hardy sourdough or rye sourdough for another layer of flavor.

Bettolino Kitchen in Redondo Beach, California, also serves a short rib sandwich, a \$20 option that holds its own among the revered hand-crafted pasta offerings. The sandwich features six-hour-braised short ribs, local mozzarella, caramelized onions, roasted peppers and a horseradish-spiked cream sauce.

## Say cheese

It speaks volumes when a honed concept like New England-based Luke's Lobster, which offers classic lobster and crab rolls on top-loading buns, includes a grilled cheese sandwich for kids and grownups. Of all the foods that Americans consume, grilled cheese sandwiches rank as the fourth most popular, according to YouGov. Such love makes the sandwich ideal for riffing, be it casual or fine dining.



## Bread's Rise | as seen on menus:

- Grilled cheese showing off brisket with smoked cheddar and Gruyere with tomato jam on sourdough at Mabel's Bar & Q, Las Vegas
- Granola apple French toast with cinnamon apple compote and granola at the Toasted Yolk, locations in Texas, Alabama and Kentucky
- Chipotle and beer-braised beef, triple cheddar, bacon tomato jam, crispy onion strings and hickory sauce on double parmesan sourdough at The Stand, locations in southern California and Texas.



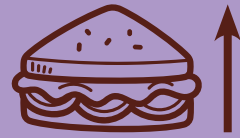
Thick-sliced sourdough makes for a flight of fluffy French toast via strawberry compote, banana caramel and pineapple coconut.

When Dave Beran, chef/owner of Pasjoli in Santa Monica, California, developed a bar menu, he wanted a grilled cheese that spoke French but also conveyed a casual simplicity. He builds a Mornay sauce with Gruyere, cools it and adds more shredded Gruyere (1 part cheese to 2 parts Mornay). The mixture is spread onto the bread along with caramelized onions and griddled.

Restaurants that primarily focus on grilled cheese prove that variations are limited only to the imagination. Meltz Extreme Grilled Cheese

in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Bend, Oregon; and Boise, Idaho, offers more than a dozen types but also provides all the ingredients from those variations for diners to build their own. Thick-sliced bread delivered frozen on a rotating schedule ensures freshness and cuts waste. Ingredients range from 11 types of cheese (including a vegan variety) to four proteins, sauces for dipping and "extras" such as garlicky spinach and buttermilk fried onions.

\$43.8 million



Growth of sandwiches globally from 2024 to 2028, according to market research firm Technavio

**Crossing over**

During the last few years, laminated dough has exploded on the pastry front as chefs riffed on croissant shapes and fillings while crossing over to savory applications. French toast shows similar potential. Batter and Berries in Chicago serves several types of French toast, including lemon accented with lemon zest and sumac. The restaurant offers a flight of four flavors, an option that has helped brand the restaurant as specializing in the breakfast/brunch staple.

Like croissants, French toast can cross global lines like the sesame-coated, Levant-inspired version at Brookline Lunch in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The French toast is topped with pistachios and tahini white chocolate ganache, leaving a pool for carob molasses. The breakfast/brunch restaurant calls it a "PB&J with a Middle Eastern facelift."

Flour and Branch in San Francisco takes a formidable approach with its Beshert: "housemade challah bathed in whiskey and vanilla bean custard stuffed with whipped cream cheese, blueberries and a drizzle of local honey topped with a pecan, brown sugar crumble."

Perhaps it's only a matter of time before a London-based concept like Crome travels across the pond. On any given night, customers line up at the French toast dessert cafe for visually appealing, over-the-top creations, such as Nutella sauce, warm brownie chunks and toffee popcorn as well as mascarpone cream, lady fingers, vanilla ice cream and coffee caramel sauce over thick slices of French toast. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT ARMENDARIZ. FOOD STYLING BY ADAM PEARSON. PROP STYLING BY AMY PALIWODA

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# A BETTER LINE

Training and retention lessons for a profitable way forward

By Kristen Hawley

■ **There's a smarter** and better approach to hiring and retaining workers.

"Restaurants will continue to have challenges finding the right employees to join their teams," says Alice Cheng, founder and CEO of Culinary Agents, a hiring platform for restaurants. "This is something that has been consistent pre-pandemic and post."

But restaurants seem to have settled into a new post-pandemic normal, and instead of simply surviving, they are prioritizing growth and change to retain key staff members, Cheng says.

That's a shift for the better because turnover is expensive. One study from Cornell University found that turnover costs a restaurant nearly \$6,000 per employee, including costs related to recruiting, training and productivity loss. To avoid the sting of such costs, savvy operators have instituted training programs, increased benefits and offered pathways for career development.

Case in point: Colorado's Frasca Hospitality Group, which employs 215 people across five restaurants, including 20-year-old Frasca Food & Wine in Boulder and Tavernetta in Denver. Jodi McAllister, director of human resources, says the group's time-tested policies and practices for engaging and retaining valuable staff members have repeatedly proven their worth. Her insight:



**"As a senior employee, (mentoring) is quite rewarding. You have this opportunity to make an impact**

**while looking through the lens of a new hire. It builds leadership qualities and offers new perspective."**

—Alice Cheng

**● How do you hire at your restaurant group?**

We generally bring people on at an entry level, no matter their experience. We've had people come to Frasca with 10 years of management experience, and they're back to polishing glassware and running food. We believe starting people in roles like these helps them best adapt to and learn our processes. There are different languages at different restaurants, how you communicate with chefs and other team members. A lot of this is developed in those first months with us, the first 30, 60, 90 days.

**● How long do people spend in these entry-level roles?**

For example, in the front of house, a new employee is polishing glassware for the first three weeks and gets moved into running. In that position, they're starting to learn the food, to learn the table numbers. At Frasca, our highest-end restaurant, this process is very structured. At some of the other restaurants, it can be quicker.

