

DINING GUIDE

Tips and Trends
for the Savvy Diner



Family-Friendly Dining

Going out for dinner can be a chore for families, especially those with young children.

Luckily restaurants are reaching out to them, welcoming parents and kids.

“As more families are dining out more and spending more, restaurants need to cater to their unique dining criteria in order to satisfy their needs, which will nurture a loyal customer base,” says Sharon Sprague, co-founder of KidNosh, a restaurant review site for parents looking to dine out with kids. The site’s restaurant reviews, which are written by parents for parents, factor in kid-friendly amenities, as well as food quality and service.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

A Restaurant.com survey of 988 adults reports 59 percent of parents dine out with their children at least once a week, with 70 percent of parents saying restaurant dining is a great way to spend time with family. The survey also found 40 percent of families go out for American food, followed by 25 percent for Italian and 21 percent for Mexican.

“Not only are they spending more than couples without kids, but parents are likely to share good dining experiences with other parents on social media and word-of-

mouth,” says Sprague, who thinks the kid-friendly commitment is likely permanent.

FAMILY CHOICES

So how are restaurants wooing families? They’re serving healthy food choices like lean meats, fruits and vegetables; and impressing kids with tech tools like video games and old-fashioned fun including crayons and paper, as well as books. There are also kids-eat-free days as well as kid-friendly activities like balloon artists, face painting and make-your-own pizzas or sundaes.

Another sign restaurants are family friendly? “They have family bathrooms or changing tables in both women’s and men’s room,” says Sprague.

Restaurants want repeat business from families with kids who eat at off-peak times like pre-dinner rush or on off-peak days like Monday or Tuesday. Parents seem to be pleased with the family friendly offerings, too. The Restaurant.com survey found 57 percent of parents like dining out as a way to teach kids table manners; 54 percent say it teaches kids about different cultures and 66 percent use the opportunity get kids to try new foods.



A Dinner Deal?

You've seen the ads: all-you-can-eat appetizers, three-course dinners for \$30 and two meals for \$20.

The premise seems tempting, but are these really good deals or are they simply marketing efforts to get diners to buy more food and drinks?

THE CATCH

“In my experience, the ‘bottomless’ or ‘endless’ quantity-type offerings aren’t as much of a value as you’d think, unless you can eat your weight in pasta or appetizers,” says blogger Kendal Perez of Hassle Free Savings, who explains diners need to evaluate how much they’ll really consume and how that compares to the restaurant’s regular pricing.

Getting a deal at a restaurant with large portion sizes, for example, can mean even more value if you box up leftover food to eat for another meal.

“If you’re a leftover fan like me, it’s a win-win,” says Perez. “I don’t dine out often, so when I do I try to find some kind of savings.”

Perez, who suggests diners look for coupons or daily deals for restaurants, says offers like Groupon can be good but have their limits, since diners often end up indulging in expensive extras, like cocktails, desserts and additional appetizers.

“This can often get your bill up to what it would be without the discount, or even more,” she says. “Bottom line: use discounts responsibly!”

CONSIDERATIONS

Look for reasonable incentives, like \$2 off an entrée. If you have to buy more than you want or need, it’s not really a good offer.

Eat a late lunch. You’ll pay lunch prices, and doing so could save you more money than a coupon. The value is in the portion size, since many lunch and dinner entrees are similarly sized but lunch is nearly always a cheaper dish.

Be wary of the fine print! Watch out for coupons that refuse substitutions and limit you to specific items only, such as only valid on one of the restaurant’s 10 chicken entrees.

Check expiration dates. Many bargains only last a short time to entice you to dine at the restaurant right away. Also note that some offers are only good during weekdays, not on weekends.

Sign up for restaurant emails to get offers and coupons in your inbox. Follow the restaurant on social media too, where you can often get coupons and advance notice of upcoming promotions.

Download the eatery’s app if they have one. By setting a reservation on the app or using it to place your order, you may be eligible for freebies like a complimentary dessert.



Farm to Table

Eating locally sourced, fresh foods may seem like an age-old concept, but it wasn't too popular for a while. Now it's reemerged as a culinary must. Still farm to table, also known as farm to fork, isn't just a fad.

For centuries, eating fresh and local foods was the only way to eat. But when freezer and refrigeration technology came about, it became easier to save foods to eat at a later time or to ship over distances. Add in preservatives and soon eating prepackaged or processed foods was a new way of life.

