



THE HOTTEST FOOD TRENDS FOR 2025

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A New Way of Looking at Trends

BY MAEVE WEBSTER AND MIKE KOSTYO OF MENU MATTERS.

Every year, the food industry collectively scrambles to determine the top trends that will define the months ahead.

These are the foods, flavors, ingredients, and dishes that are supposed to keep your concept and menu fresh and exciting in your customer's eyes—shortcuts to success, you might say. The past decade are filled with the "it" trend of the year: avocado toast, gochujang, ube, birria, etc.

It's not that any of these trends are bad ideas, of course—each one is delicious in its own right. And they were certainly trending, depending on how you measured the trend—an increase in social media mentions, growth on menus, increasing sales, etc. You may have even put some of them on the menu with success in increased sales, mentions, or visitation.

But often we are sold these trends as the **solution** first, and we then must back into the **problem** we were trying to solve with that flavor or ingredient, if we think about it at all. When someone says avocado toast is trending, does that mean everyone should immediately put it on the menu? The breathless, ever-quicken pace of the trend cycle means we are constantly bombarded by trends, wondering if we're missing out on a new consumer want and if the trends are passing us by. We are always sifting through this endless onslaught of trends, deciding if they make sense for our concept, brand, menu, and marketing goals. When we decide we should activate on them, we often feature them for a short amount of time, until that churn-and-burn trend cycle moves onto the next "it" item.

Imagine if this is how we diagnosed and treated illnesses? Every year we walk into our annual physical and the doctor tells us what the hot new trend is: the new "it" treatment of the year is arm surgery. Then we either decide if arm surgery makes sense as a treatment for our particular issue ("will arm surgery really fix my cough?") or we go ahead and get the surgery because it's so on-trend that we're afraid of being uncool.

Instead of thinking this way, it's time to flip the script. As we head into 2025, give yourself a start thinking about trends a little differently. Consider this your chance to take a step back, decide what you are truly trying to solve for in the year ahead, and then decide which trends can help you solve those needs. In this special trend report, we'll look at the core wants and needs that your customers will have in the year ahead, based on extensive research and data.





That includes new ways of looking at value beyond just low prices and an endless stream of combo meals. It means giving customers a new way to escape the grind of everyday life, whether that's through new experiences or global flavors. It's also about focusing on hospitality again, giving customers the human touch that may be lacking.

As you think through the customer needs in the pages ahead, consider what resonates with you and your brand. Maybe you are looking for ways to help your customers live more boldly, giving them fun, exciting flavors and experiences that keep your concept young and fresh. Or maybe you want to incorporate more sensory experiences into the menu, getting your customers excited through smoky cocktails or the "crackling latte" trend. Once you've decided which customer needs will be a focus for your brand, it will then be much easier to choose the trends that will help you solve for those needs. Suddenly, picking the trends that you will include in your trends toolbox becomes more straightforward, instead of an endless bombardment.

46 percent of consumers say they are experimenting more with new foods and beverages at home, vs. 26 percent who say they are experimenting more at restaurants. Restaurants will need to give customers new, exciting, innovative dishes that only a chef can make to win them back.

But there is one overarching customer need to keep in mind as we head into 2025: customers are looking to you for something new. Consumers have been in a funk for a few years now, leading to terms like "permafunk" and "bed rotting" (where consumers spend the entire day in bed, refusing to interact with the world). Today more consumers are experimenting with new foods and flavors at home than they are at restaurants, a momentous change from pre-pandemic times, when customers mainly trusted chefs to introduce them to something new.

So it's time to give them something fresh. After years of nostalgia and comfort foods, it's time to get consumers excited again. It's time to start getting creative, focusing on innovation and showcasing what consumers love about restaurants again. Consider this report the first step in creating bold new ideas, menu items, marketing initiatives, and experiences that will jolt your customers out of their malaise and chart a fresh, exciting path forward for your concept.