**● Then what happens?**

We do a lot of ongoing education, talking to the team about new products every day, highlighting steps of service and holding specialty classes about everything from our by-the-glass wine selection to a great caviar that just came in.

We encourage mentorship at our restaurants; after the first 90 days, you're paired with a senior team member to continue to develop new skill sets and specializations. For example, someone who's very into wine would be partnered with a junior som (sommelier) who can teach them about inventory practices.

**● What are the mentors getting out of it?**

As a senior employee, it's quite rewarding. You have this opportunity to make an impact

while looking through the lens of a new hire. It builds leadership qualities and offers new perspective. It's easy to get stuck in your ways, and a mentorship program provides this unexpected avenue for growth. It builds a real team camaraderie.

**● What else do you do to create retention?**

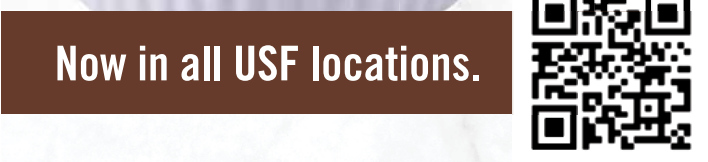
We're constantly analyzing our benefits, including insurance, paid time off, wellness initiatives. Over the past four or five years, companies have had to really look at these seriously and make sure they're offering quality benefits for their staff. Full-time in our restaurant group is about 30 hours or more, which is about 80% to 90% of our population at a given time. We pay 100% of the health insurance premiums for employees who have been with us for three years. We match employee 401(k) contributions, and employees are fully vested after a year.

Finding ways to increase retention is the key for restaurants. It's tough with people coming and going. Restaurant jobs aren't always thought of as a career but that's something that our company tries to promote. This can be a career for you. This can be an entry point into your next career. Hospitality isn't just for restaurants and hotels — people need to bring it into everyday life. ■



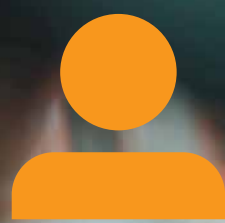
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# Marketing your restaurant on a budget

**It's not that hard**

By Bret Thorn

↘  
Solid marketing efforts need to extend beyond influencers.

**You've heard it all before:** "People don't know you exist if you don't tell them you're here," says Teneshia Murray, owner of T's Brunch Bar, an all-day brunch restaurant with four locations in the Atlanta area. "Marketing is the most important thing for running a business."

She's not wrong, but the catch is figuring out how to affordably get in front of the right people for your restaurant. Independent restaurants can scarcely afford huge marketing blitzes, but there are budget-friendly ways to get the attention of the people who are most likely to come to your restaurants, enjoy them, and return for more.



➔ Show some love for local influencers. An audience from faraway places won't become regulars.

LOOK GOOD ONLINE

Murray tries to get inside her customers' heads, understanding how they behave because she behaves similarly. "When I travel, I Google 'brunch near me,'" she says, while also scouting out restaurants on TikTok, Instagram, and elsewhere on social media where potential customers browse for restaurants with eye-catching food. "I want my food to look like you can eat it off the website. It needs to be attractive. I want to stand out."

To do that, she takes a multi-platform approach. She hired a full-time social media manager who goes to her restaurants each week and posts content daily—videos and still shots—on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Google, Meta Ads and elsewhere, such as Facebook groups for foodies, especially those in her neighborhoods. "These groups are huge," she says. "As soon as we post there, they come in all day long."

By strategically engaging with those communities, she turns a simple post into an influx of traffic, leveraging local word-of-mouth in a digital space.

FIND THE RIGHT INFLUENCERS

A mention from a big-name celebrity or influencer with millions of followers is nice, but if the followers don't live near you, how much traffic will it drive? Instead, look at posts from people within your delivery zone. They might only have a few hundred followers, but if they're mostly neighbors, that's a huge win. Be gracious to those micro-influencers; invite them in for a meal if it's within your budget. Chikurin, a sushi restaurant in the Sheepshead Bay neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, offers a free appetizer to anyone who posts about them on social media—an easy way to drum up attention at minimal cost. While online buzz can help bring in new guests, making sure they come back is just as important.

**"I want my food to look like you can eat it off the website. It needs to be attractive. I want to stand out."**

—Tenesha Murray, owner of T's Brunch Bar

REMEMBER THAT YOUR REGULARS ARE THE VIPS

Treat your regulars right. That might mean giving them a free appetizer or dessert or buying a drink. Or it might just mean acknowledgment, knowing where they like to sit, how they like to be treated and acting on it. Whether they post about their experiences or just tell their friends, it's a simple but organic way to get people through the door.

WORD OF MOUTH IS STILL KING

Digital marketing is critical for most operators, but alternative approaches can work, too.

Andrea Fraquelli, owner of Cotoletta in Miami's Coconut Grove neighborhood, opened his restaurant in October to instant success, and his website doesn't even show the menu—which is uniquely limited to a single entree, two antipasti, one pasta and three side options, all sold as a prix-fixe meal.

"I've noticed that the people who are willing to pick up the phone are doing it with so much more vigor and gusto than clicking on OpenTable," Fraquelli says. That small effort makes customers more invested in their dining experience, he says.

And the result is a strong network of fans. He began, as most restaurateurs do, by inviting friends and friends of investors, who spread news of the restaurant by word of mouth, resulting in success that has far outstripped his expectations.

"In a market (like Miami) where everyone is spending \$5 to \$10 million on flashy social media campaigns and extravagant restaurant build-outs, maybe this was a breath of fresh air," he says.

