

# Experiential Dining

A high-angle, dimly lit photograph of a dining table. The table is dark and rectangular. On it, four place settings are arranged. Each setting consists of a white napkin folded into a rectangular shape, with silverware (fork, knife, and spoon) tucked into it. In the background, there are salt and pepper shakers and a small white container. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, creating a sophisticated and modern atmosphere.

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# The Evolution of Experiential Dining



## WHERE WE STARTED



Themed restaurants used to be the apex of casual dining experiences, giving consumers an immersive dining experience with special menus—they offered something different from fine dining atmosphere, yet memorable. However, repeat visits just gave you the same experience, meaning consumers didn't always have a reason to go back repeatedly.

**Stale Themes**

## WHERE WE WERE



Technology changed the way we ordered—and, by extension, changed consumer expectations around dining experiences. App ordering, online shopping, and automation changed how we engaged with the dining experience. As access and staff interaction evolved through technology, the quality, story, and uniqueness of the food came to the forefront.

**No Frills, Just Food**

## WHERE WE ARE



Operators and brands are pushing a unique food *story* along with a special *experience*. As food has become the focal point, consumer expectations have shifted to reflect a desire for quality, experience, and value all at the same time. In order to keep up, operators and brands are focusing on what makes them unique, and how to give the consumers something new.

**A Refocus on Experience**

## WHERE WE ARE GOING



Food tourism has created a whole new category of travel, and operators, brands, and restaurateurs are responding by creating destination worthy dining experiences. As consumers are exposed to more unique dining experiences, the expectation for a great food story mixed with a unique experience is now expected everywhere—even when you aren't traveling.

**Destination Worthy**

## What We're Paying Attention To:

1. Pop-Up/Themed
2. Food Tourism/Destination Dining
3. Cross-Cultural
4. Technology
5. Interactive/Immersive
6. Local Is Anywhere

## Pop-Up/Themed

Pop-up restaurants have become the next evolution of themed dining experiences, taking on interesting themes that are not only reflected in the environment, but also in the menu options. Being a pop-up is important because it makes the experiences limited and desirable, as well as keeping the experience from becoming stale, because it will be new every time, until it eventually disappears.

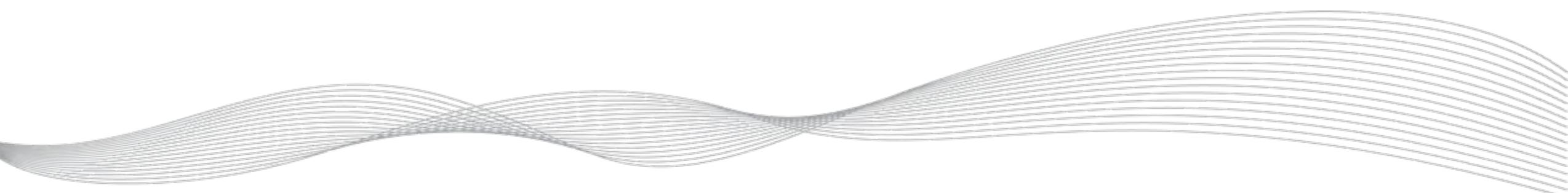




Image Source: [Bleeding Cool](#)

- Los Pollos Hermanos, the famed chicken restaurant from both *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, is coming to NYC, tied to the return of a prominent character in the latter series. The pop-up has already shown up on the West Coast and in the South, but this is the first iteration on the East Coast.
- WastED is a rooftop pop-up in London that, under the guidance of a revolving schedule of well-known guest chefs, creates fine dining cuisine from food scraps. Guests do not know who is cooking until the day of, and all dishes use ingredients that would have been tossed out. Even the restaurant itself is upcycled, with everything from the shirts and aprons for the cooks, to the tables and chairs in the dining area, all made from reclaimed or repurposed materials.
- A Super Mario themed pop-up bar in Washington, D.C. features Mario themed décor with fire flowers, question blocks and even piranha plants, plus themed cocktails like the “It’s a Me, Mario,” and the “King Koopa Cup.”
- Kellogg’s is hosting a limited fine dining engagement at its cereal bar in NYC with world famous chefs putting a cereal-based twist on some of their signature dishes. Some of the menu items include chilled carrot-ginger soup with Fruit Loops, truffle custard with Corn Flakes and Special K, and lobster macaroni & cheese with Rice Krispies.