KEY CONSUMER NEED 1

Trends & Value: Give Customers A Fresh Perspective on Value and Pricing

Over the last year, food has experienced some of the highest rates of inflation. From skimpflation and shrinkflation to higher prices at restaurants, consumers are feeling the squeeze. The result is increased tensions between consumers and the brands they purchase, with 24% of consumers now feeling like they have to constantly watch their back because brands and restaurants are constantly taking advantage of them.

Yes, price is a key contributor to the perceived value of a purchase at foodservice. And extended periods of rising prices on menus has led 43% of consumers to want lower prices at restaurants in 2025.

But price isn't the only factor. True value, value that is sustainable and impactful, is driven by more factors. When value is based on unique experiences, hospitality, consistent quality, and reliability, higher prices are less painful. Value underpinned by more than just cheap prices can and does drive greater patron loyalty, increased traffic, and greater acceptance of price increases.



TREND TOOLBOX FOR VALUE

Are you looking for new ways to offer value to consumers? Consider leveraging these trends:

- Balance product compromises with upscale or improved quality on key ingredients
- Eliminate service pain points
- Use technology to enhance, improve hospitality
- Eliminate packaging pain points
- Create better value through service, sensory experiences
- Elevate the role of innovation to drive value propositions
- Use customization to allow patrons to reduce price, downsize (not just to upcharge or "add to")
- Promote role of "leftovers" as multi-meal value
- Reward frequent patrons with customized discounts ▼

No one wants to be taken advantage of, and that includes businesses. There are a lot of pressures now forcing prices to increase. Even though consumers may hear about legislation increasing minimum wages or understand food costs are rising, without effective communication they won't immediately connect the dots. Remember, though, they are being squeezed. Realistically, we are all in this together, and communication with your patrons should focus on that.

**57 percent
of Gen Z is less
loyal to brands
now than
before the
pandemic**

(SOURCE: FORBES, SEPTEMBER 2023)

How are you building greater value into your patron experience? If compromises on quality must be made, how are you offsetting those compromises to mitigate poor consumer perceptions. If portion sizes decline, can you increase the quality of key ingredients to offset that shrink? Can you improve the atmosphere or the hospitality to help support higher prices? Is technology eliminating pain points to improve the customer experience?

Increased costs must be addressed and tough operational decisions must be made to protect profit margins. These decisions can't be made in a vacuum, discounting the customer experience. The decisions made to protect your interests should dovetail with improvements for your customers. They may not understand your business dynamics, but they will understand efforts to make their lives easier or better.

Take the time to find, and address, any value pain points. If you don't, consumers will notice and go elsewhere.

54% of consumers want more than just low prices at restaurants in the future, including more innovation, more global flavors, and better service

88% of consumers use food or dining out as a form of self-reward and self-care. Leaning into this idea can provide additional value more so than lower prices

More than 1 in 3 U.S. consumers aren't loyal to any brands

(SOURCE: FORBES, SEPTEMBER 2023)

10 THOUGHT STARTERS:

HOW CAN I SHOWCASE VALUE IN NEW WAYS?



1. What exactly does value look like for your operation? How would you define value within the framework of your strategy and brand position?
2. When thinking about value at your operation are you more focused on price or creating value without dropping prices?
3. How is your service and hospitality being used to create value? Is it effective in creating value and how can that be improved?
4. How are you creating value through options or personalization including different sizes, toppings, add-ons or subtractions?
5. Can you improve elements of dishes to support prices and create value?
6. Can you create value with unique options or customization for off-premise experiences?
7. Are you offering consumers both lower cost options and indulgent, luxury options to facilitate a range of experiences and occasions?
8. Are you telling the story behind your ingredients and suppliers to create great emotional engagement and increased value?
9. Are you communicating sustainability efforts or employee support efforts that create great value propositions?
10. Can you create new experiences or experiential food offerings to better support a value proposition?

Increased costs must be addressed and tough operational decisions must be made to protect profit margins. These decisions can't be made in a vacuum, discounting the customer experience.