These days, more and more Americans are health conscious and want to avoid consuming foods that may be frozen or loaded with preservatives to keep foods from spoiling.

After all, who wants frozen corn when you can eat it fresh? Why buy carrots shipped from thousands of miles away when you can buy them locally?

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Diners, chefs and restaurants seem to value the farm-to-fork concept, too. A MamboTrack Health and Natural Consumer Outlook survey of over 1,000 consumers found 95 percent want “fresher” food, while over 80 percent consider “humane treatment and environmental factors” and over half say they pay or are willing to pay more for these healthier and environmentally friendly options.



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In a survey of professional chefs, The National Restaurant Association found the top trends include locally sourced meats and seafood at number one; locally grown produce at number two; and environmental sustainability at number three.

LOCAL FOCUS

Embracing the farm-to-table experience means buying foods that were planted, grown and harvested locally, which supports nearby farmers and the local economy.

It's also a great way to protect and respect the environment,

relying on farmers and farms to produce pesticide-free fruits and vegetables.

Farm to fork is all about savoring the seasons and incorporating what's in season into your menu. Think pumpkins in fall, watermelon in summer and a variety of herbs

all year round.

Due to the seasonality and availability of farm-to-table foods, the menu is always changing. That prevents ruts in your eating habits. Farm to table is a tasty choice for diners and a boost to the environment and the local economy.

On-the-Go Gourmets

You see them driving in your neighborhood, stopped at local parks and even on TV shows like, “The Great Food Truck Race.” Food trucks seem to be everywhere these days.

In just five years, food truck revenue has grown 12 percent, according to IBISWorld, a company that tracks industry and market research.

The \$803 million-dollar-a-year food truck trend, which started during the recession, brought gourmet food to customers in various communities across the country from Miami to Chicago to Los Angeles and many smaller cities, too.

SMORGASBORD OF OPTIONS

Truck offerings include cupcakes, pizza, donuts and fusion food, like Korean barbecue combined with Mexican cuisine.

Chefs love keeping costs low in a mobile operation, which enables them to share their cuisine with many different diners. Consumers love the variety of food truck options and appreciate being able to eat high-quality food on the go, such as during lunch hour or while hanging out at a park.

“Consumers seem to love food trucks because they make interesting, often high-end food more accessible and convenient,” says Mark Brandau, managing editor of “1851 Magazine,” acknowledging the food truck trend is here to stay.

Craving dessert? Looking for burgers? Whatever you want to eat can probably be found on a gourmet food truck. Search social media to see where your favorite mobile vendors will be, then get curbside and prepare to eat. Lines typically aren’t long, and tips aren’t expected either — a definite bonus for foodies.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD TRUCKS

“Our customers are savvy consumers who are interested in mobile food trucks for lots of valid reasons; value priced food, artisanal small businesses, a sense of shared community,” says Matt Cohen, founder of Off the Grid, a street food organization company in San Francisco.

The trend will grow as more communities accept the idea. “Since more cities are relaxing their restrictions on food trucks, the trend is only going to proliferate,” says Brandau.

Up next for food trucks? More catering opportunities (think weddings and events) and increased tech use, as well as “a move toward healthier food from the trucks,” says Cohen. “Better and better food.”



Next Generation of Diners

Breakfast, lunch and dinner are evolving. Traditional dining from what's on the menu to what it costs is changing. Nowadays diners want fresher food, value for their money and customer service.

A BrandKeys study looked at food preferences among a total of 3,000 people, 1,000 in each of three groups: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. The results?

Boomers also want great service and say they pay extra for it. Gen X can be practical and wants value for their money, not necessarily the cheapest price. Millennials, who tend to have sophisticated tastes and aren't necessarily loyal to restaurant brands, want healthy food in a casual setting.

COURTING YOUNG DINERS

Restaurants are changing to meet the needs of diners, especially millennials, who were born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. A key dining demographic, there are approximately 80 million Millennials in the U.S.

"We've found that creating moments in the dining experience that are personal, sharable and what we call 'friction-free' lead to satisfaction and repeat visits," says Adam Pierno, director of brand strategy and planning at Santy. The brand strategy company recently polled Millennials to identify what makes them dine out or stay home for dinner.