By eliminating the digital friction of reservations, Fraquelli creates a sense of exclusivity, making the experience feel more personal and intentional. ■



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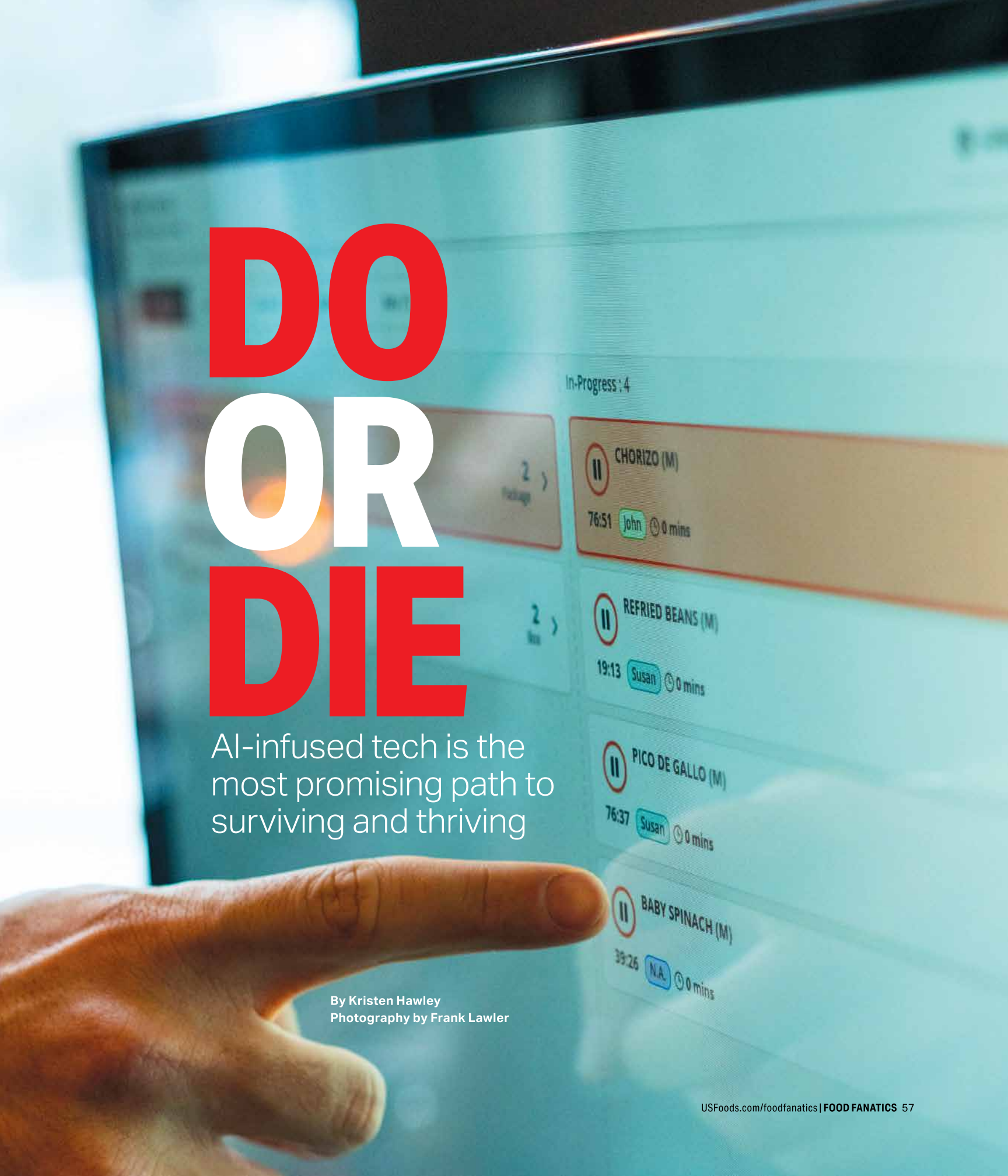


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# DO OR DIE

AI-infused tech is the most promising path to surviving and thriving



By Kristen Hawley  
Photography by Frank Lawler



**➤ Chef/owner Bill Kim, left in the right photo, regularly invites fellow Chicago chefs and restaurateurs to his restaurant Urbanbelly to share advances in equipment and technology.**

**Restaurateurs who have** reaped the financial benefits of artificial intelligence today believe that it can single-handedly determine the success or failure of an operation. Yet, in a recent National Restaurant Association survey, only 16% of operators said they plan to invest in AI this year even though three-quarters of the respondents understand that it gives restaurants a competitive edge.

It's anyone's guess why an operator wouldn't allow technology to handle the heavy lifting, from predictive ordering to reducing food waste. But if you're still holding out on adopting AI, here are some rewards you can start reaping by embracing automation:

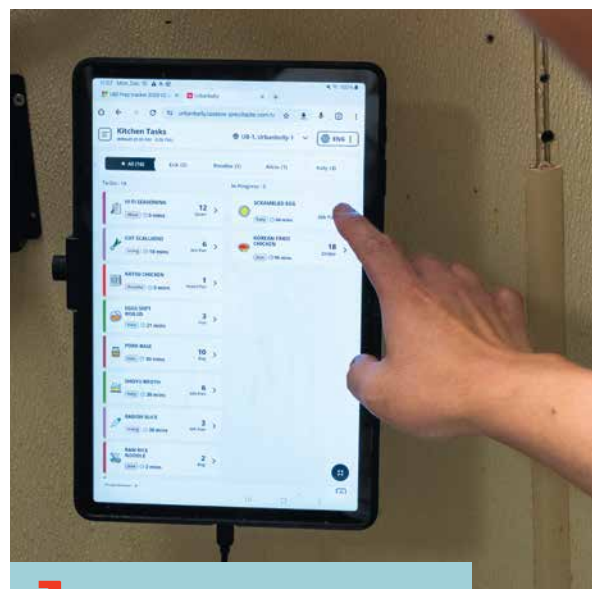
**1. Reach more diners.**

Artificial intelligence can help restaurants market themselves to guests to drive repeat business. Reservations and customer relationship management platform SevenRooms acquired the AI-infused text marketing platform HeyPluto last year,

quickly integrating it into its own platform. Restaurants can send personalized marketing texts to diners—based on location or dining frequency or encouraging them to book a table or attend an event. The software tracks reservations and spending, linking this valuable info to diner profiles. In early testing, texts from one restaurant group, Fabio Viviani Hospitality, drove \$432,000 in revenue in six months, generating 5,726 covers from 1,784 reservations, according to the company.