KEY CONSUMER NEED 2

Trends & Flavor: Give Customers New Ways To Live Boldly

In 2023, consumers were focused on living their best lives. This translated into increased spending on travel, designer labels, and fine dining restaurants. After years of pandemic-driven compromises, consumers were ready to live well and spend money to do it. Nearly a year of inflationary pressures have finally begun to slow that spending, but the desire to live a richer and happier life remains.

As economic, political, and cultural changes continue, that desire to live well is evolving and expanding to a focus on living boldly. But what does living boldly mean to consumers?

58 percent of consumers say they would rather have their favorite meal at a “not very nice” restaurant **vs. 42 percent** who would rather have their second-choice meal at a gorgeous restaurant

The definition of living boldly is as diverse and dynamic as the population of consumers. Living boldly exists on a spectrum of flavors, experiences, and spending. For example, Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X say they are willing to sacrifice atmosphere to enjoy their favorite meal. For these consumers, living boldly means not sacrificing what they want most and, if we're honest, "roughing it" at a more unusual location can actually enhance the overall experience. On the other hand, Boomers have the time and the money and will not sacrifice atmosphere but would rather enjoy their second choice meal at a gorgeous restaurant.

As living boldly encompasses the driver to live well, health plays a role here. Living both boldly and healthy means abandoning the "low" and "no" road to health in favor of exciting, engaging dishes that feature unique ingredients and bold flavors. QSR operators should ensure healthy dishes feature as many premium, on-trend, and compelling ingredients as those dishes designed for consumers not seeking healthy options.

Of course, health is only one facet to this key consumer driver for 2025. Consumers are ready to throw off the yolk of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty that have largely clouded every year since the beginning of 2020. Living boldly means experimenting, taking chances, and "living out loud." It may mean taking risks with flavors that press against or break through a consumer's comfort zone. It means visiting new locations and venues. It means taking a chance on the unknown.

Inherently, living boldly is optimistic because taking risks requires the optimism that the risk will pay off. Consumers are finally emerging from the cloud of uncertainty, embracing greater optimism that will power their decisions through the end of 2025.

For the next year, QSR operators should consider how they can embody and embrace this optimism. This may mean taking greater risks and being bolder with innovation. Challenges for the industry still exist, but it's time to remind consumers why restaurants are the best places to experiment and, through that experimentation, learn more about themselves. make their lives easier or better.

Take the time to find, and address, any value pain points. If you don't, consumers will notice and go elsewhere.

**49 percent
of consumers
use food or
dining out as a
form of self-care/
self-reward**



TREND TOOLBOX FOR LIVING BOLDLY

Are you looking for new ways to help consumers live boldly? Consider leveraging these trends:

- A spectrum of spicy/hot flavors
- Exploring new cuisines, new cuisine elements
- Premium ingredients
- Unexpected formats for familiar items
- Unexpected ingredients in familiar items
- Healthy items putting flavor first
- Indulgence ranging from pure to healthy
- Experimental baked goods, desserts, snacks
- Daily luxuries
- "No compromise" choices
- Experience spending
- Revenge and "you only live once" spending ▼

1. How boldly do you think your patrons want to live? Where on the spectrum of bold would your patrons fall?
2. What does bold mean for your brand and for your menu strategy?
3. Does spicy fit your menu positioning and, if so, how is it working to help your patrons live boldly?
4. What other flavor elements or profiles could be positioned as bold?
5. Do you have items that help customers experiment or break out of their habits?
6. Do you or can you incorporate premium elements into otherwise familiar applications or items?
7. What would bold healthy or better-for-your items look like at your operation?
8. What would bold hospitality look like at your operation? How would that change how you train your staff and interact with your patrons?
9. What could be a daily luxury at your operation that fits with your menu strategy?
10. How would innovating against “living boldly” change the formats or preparations you feature on your menu?

The share of consumers experimenting with new foods and beverages at restaurants has **dropped to 26%**. Experimenting is optimistic and future thinking. Restaurants need to retake that position as the place consumers can experiment, push their own boundaries, and live boldly.