Pierno says Millennials value being able to split checks easily

and like paying the bill on their phones or tablets, as well as apps. They also enjoy knowing an eatery's "hidden" menu and appreciate restaurants that are flexible with substitutions.

"Good service is still in style, as well," says Pierno, noting 57 percent of diners say it's an important factor in deciding where to eat.

COMPETITION

Millennials don't dine out as often as you think. Pierno says the generation's dining occasions are down by as much as 20 percent since 2007. Many millennials would rather eat dinner at home while enjoying entertainment like streaming movies and video games.

While 71 percent of Millennials say they're budget-minded, they're not very interested in eating fast food. They like fast-casual eateries and will splurge for big occasions. Still the recession taught them to be wise with their money.

"They don't like to risk dining out at a place they aren't quite sure will deliver a great meal or experience," says Pierno.

With the restaurant industry worth \$632 billion, restaurants will be competing for the attention and spending power of this new generation of diners.



Going High Tech

From smart phones and tablets to social media, consumers are connected to the world and each other all the time. Restaurants are embracing tech, too, as a way to reach out to customers and streamline operations.

Dining out is getting easier and easier. With a swipe or two, diners can take control of their restaurant experience. According to The National Restaurant Association, 52 percent of diners say they'd pay their bill electronically, and 46 percent would use a restaurant's app.

Consumers are already connecting to eateries, with 61 percent saying they've checked out a restaurant's website and 36 percent saying they've looked up nutritional information about the restaurant's food online.

Some of the new technology being used at major chains and local restaurants includes table-top tablet technology allowing guests to order food and drinks, play games for entertainment and pay the bill at the end of the meal. Diners can even calculate tips on the spot, with the app making gratuity suggestions.

