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[Consumer Insights, Trends](#)

The Wow Factor

The giant Bavarian pretzel at New Bohemia Wurst + BierHaus in Minnesota

To increase customer visits, quick-service and fast-casual restaurants are finding it takes more than cost and convenience—two things diners today expect as standard. When consumers decide to visit a restaurant, they want something special: an all-encompassing dining experience they couldn’t get at home.

Diners seek something that’s not always tangible—a mood, feeling or emotional response—that connects the meal to the space, allowing them to leave feeling like they did more than grab a bite.

Consumers now spend 70 percent more on experiences and events than they did three decades ago, according to [research from Eventbrite](#). More than 3 in 4 millennials—the nation’s largest consumer group, according to the [Pew Research Center](#)—say they’d choose them over possessions.

“[Diners] are looking for more than just a meal,” says Bonnie Riggs, restaurant industry analyst for [The NPD Group](#). They’re seeking something that’s not always tangible—a mood, feeling or emotional response—that connects the meal to the space, allowing them to leave feeling like they did more than grab a bite.

To cater to this desire, consider focusing on the following.

Set the Mood

After operating for two years as a food truck, [Curry Up Now](#) opened its first brick-and-mortar restaurant in 2011. Today, the Northern California Indian street food eatery has six locations and two trucks. Each is decked out with a look CEO Akash Kapoor calls “Bollywood chic,” featuring bright colors and murals by local street artists.

“On a food truck, it’s hard to give people any sort of experience beyond the food; a restaurant changes everything because you can plan the space based on the experience,” Kapoor says. “Our restaurants are very eye-catching; not stuff you’d probably do in your house—but people dine out because they don’t want to eat in their house. We really wanted to take them into a different world for a little while.”

Encourage Social Interaction—in Restaurants and Online

Customers can play games and attend weekly trivia nights at [New Bohemia Wurst + BierHaus](#), which has seven Minnesota locations. To encourage guests to strike up conversations, the fast-casual eatery chose communal tables for its seating.

“It’s our interpretation of a German beer hall where everybody knows everybody,” says Chief Operations Officer Brian Ingram. “The whole concept is based on a sense of community.”

The theme is also carried out through a menu of shareable items, including a 3-pound pretzel. “We get people who won’t finish it and hand it to their neighbor,” Ingram says. “You go to [some restaurants], and no one is sharing. We wanted to see people talking to the folks sitting next to them.”

The social interactions encouraged at New Bohemia and the restaurant’s offering translate well to social media, where diners love to flaunt their unique experiences. “[People want to post about] alligator sausage when they’re eating it; that’s Instagrammable,” Ingram says.



Embrace Technology

Some eateries are using mobile and in-restaurant tech to make dining more convenient.

“Generations Y (millennials) and Z are glued to their phones,” Riggs says. “There are operators who are trying to make it more of an experience with tablets, kiosks, apps you can use to pay ahead of time.”

For [restaurants with a loyalty program](#), making registration simple is key. More than half of consumers 18 to 50 want restaurant loyalty programs to be offered through a mobile app, according to a [2017 Oracle report](#)—millennials more so than any other age group.

“Millennials are very brand-conscious and want to be rewarded for that loyalty,” Riggs says. “But a program has to be easy to use to be worth their while.”

Offering exclusive rewards to dine-in customers can help make the experience more special.

Invest in Presentation

Curry Up Now displays its dishes in a creative way whenever possible. “I find it boring when you go to a restaurant and see everything in one color, which is usually white,” Kapoor says. “We use a lot of stainless steel. We serve some things in newspaper print cones,” Kapoor says. The chain’s Naughty Naan—naan flatbread with cheese, caramelized onions, jalapenos and a choice of meat or vegetarian protein, depending on the location—is served on a bread board with a knife so that it’s easy to cut and share.

“People eat with their eyes; if you don’t like the way something looks, you’re probably not going to like the taste,” he says. “We do a lot of microgreens and garnish; that’s not normal in a fast-casual restaurant. We want guests to feel special while giving them an authentic, yet different Indian meal. You’re eating food that’s plated like a high-end restaurant, but most things are \$10—that’s the experience we want to give guests.”

Menu items’ appearance, along with the restaurant’s atmosphere, can make customers feel they’re getting more value than they may have expected, and indicate that instead of just having dinner, they’re participating in something unique.

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