KEY CONSUMER NEED 3

Trends & Escape: Give Customers A Chance To Get Away From It All

2024 was a record year for travel. According to the Transportation Security Administration, the top ten busiest days in the agency's history have all occurred this year, with July 7 being the busiest day ever for the TSA as it screened over 3 million airport passengers for the first time.

The demand for experiences and travel has led to unprecedented crowds in some of the most popular travel destinations around the world, as tourists jetted off to the London, Greece, Portugal, Japan, Croatia, Mexico City, Italy, Spain, and beyond. The popularity of some destinations has even created concerns about overtourism, with Barcelona making headlines when anti-tourism protestors sprayed visitors with water guns.

37 percent of consumers say it's a good sign when a lot of people from that culture are eating in a global or ethnic restaurant

The cuisines that consumers say will have the most impact on future food trends:

American/U.S.	46%
Asian (Japanese, Korean, Chinese, etc.)	45%
Mexican	38%
Italian	33%
Mediterranean	29%
Middle Eastern	22%
South American	20%
French	19%
Caribbean	19%
African	17%

68 percent
of consumers
say they look for
foods, flavors,
beverages,
ingredients, and
flavors from
countries they
recently visited
when they get
back home

Consumers clearly want to get away. Much of this travel is the result of pent-up demand from the pandemic, but it's also partly due to the growing purchasing power of generations who prioritize travel and experiences. According to Expedia, Millennials travel more than any other generation – in total they travel for more than a month of the year, or 35 days, compared to 29 days for Gen Z, 26 for Gen X, and 27 for Baby Boomers.

That demand for travel also creates a demand for the foods, flavors, and ingredients that consumers discover on their trips or learn about from friends and family who travel. Japan, where a weak yen has made travel more affordable for visitors, has been breaking record after record for travel, welcoming more tourists than ever before in the nation's history, according to the Japan National Tourism Organization. Visitors have been embracing Japanese food on these trips – and sharing them on social media – creating a booming market in the U.S. for options like matcha, a wide range of sandos, and tanghulu, the candied fruit that has trended on TikTok. It's no surprise that, as tourists discover the high-quality and on-trend foods found at Japanese konbinis, or convenience stores, 7-Eleven has announced that it will bring options found at Japanese c-stores to the U.S., including chicken teriyaki rice balls, miso ramen, and sweet chili crisp wings.

That gives you an opportunity to not only offer even more global foods, flavors, ingredients, dishes, and trends to menus, but to highlight the escapist nature of them. Don't just put a matcha or cherry blossom latte or baked good on the menu, use evocative terminology like, "Travel to Japan with us this spring with flavors like matcha and Sakura." Street food or night market menus and LTOs give customers a sense of place and escape in their everyday lives.

**51% of consumers say they are very or extremely
envious of other generations**



But giving consumers an escape also goes beyond travel and escape in a literal sense. There are many ways to escape the boring and mundane. Consider these types of escape:

- Escaping through physical spaces that feel unique and exciting, with bold and fun aesthetics that feel like a completely new and different environment.
- Escape through experiences, getting into a “flow state” where you are enjoying the moment so much you forget about your worries.
- Escaping through entertainment experiences, losing yourself in a show, movie, book, song, etc.
- Escape through luxury and premium experiences, giving a customer an opportunity to “taste the good life,” if even for a moment

One type of escape that has gotten a lot of attention in recent years is nostalgia. With so many customers feeling like we’re living “in the worst timeline,” they’re looking for that escape through the rose-colored glasses of their childhood. When Pizza Hut brought back its BOOK IT! summer reading program this year, Millennials rejoiced, remembering the buffets, Tiffany-style glass lamps, and personal pan pizzas of their childhood. Nostalgia, in turn, can sometimes become something brand new for the younger generations who are experiencing these trends for the first time. For the children of Millennials who are actually enrolling in the new BOOK IT! program, it’s simply a new experience (sometimes called “newstalgia”).