**2. Reduce food waste.**

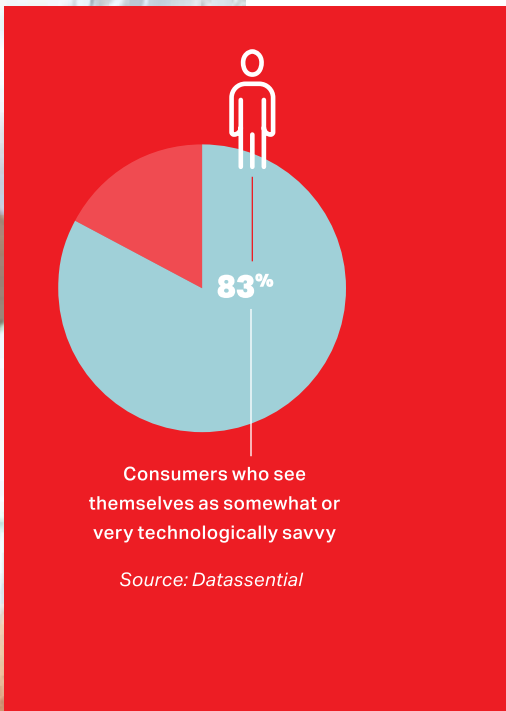
Good software helps operators understand what they need and when they need it. Chef Bill Kim, owner of Urbanbelly in Chicago and partner in Cornerstone Restaurant Group, tapped a company called PreciTaste to help better understand day-to-day sales volumes at his restaurants. The software uses data from the restaurant's point-of-sale system and other outside information—like weather forecasts—to determine expected performance, which in



**➤ AI software uses data, such as weather and past performance, to calculate sales that helps with ordering and reducing waste.**



**➤ The latest technology in sous vide and preserving freshness happens faster than ever, which allow for less waste and labor.**





↗  
A device that makes and dispenses gelato to order within minute saves on time and labor while adding value and interest to drinks and desserts at Urbanbelly.



→  
Fresh ingredients vacuum-packed in seconds preserves freshness and reduces waste.

turn helps with ordering just enough product to avoid waste. “Every morning, I know in advance what I’m supposed to do, revenue-wise,” he says. So far, his restaurant has saved 1 percent on food costs while reducing waste.

### 3. Engage employees.

The same software aids kitchen employees by breaking down daily prep into easily manageable tasks. “It helps the crew members get organized and use technology to boost their confidence,” he says. It’s also changed the way the team talks about the restaurant’s performance. Instead of explaining performance with vague terms like “busy” or “slow,” Kim says, “We talk numbers ... real, live data.”

### 4. Understand performance.

In 2024, point-of-sale and payments provider Toast introduced a benchmarking tool that helps operators understand their business’s performance relative to competitors, which can help determine ways to be more competitive and successful. Restaurants can compare their own sales and traffic to others in the area based on broad categories, like style of service. The software uses AI to identify so-called peer restaurants and lets restaurants compare food sales, alcohol sales, and even service performance to unnamed and unidentifiable restaurants. According to the company, it can also help operators identify emerging food and beverage trends based on popularity and performance.

### 5. Surprise and delight.

Yes, AI can be hospitable. It can even talk to guests on the phone so the host doesn’t have to. Voice AI services like Slang.ai are trained to answer the phone, offering information like opening hours, location, or, thanks to a new partnership with OpenTable, reservations. Hundreds of restaurants outsource an average of half of their phone calls to the tech, leading to happier customers and less-stressed staff.