## Food Tourism/Destination Dining

Consumers now have the expectation that dining will be experiential in some way. In fact, dining experiences that are truly different or immersive have become so sought after that they now go hand-in-hand with travel. This makes specific restaurants, markets, or other food-related destinations worthy of the trip, all by themselves.

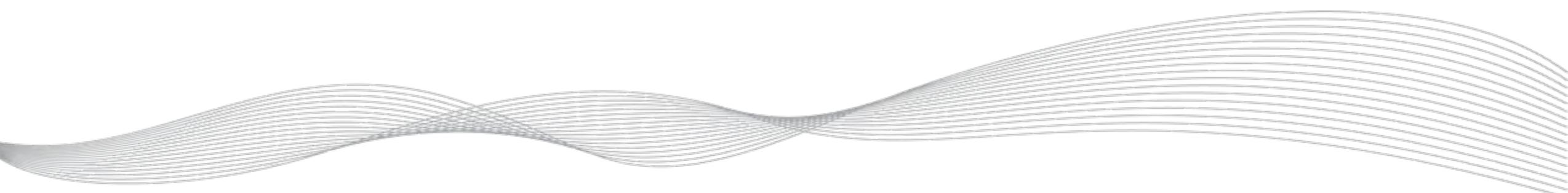


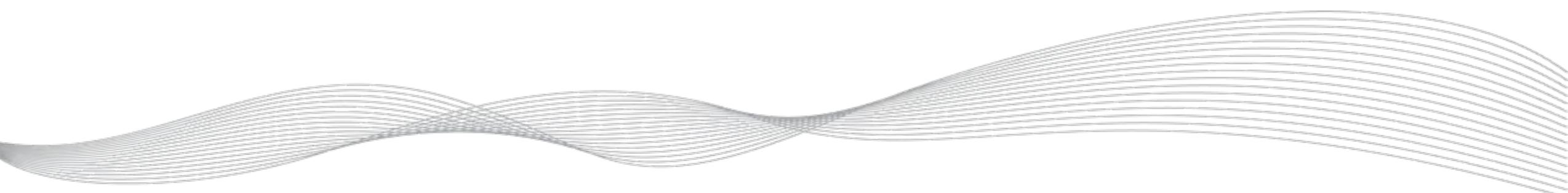


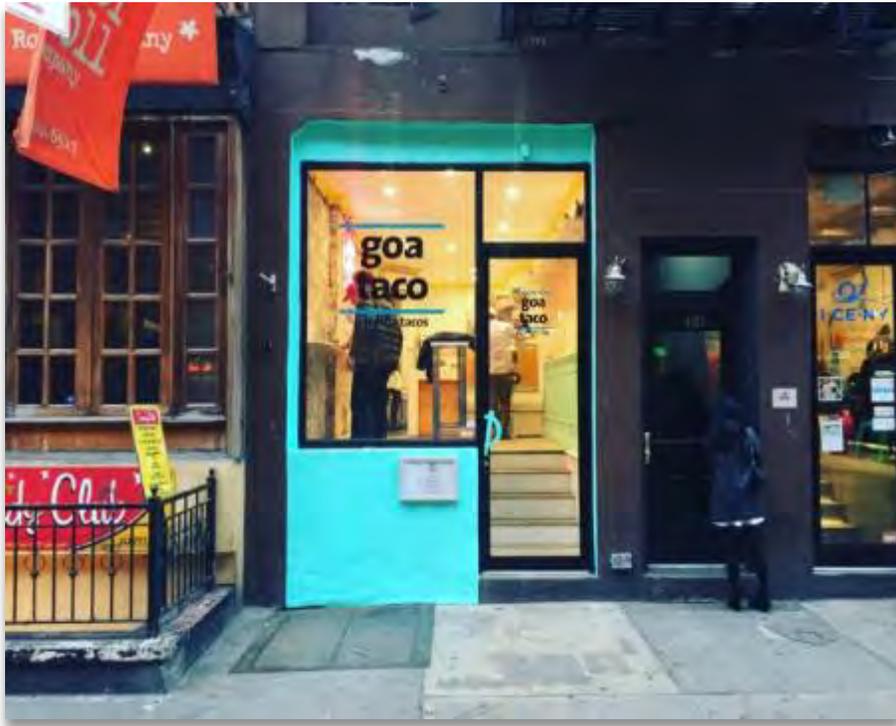
Image Source: [Pixabay](#)

