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E-reservations

Tucson Citizen

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Restaurant owners using such services find a reduction in frustration, costs
By JENNY HUNSPERGER

One day you'll probably be able to browse a restaurant's menu, order dinner and pay the check all through your cell phone.

Even now, diners can do everything from make reservations at fine restaurants to order a pizza online.

And since several Tucson restaurants in October joined a service that allows such automation, it seems the trend is here to stay.

"You can get on the Web site and make reservations in real time and it will tell you right away whether we have space based on your search criteria," says Michael Luria, owner of Terra Cotta, 3500 E. Sunrise Drive.

Terra Cotta is among 10 Tucson-area restaurants that participate in Open Table, a Web-based company that allows diners to make reservations online.

"It can either e-mail you a confirmation then or a day in advance if you're making reservations in advance," Luria says. "Beyond that, you can let the restaurant know if it's your first time dining in the establishment or if you have any special requirements or if you're celebrating a special occasion. It's sort of a win-win for everybody."

Although Open Table began in 1999, it arrived in Tucson about seven months ago. Restaurant owners who had already adopted similar technology say they've found it a powerful way to boost profits, increase efficiency, refine menus - and hopefully please customers. Some are reporting 30 percent savings in wait staff payroll, 20 percent increases in service speed and a notable decline in frustration.

Systems that simply track sales and handle finances have been available for years, but this growing level of high-tech sophistication is bringing restaurants the chance to electronically monitor customer preferences, orchestrate the cooking process second by second and digitally monitor how much booze a bartender is pouring.

"I think it's a great system, not only for keeping track of things (names on the reservation list, where people are seated, etc.), but also tracking items guests like or allergies," says Sarah Hunt, general manager of Montana Avenue, 6390 E. Grant Road. "It's a way to personalize the customer's visit."

A diner's capacity to appraise and review restaurants online, such as with the Tucson Citizen's interactive dining guide, has leveled the playing field, but for now, some restaurants aren't using the technology to its fullest potential.

According to a recent study by Hospitality Technology magazine, most restaurants recognize its advantages in productivity, efficiency and costs, but lag in bringing technological solutions to the kitchen and other areas. Four percent use customer data for analyzing trends and 2 percent for marketing.

"Restaurants are a market that adapted to technology later than other industries," says Jaleh Bisharat, OpenTable vice president of marketing. "We're very fragmented and I think we're at the very beginning of this trend, but it's a trend that's firmly here to stay."

"Once you've automated, you can't go back."

USA TODAY contributed to this article.