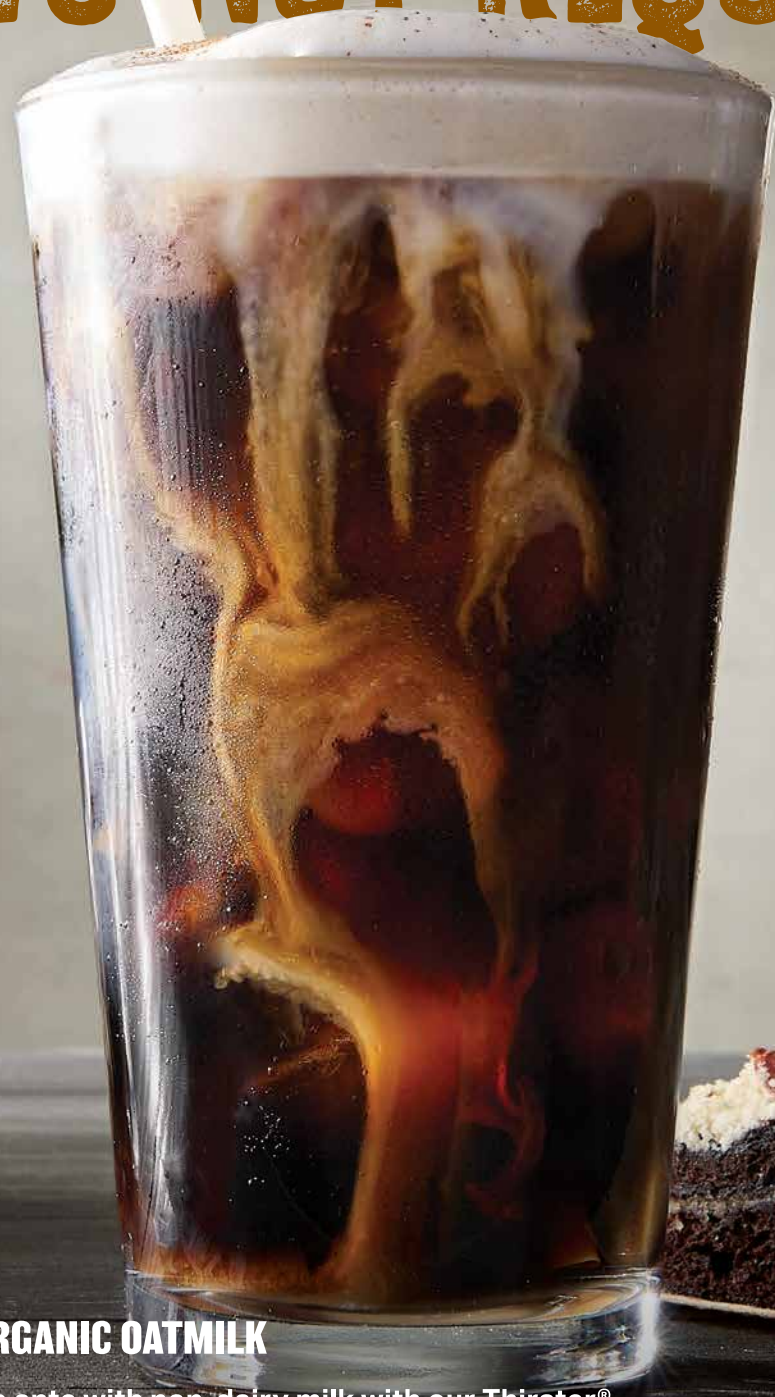
AI isn’t replacing humans; it’s enhancing operations, especially for operators struggling to do it all with minimal staff. It’s the next step in the evolution of the industry, and it pays to get on board. ■

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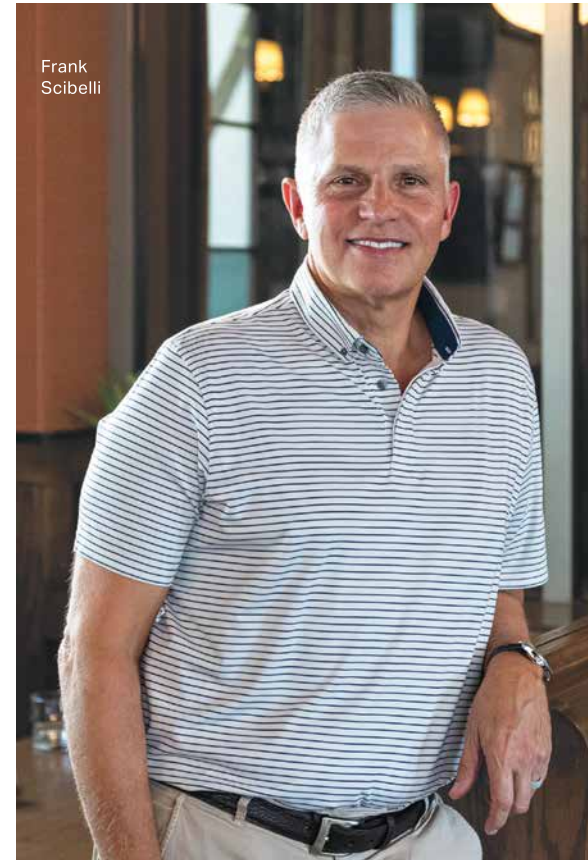
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Frank Scibelli



**Little Mama's,** a New England-style Italian restaurant under Frank Scibelli's FS Food Group.

# THE PATH TO SUCCESS

## From a "mom and pop" to multiple concepts

By Lisa Shames

**In 1992 when Frank Scibelli** opened his first restaurant in Charlotte, North Carolina, he knew he was taking a big risk. While he grew up in an Italian-American family, Scibelli had no professional experience running a restaurant. What the Springfield, Massachusetts, native had in spades, though, was a love of the magic and joy that can happen when folks are sitting around a table together eating simple, delicious food.

Armed with that and some recipes from his mother, Scibelli opened Mama Ricotta's with a

menu of traditional Italian dishes. Some 33 years later, his FS Food Group has seven hospitality concepts and 15 restaurants with two more in the works. Those include a fast-casual Middle Eastern street food spot (YAFO Kitchen), a Latin café and cevicheria (Calle Sol), a neighborhood smokehouse (Midwood Smokehouse), a Tex-Mex spot (Paco's Tacos & Tequila), a New England-style Italian restaurant (Little Mama's) and a catering company (Plate Perfect Catering). Meanwhile, Mama Ricotta's has expanded to five times its original size.

By embracing old-school hospitality, providing a supportive environment for its nearly 1,000 employees and sourcing the freshest ingredients (when Mama Ricotta's opened, fresh mozzarella wasn't available so they made it), FS Food Group has become a Carolina foodservice group to be reckoned with.

Scibelli opens up about his early restaurateur days, the steps to open a new concept and lessons he's learned along the way.

PHOTOGRAPHY REMY THURSTON



Generous hospitality and value at Little Mama's and other FS Food Group restaurants have led to their success.

**Q. Why restaurants for you?**

**A.** I thought I was going to be a lawyer and pursued a law and MBA degrees. I ended up just doing an MBA and worked in consulting. I always felt I wanted to be an entrepreneur, but didn't really know what I wanted to do. I came to work in Charlotte and saw a big business opportunity as at that time there weren't really any casual Italian restaurants. I felt like it would be a great opportunity to do one. I was 27 years old and figured if it didn't do well, I could do something else. I love food and I love people. To me it boiled down to a do what you love, and the money will follow sort of thing.