- Hotels have become the gateways to food tourism, and have shifted their dining models to embrace local culture in order to develop local flavors, chefs, and ingredients as a part of the brand.
- Jamaica is positioning its cuisine as a tourist attraction, with cross-country food and rum tours, and new focus on Devon House, an antiquated estate from the 1800s that has been repurposed into a gastronomy center.
- Italian-inspired grocery chain Eataly has announced plans for what might be the future of food and entertainment. Recent announcements have centered around a massive theme park created solely for the celebration of Italian food. A majority of the park, reportedly, will be dedicated to shops, markets, and restaurants, but there will also be more than 75,000 square feet dedicated to growing crops.
- The Mexico Tourism Board, in partnership with LAPIZ, a creative agency, has created a cloud that literally rains tequila. It was made in order to specifically appeal to German tourists—and was even put on display at a gallery in Berlin, called Urban Spree.

## Cross-Cultural

Food fusion has evolved to embrace other cultures. This means that fusion is no longer taking one culture and westernizing it, but, instead, is combining multiple, non-western cultures in order to create new flavor combinations and discover new ways to use traditional ingredients.





*Image Source: Bowery Boogie*

- Goa Taco in Greenwich Village uses tacos as a carrier for Indian and Vietnamese flavors and ingredients. This blending of cultures creates menu items such as a recado rojo lamb shoulder taco with tzatziki and eggplant salsa.
- Bon Ton in Atlanta is doing Cajun-Vietnamese cuisine, with Vietnamese-spiced crawfish boils and ramen bowls with Cajun flavors and ingredients.
- Mexican staples like tacos and burritos are being used to make flavors and ingredients more accessible and portable, fusing them with other cultures as is being done with the Phorito from Pearl Café—a burrito stuffed with classic Vietnamese Pho—or Panda Express' new Bing menu item—a rice tortilla stuffed with things like orange and sesame chicken.
- Chicken Moto in Texas blends Sothern and Korean flavors with its Kimchi Queso, which is made with three-month aged kimchi and melted cheese, blended with gochujang and lime juice.

## Technology

Technology has enabled new dining experiences across categories and, as a side effect, has brought about the reduction of human contact in the dining world. This means more attention is now to paid to flavor and ways to enhance the dining experience by augmenting service or presentation.

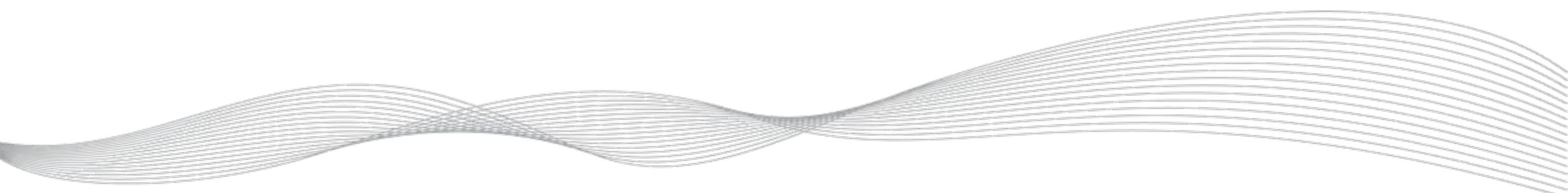




Image Source: [The Rail](#)