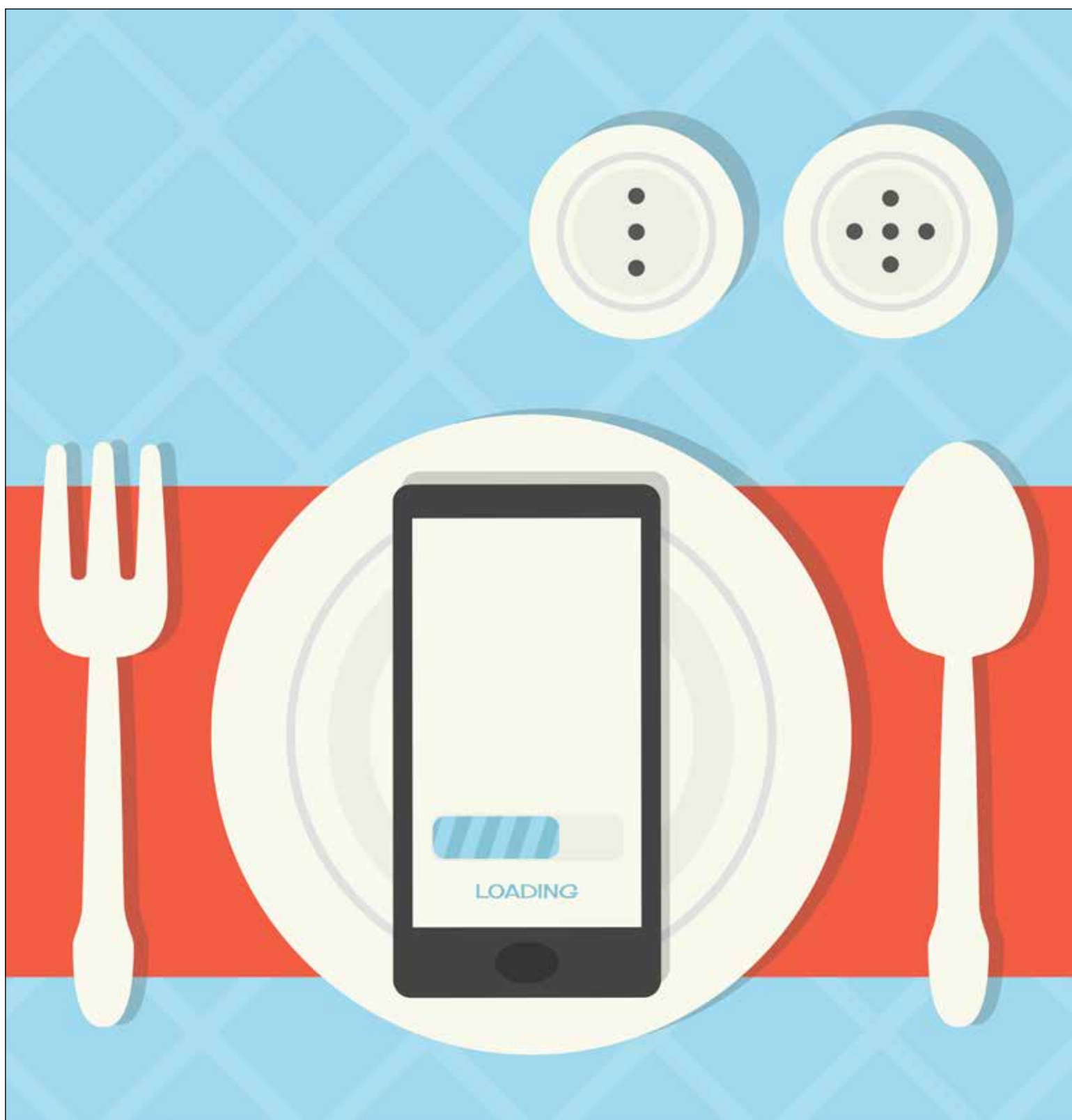
ONLINE REVIEWS

Eating at a restaurant isn't just about a meal. It's an experience that's important for diners. The National Restaurant Association notes that about a third of consumers choose a restaurant based on social media; 40 percent use group buying sites like Groupon and LivingSocial, and almost a third have read or posted dining reviews to sites like Yelp.

RESTAURANT TECH

While consumers want the tech, so do restaurants. Even though technology's initial setup can be expensive, it's a long-term investment for eateries that can use the tech tools to streamline business. For example, one tech app for restaurants helps the eatery track inventory, review peak and off-peak dining times and see and adjust staffing levels and schedules.

By using tabletop apps and tablets, diners can do it all: ordering, paying the bill, leaving a tip and writing an instant review. It can all happen fast and efficiently which pleases the customer and gives the restaurant immediate feedback on the food and the service. Plus it's a quick-pay way for customers to check out, which could result in faster table turnaround.



Fresh and Healthy Dining

You eat broccoli, spinach and tomatoes at home, so why wouldn't you want to enjoy these healthy and tasty flavors at restaurants, too?

According to The Vegetarian Times, over 7 million Americans are vegetarians, while an additional 22 million follow a "vegetarian-included diet." Both men and women follow the veggie lifestyle, with women accounting for about 60 percent of vegetarians.

Even for non-vegetarians, the desire to eat better is a driving force in the marketplace.

HEALTHIER GOALS

A 2014 survey of over 1,000 Americans by the International Food Information Council Foundation found 71 percent of consumers value healthfulness, compared to 61 percent, just two years ago. That 10 percent increase shows attitudes about clean eating are improving. For example, 83 percent of those surveyed say they've tried to eat more fruits and vegetables in the past year. Over half of the respondents say they use nutrition information when dining out, such as reviewing food calorie counts.

VEGGIES

ON THE MENU

No longer does eating out at a restaurant mean you have to sacrifice your good habits or choose from a very limited



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menu of good-for-you options.

As more consumers want to eat healthier, restaurants are meeting the demand. One chain has everything from Portobello burgers to barbecue "veggie steak" sandwiches.

Diners are choosing healthier entrees and sides too, such as grilled instead of friend

chicken; and a side salad or sliced fruit in lieu of starchy French fries. Spinach and kale salads are on the menu, too, at many restaurants.

Breakfast can now mean an egg white omelet, turkey bacon and whole wheat bread, compared to the traditional two-egg omelet, with bacon and pancakes.

Even deli sandwiches, which once were about meaty options like steak and cheese or meatball, are changing. More diners want veggie subs, or at least sandwiches with lean meats, topped with veggies such as spinach, onions, olives and tomatoes.

Dining out options now include a variety of better-for-

you ingredients, too, like whole-wheat pasta and flatbreads, compared to their carbohydrate-loaded versions.

While there's room for even more healthful dining changes, these nutritious choices are steps in the right direction, helping diners enjoy a satisfying meal that supports a healthy lifestyle.