**Q. Any fears that went through your head?**

**A.** I had a pretty good job as a consultant, and I had achieved some level of status with that. And then, lo and behold, I start from scratch, and I can't cash a paycheck right away. I remember laying in the middle of my living room floor at 3 in the morning and I'm like, what the hell did I do? Thankfully, eight weeks in, we got a really good review and that started the ball rolling. We've had plenty of ups and downs, but generally it's been a good ride.

**Q. How long after opening your first restaurant did you open the second?**

**A.** We opened in 1992 and in 1994 we opened our second restaurant. That was really my biggest failure, and I lost money. But that's really where I learned how to manage my pennies and how to do a budget. It's one thing to have an MBA, but it's a different thing in the real world. We figured out how to run our restaurants. We developed a structured team. It got me into my catering business and then I opened other concepts. I started a concept called Bad Daddy's Burger Bar and grew it to 13 units before I sold it to a public company in 2015.

**Q. What would you say are the threads that tie all your different concepts together?**

**A.** I think the biggest thing is they're comfort food. I'm not a fine dining guy as a personality. I'm a casual dining kind of guy. I like grandmother food. I like food that's a little bit rustic and food people are going to put on their dinner table more so than foams and something that's super fancy. To me, it's the feel of eating with friends and family and the hospitality component that comes with that.

**Q. What criteria go into creating a new concept?**

**A.** There's a couple of hurdles. The first would be if there's a market for it. Then it's whether we can execute it. We're going to stick to things we know how to do well. We wouldn't do a sushi concept, for example. We're blessed with some common sense. It's also about finding the right ingredients. For the research, it's about getting exposed to that food. Many times, we're going to the source. Last year, we went to Lima and did food tours and worked with chefs there to understand the food better. Most of our team view it the same way. We've got to be continually trying to hone our craft.

**Q. What makes for a successful FS Food Group restaurant?**

**A.** Making people happy, introducing customers to different food and getting a team to gel is really a great feeling. Then making it financially successful. You can have a great chef and great food, but there's all this other stuff that has to work. Great food is probably the easy part.

PHOTOGRAPHY REMY THURSTON



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**Ceviche Aji Amarillo from Calle Sol, an FS Food Group restaurant.**



**Q. What lessons have you learned from your 30-plus years in the hospitality industry?**

**A.** As a culture here, we like being direct. Not everybody likes that, but we talk about it as a team. When you look back on your life and say these people had a big influence and made me get better, usually it's those who pushed and challenged you. The directness of developing people is something that's important to us. The people who like that love it and thrive here and stay for years and years.

The business must be seen as a whole. If you're only worried about accounting or making food or service, you're not going to be successful. They all have to go hand in hand.

**Q. What have been some of your biggest challenges?**

**A.** Clearly COVID was a challenge and figuring out how to pivot. We did a great job and we're one of a minority who thrived during it. We got a phone call from Bank of America, and they wanted to sponsor us to feed first responders. We're also involved with the Jewish community here in Charlotte, and we ended up feeding Jewish seniors. These are people who couldn't leave their homes. So, hopefully we gave them something to smile about by giving them a good meal. It was really rewarding.

**"The business must be seen as a whole. If you're only worried about accounting or making food or service, you're not going to be successful. They all have to go hand in hand."**

—Frank Scibelli

**Q. Why do you think you've been so successful?**

**A.** It goes back to creating a team. You can't accomplish the other things unless you have the right people to help you accomplish them.

**Q. What advice would you offer new restaurateurs?**

**A.** I try to talk people out of it because there's an element of luck to it. No one goes in the restaurant business thinking their food isn't good. But the market doesn't always like your food. You've got to listen to what the customer has to say. People think it's taking a little concept and putting some money behind it, but then they don't do all the homework to understand what people want. It's also about making changes along the way because what people wanted in 1992 isn't necessarily what they want now. It's finding that happy medium of change but not too much kind of situation.

**Q. What brings you the most joy in your career?**

**A.** We really love developing our teams and taking care of our customers. Both those things are important to us. We've had people who've been with us for 30 years and they've grown and changed their financial positions in the world. That stuff has really been wonderful. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY REMY THURSTON