TREND TOOLBOX FOR ESCAPE

Are you looking for new ways to help consumers escape? Consider leveraging these trends:

- Global foods
- Street foods/night market menus
- Regional flavors
- Escape marketing
- Showcasing a chef’s culinary background
- Bold, maximalist design
- Experiential dining
- Japanese trends: next-level matcha, sweet sandos, tanghulu
- Mexican trends: Tacos de canasta, accessible agua-chile, marquesitas
- Next-level Italian trends: Cacio e pepe 2.0, giant mozzarella sticks, fusion focaccia
- Cultural tie-ins
- “Treat yourself” moments ▼

10 THOUGHT STARTERS: HOW CAN I HELP CONSUMERS ESCAPE?

1. What's a global cuisine that I've never featured? How would I adapt it for my menu?
2. What's my most popular global ingredient, dish, or flavor? How can I take it to the next level?
3. How can I create a concept that feels like a fresh, unique space the moment you walk in the door?
4. How can I help consumers experience another destination through my menu and marketing?
5. How can I add an experiential element to the dining experience that takes consumers away for a moment?
6. How can I give customers a chance to treat themselves and have a luxurious moment?
7. What are some new, on-trend foods, flavors, ingredients, and dishes in the home country of the food I serve?
8. How can I use our chef's culinary background to give our guests a chance to escape to that destination, even if only for a moment?
9. How can I use technology to help consumers escape?
10. Can you identify a "back to reality" moment in your operation that takes customers out of the fun, escapist experience of dining? How can you remove that moment?



But some of this nostalgia has actually manifested into something else: era envy. Consumers' desire to escape has made them envious of an imagined past that they never experienced. This has led to trends like "grandma-core," where young consumers imagine life as a carefree retired grandmother, living a simple life by the sea ("coastal grandma chic"). Restaurants have followed suit, with McDonald's offering up a Grandma McFlurry so Gen Z "grandmothers" can enjoy their favorite butterscotch candies in the form of a frozen treat and Taco Bell opening up an early retirement community activation called "The Cantinas" with a slow-living lifestyle featuring crochet classes and an early bird dinner.

While there will always be a place for some nostalgia, consumers may be starting to get burnt out on the past, particularly as it's constantly refed to them through social media. Many of the movie flops released in 2024 were retreads and reboots of existing franchises, prompting some consumers to demand new ideas and fresh stories. As we head into 2025, brands will start to differentiate themselves from the mass of nostalgia-focused brands and start to find exciting, innovative ways to help consumers escape and experience something new. After all, at some point we have to create something new to be nostalgic for in the future.



KEY CONSUMER NEED 4

Trends & The Senses: Give Customers New Sensory Experiences

As consumers embrace a more optimistic and bolder approach to life, inherent in this is the desire for new sensory experiences. Food and dining away from home are among the few full sensory experiences a consumer can enjoy, alone or with others, and embracing all the senses is the best way for operators to truly connect with their patrons.

When asked to rate their senses in order of importance when selecting foods and beverages, it's not surprising taste was ranked either #1 or #2 by 69% of consumers. Taste is critical, and taste exploration and experimentation is a key part of new experiences.

**81 percent
of consumers
find more joy
in anticipating
a meal than
in reminiscing
about a great
meal**



TREND TOOLBOX TO GIVE CUSTOMERS A NEW SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Are you looking for new ways to give customers a new and complete sensory experience? Consider leveraging these trends:

- Bold, saturated colors
- Unique textures in unexpected places
- Bold textural combinations
- Aroma that transports
- Garnishes that elevate
- Interactive dishes, beverages
- Unexpected, engaging hospitality
- Technology that enhances the experience
- Maximalism
- Third culture cuisine ▼

When asked to prioritize their senses when selecting a food or beverage item, the following share of consumers ranked these senses either #1 or #2:

Taste	69%
Smell	61%
Sight	42%
Touch	20%
Sound	8%

After years of focusing on the Instagrammability of foods, you may have guessed that consumers ranked sight second—but that's not the case. Sixty-one percent (61%) ranked smell and aroma second. How effectively is aroma being used to create unique new experiences for consumers? This is particularly true at time when cold beverages are far more commonly consumed. Consciously innovating against aroma can change consumer experiences and reset expectations.