- Inamo uses interactive tables and table settings to deepen the dining experience, using projection mapping to give consumers the ability to visually order from the menu projected on their plates, customize the tablecloth, watch their dinner being made, and even play games, treating the table like a touchscreen device.
- Alinea in Chicago uses sous vide behind the bar to infuse cocktail ingredients with more potent and interesting flavors, such as blueberries infused with violet. There is also the Hop Sea Negroni at Cassia, in Santa Monica, which infuses Cocchi Americano, an Italian aperitif, with hops and mixes it with oyster shell-infused mescal.
- Point of Sale systems are being implemented in restaurants as a time-saving measure. Impos, one such system, makes it possible for the customer's order to be in the kitchen, instantly—the moment they send it. It frees up servers to better serve and cuts down the process time of fulfilling orders, making the whole dining experience more fluid.
- The Nima portable food sensor is a response to the continuing consumer demand for menu items tailor-made to individualized diets. The Nima chemically scans proteins to determine the gluten content of foods, and syncs up to a consumer's phone to provide the results.

## Interactive/Immersion

Consumers are no longer happy sitting idly by, waiting on their food. They want to get their hands dirty, or at least watch someone else get their hands dirty. This new level of immersion allows consumers to be directly involved in the dining process, drawing the curtain back to an extent and giving a new level of understanding (and appreciation) in the process.

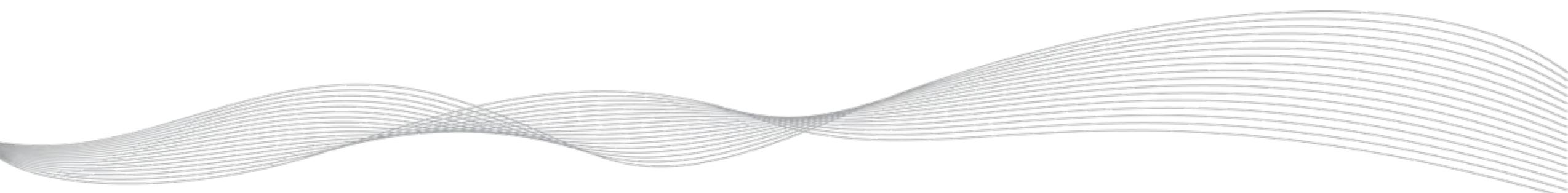




Image Source: [Air Lift Limo](#)

- O Noir in Montreal developed a menu based around surprise: you can order “surprise” options that are decided upon back-of-house and then delivered to your table in a pitch-black dining room. All the waiters are visually impaired and able to expertly navigate the dining room without a problem. The darkness is meant to emphasize the eating experience.
- Four Seasons hotels introduced a new *Taste of Place* program that takes consumers on immersive and interactive food tours around the local markets and restaurants. The experience includes getting to see where the chefs get their food, taking cooking lessons, and tasting special meals in exclusive locals.
- Disney is introducing World of Pandora, a new area of the Animal Kingdom theme park dedicated to the world first introduced in James Cameron’s *Avatar* movie. The food reflects the bright colors and alien fauna of the world with neon and even glowing ingredients. The plan is to use fruit boba (edible juice and fruit filled spheres) in drinks, borrowing from the milk tea trend.
- Russian House in Austin is an authentic Eastern European eatery, which goes so far as to have Russian clothing available for consumers to wear, and private dining rooms styled to look like apartments found in Moscow at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Local Is Anywhere

The concept of local is changing—it's no longer based solely on proximity, but, instead, is based on an origin story. Consumers are exploring ingredients, spices and unique flavors through the lens of locations—with or without having to actually be there. As the access hurdle to niche, experiential, and infamous flavors goes away, consumers are finding themselves exploring local, regional, and formerly inaccessible cuisines without ever leaving the comforts of home.



Image Source: [Businesswire](#)

- Arby's Big City Sandwiches promise to offer classic flavors of cities nationwide, including the Philly Cheesesteak, the New York Reuben and a Chicago-Style Beef Dip.
- Big Gay Ice Cream leverages its cult status to push its top selling products into retail, giving a broader audience access to its signature flavors and unique take on classic ice cream.
- McDonald's begins to offer bottled versions of Big Mac, McChicken, and Fillet-O-Fish sauce outside of the restaurant through promotions and limited time engagements. This is enabling consumers to create their own experiences at home, using signature flavors.
- Online sites such as Goldbely offer nationwide shipping from top restaurants across America, giving consumers the ability to get renowned food from select cities shipped to their doorstep, nationwide.

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