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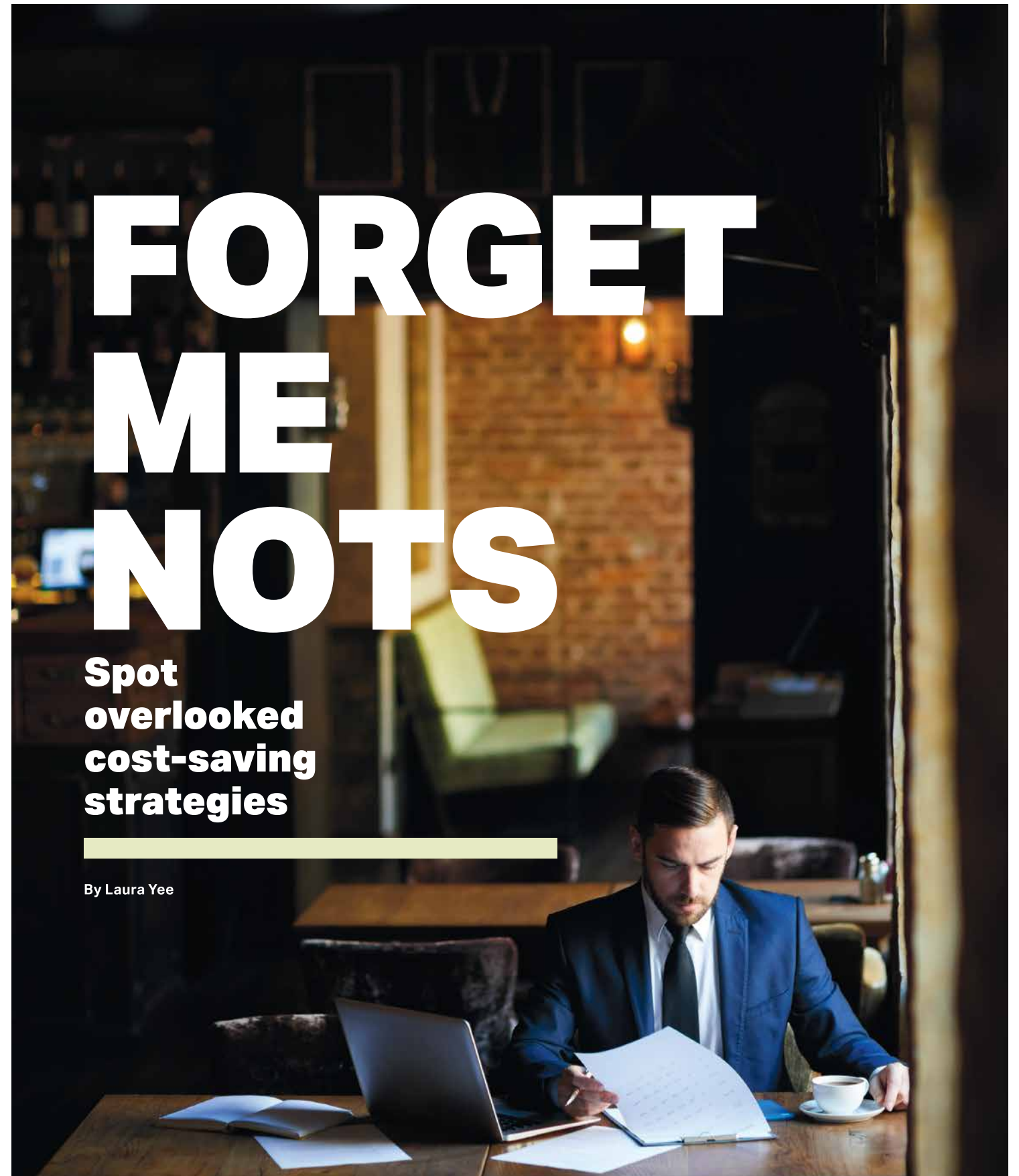
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# FORGET ME NOTS

**Spot overlooked cost-saving strategies**

By Laura Yee



## For independent operators, penny pinching has become a sport.

Owners and chefs scrutinize the obvious—rent, food costs and labor—but in recent years, the menu mix, portion control, repurposing food and cross-utilizing ingredients have become money-savings mainstays, and of course, putting technology to work. But there are many less apparent strategies that can make a big difference on the bottom line, according to chefs:

### \$ DO IT YOURSELF

Calling in experts to fix equipment can be excruciatingly expensive, which led Ellen King to learn the basics, from recalibrating the ovens to troubleshooting refrigeration, during the early days of her bakery, Hewn, which now has two locations in the Chicago suburbs. DIY maintenance can cut repair costs up to 40%, says the Restaurant Facility Management Association.

### \$ REDUCE EVERYDAY COSTS

Mobile phone/internet services, credit card processing, banking fees and other operational costs add up, but businesses that offer similar services are ripe for negotiating. Call providers

and ask for promotions or reductions in costs—the worst they can say is no. And if they refuse, switch providers, which typically offer introductory (lower) pricing.

### \$ JUGGLE DEBT

While no business wants debt, sometimes equipment expenditures end up on credit cards. Instead of carrying the debt month to month and accruing fees, balance transfers can save hundreds of dollars. During the last few years, credit card companies have been offering zero interest on balance transfers often lasting more than a year. Make sure to research and read the fine print for restrictions, such as fees for the transfers.

### \$ SUBLEASE UNDERUTILIZED SPACE

If your business is open only for dinner, just breakfast and lunch, or if there's unused space, rent it to a complementary business. Be sure to vet the business and request proof of liability insurance and other matters to protect yourself.

### \$ HOST LATE-NIGHT POP-UPS

Industry people appreciate a place to grab late-night food after a shift, whether it's ramen, fried chicken or tacos, and customers are drawn to where chefs go. This means staying open a few hours later during a slow night to bring in additional revenue. Just be sure to make it a deal and publicize. It's likely to take several attempts to build a following.

### \$ BUY USED EQUIPMENT

Finding second-hand equipment has never been easier with Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace. More equipment companies are also offering refurbished or older models with limited warranties that cost less and help with startup costs. Also consider lease-to-own equipment, such as a combi oven, instead of purchasing outright, to conserve cash flow while still accessing high-quality equipment.

### \$ REPURPOSE COOKING OIL

Sustainability has made immense strides in recent years (see story on page 32), which includes finding alternative uses for everyday ingredients. For example, instead of disposing used cooking oil, partner with companies that buy used oil for biofuel conversion. ■