What cold beverages have lost in aroma, this category has certainly gained in textural exploration. While touch may have been ranked low in importance by consumers, there's no doubt unique textural experiences have drawn consumers in through innovation in restaurants and social media. From boba and cheese foams to crackle coffee and fluffy Coke, texture elevates and surprises.

- **85% of consumers would not give up smell when it comes to a dining experience**
- **90% of consumers would not give up touch**
- **66% of consumers say a bad smell is an immediate turnoff at a restaurant, and 64% are turned off by restaurants that look dirty or unclean**



89%

of consumers would not give up sight when it comes to a dining experience.

Sensory experiences extend well beyond the foods and beverages, starting when a consumer enters and following through to the end of the meal, which may be off-site or as they leave the property. Remember, all the senses should be engaged and thoughtfully considered to create not only new experiences, but the right sensory experiences unique to an operator's brand. This includes the hospitality offered by employees and the interactive technology used to enhance or ease a patron's experience.

In the end, sensory experiences elicit emotional responses and emotions resonate far more with consumers than any one trend. Unique and impactful sensory experiences will hit consumers emotionally. What emotions do you want to provoke from your patrons? What emotions would the ideal experience at your units or with your offerings draw out? Should the emotional experiences with your brand evolve through the experience?

Over the past twelve months, consumers have become more focused on sincerity and authenticity, and that's as true for sensory experiences as it is for marketing and communications. Just as insincere communication can undermine trust in a brand, similarly insincere sensory experiences can lead to skepticism and a lack of faith in the overall experiences. Great food can be undercut by experiences that seem forced, artificial, or too consciously designed to elicit certain emotions. Make sure your experiences are as authentic as your brand voice and strategy. Liquid Death has perfected the art of truly unique but utterly authentic communication. Your communication and experience doesn't need to be as weird, but it should be as distinct and utterly recognizable.

***73 percent
of consumers
would share
personal data
if it meant a
completely
personalized
meal experience***

10 THOUGHT STARTERS:

HOW CAN I GIVE CUSTOMERS NEW SENSORY EXPERIENCES??

1. What are the top sensory experiences a patron experiences when they walk into your operation? Are these the right experiences you want them to have?
2. What are you doing to leverage smell in the operation or in menu descriptions?
3. Are you factoring smell into your innovation process? How can smell be better engaged with your patrons for a more impactful experience?
4. How can you enhance sensory experiences in your operation? Across your menu?
5. What new or unexpected sensory experiences could you add to your patrons' experience that fit well with your strategy and brand?
6. Sound is often underappreciated by patrons. How are you leveraging sound to enhance an experience in your operation?
7. Have you thought about full sensory experiences as a key element of your innovation process?
8. How can you rethink the role of all five senses when designing foods or beverages?
9. Are you considering how delivery impacts the sensory experience of your foods and beverages, and how can that sensory experience be improved for off-premise ordering?
10. Can your app or website be better used to engage your patrons' senses before they place an order or visit your operation?





KEY CONSUMER NEED 5

Trends & Hospitality: Give Customers The Human Touch

In August 2024, *The New York Times'* restaurant critic Pete Wells stepped down from the job after twelve years. In his last essay as a critic, he describes the evolution of the restaurant industry over that time, focusing on a "series of changes that have gradually and steadily stripped the human touch and the human voice out of restaurants." He notes that the rise of touchscreens and reservation apps, while small changes when considered individually, have "have made going out to eat much less personal" in totality.

The word "hospitality" itself comes from the Latin word "hospitalitas," meaning to receive or care for a guest or stranger. Yet many consumers say that the hospitality is missing from the guest experience at many restaurants—they don't feel like they're being taken care of. Thirty-eight percent of consumers say the value of eating out overall has declined, which means one out of every three customers that walks in the door is primed for a bad experience.



At some restaurant concepts, the customer enters and is immediately faced with a row of kiosk (a few of which may be broken), where they click through a series of screens to order a meal. When the order is ready, a server calls out an impersonal number—or, in some cases, the number appears on another screen—and the customer picks it up themselves. Other customers are ordering on their phones, picking up a bag from a series of cubbies, never having to interact with a single person. At full-service restaurants, they may bring up the menu using a QR code and viewing it on their tiny screen, and they may pay for it using the same phone system.

- **39% of consumers** say it's hard to make friends as an adult
- **30% of consumers** said they visited the last restaurant they went to because they wanted to support a local restaurant
- **37% of consumers** say they are going out to restaurants less but looking for restaurants that are doing something special so the time/money is worth it
- **59% of consumers** say unfriendly staff would be an immediate turn-off in a restaurant
- **66% of consumers** say they would rather have a dish made from a human chef than an AI one



TREND TOOLBOX TO GIVE CUSTOMERS THE HUMAN CONNECTION

Are you looking for new ways to infuse more humanity and connection into your brand? Consider leveraging these trends:

- Shareable options – family meals, app samplers, etc.
- Personal tech invites
- In-person experiences – tastings, dinners, etc.
- Chef-led classes
- Hospitality training
- Staff call-outs on menus
- Staff recognition
- Communal cooking – robata, hot pot, etc.
- Hangout-friendly spaces
- Story-focused marketing
- Group discounts
- Dim sum
- Build-your-own meal options
- Dealers' choice cocktails
- Flights
- Seafood towers ▼



**49 percent
of consumers
say they prefer
a human to a
screen or robot**

While in the short term these solutions may feel beneficial, in the long term consumers start to lose the human connection—the touch of hospitality. Picking up a meal from a cubby starts to feel scarcely differentiated from buying a product at the supermarket. “In the first few years on the job, I thought of restaurants as one of the few places left where our experiences were completely human,” says Wells, noting that someone’s day might be spent in impersonal cubicles, walking around with headphones, and ordering books and clothes online. But when they went out to eat they were human again, drinking wine, flirting with someone, talking to hosts and servers and bartenders. It was a visceral, participatory experience.

That’s why a key trend for the year ahead will be helping consumers connect again. Operators will start looking for ways to make transactions less, well, transactional and more human and experiential again. In 2023, the U.S. surgeon general declared a loneliness epidemic across the country, comparing the health impacts of loneliness to smoking a dozen cigarettes a day. It’s a widespread issue: over a third—35%—of consumers say they didn’t eat a single meal with a friend or family member in the past week.

That’s why consumers are starting to long for those connection points again. Schools across the country are becoming “no cell phone” zones, with both teachers and the students themselves noticing that students are more engaged and present. Bars across the country are becoming third places again, welcoming customers to reading nights and music listening parties.

10 THOUGHT STARTERS:

HOW CAN I GIVE CUSTOMERS NEW WAYS TO CONNECT?

1. How can you ensure every customer that enters has at least one moment of human connection?
2. How can you make customers feel welcome immediately upon entering?
3. How can you personally reach out to your best customers?
4. How can you add more shareable options to the menu?
5. Can you turn a top-selling entrée into an appetizer or other option to share with friends and family?
6. How can you invite the community to come together in person at your brand?
7. How can you use social media to connect directly with customers?
8. What percentage of your customers would say your brand makes them feel special or important? How can you increase that percentage?
9. How can you add new trends and ideas to special occasions or catering menus?
10. What are some ways you can upgrade your training program to encourage staff to connect with each other and customers more often?



There is a place for technology, of course: some consumers are in a hurry, it does assist with labor crunches, etc. But when adopting tech solutions, consider the overall impact on the human connection that may be lost in the long term. In the year ahead, consider ways to balance industry changes with the need to keep hospitality as a central, non-negotiable element of the dining experience. Tech may even be a part of the solution—can you use an app to reach out directly to customers more often, to invite them to an in-person event, to learn where the human connection points may be missing?

The decline in restaurant traffic may in fact be exacerbating the loneliness epidemic in the U.S., as consumers pull back from a place where they might connect. But that also means that there are few industries better suited to bringing back that human touch and helping consumers connect again. In 2025, restaurants will adopt trends that have that human touch.