40%

Percentage DIY maintenance can cut repair costs

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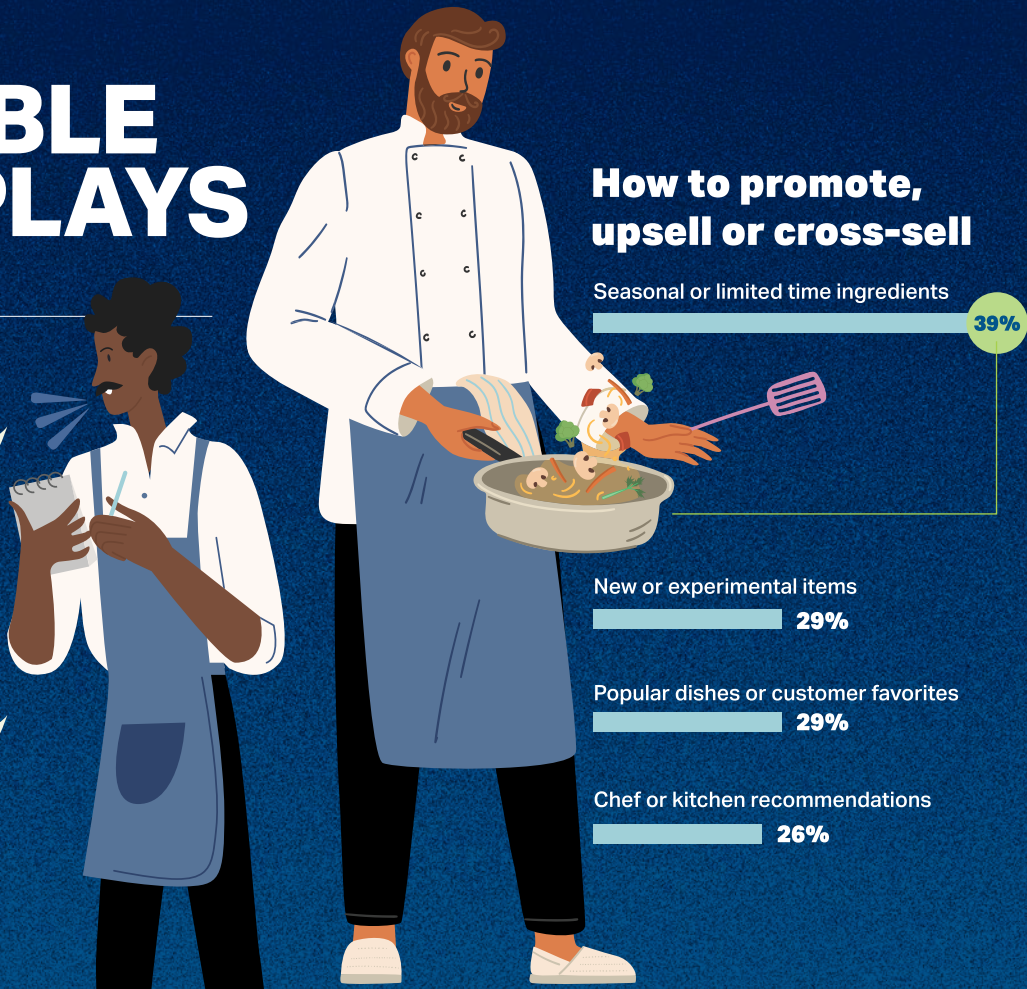
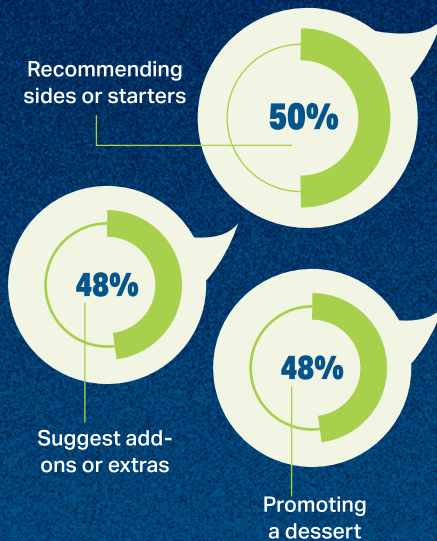
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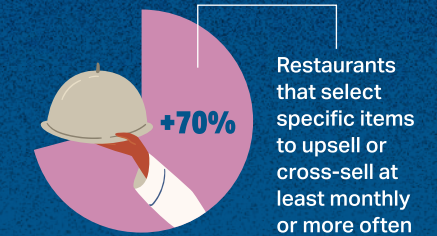
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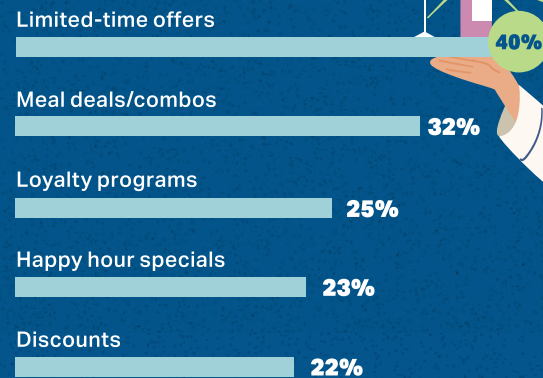
## 3 ways to upsell



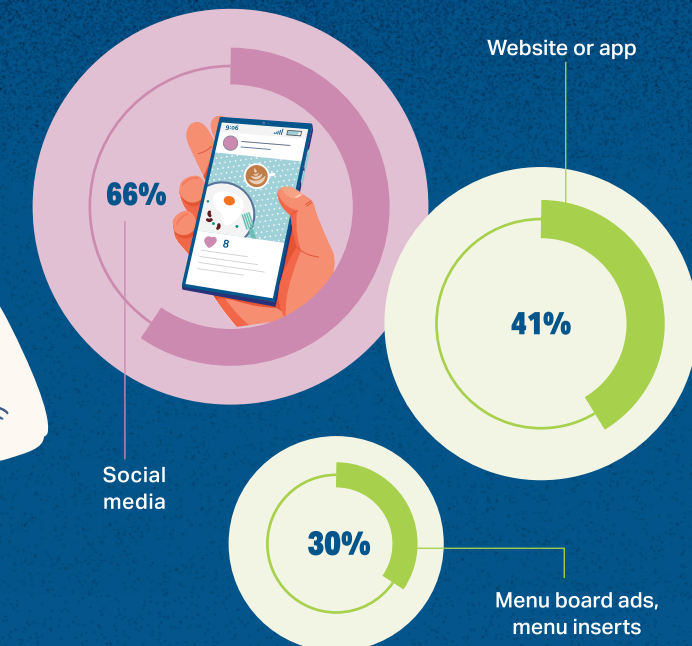
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## Top ways to score



## Getting the word out



Source: Datassential

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