

Today's Restaurant

THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY AUTHORITY

VOLUME 31

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Rodents pose growing threat to food service industry: How to mitigate risks

By Ken Huening
CEO of CoverSeal

Rodents have been a problem for the food industry since the first food cart operator started hawking meat pies in the Middle Ages. But the problem has exploded in scope in recent years. According to a recent study published in the journal Science, 69% of cities studied, including Washington, D.C., San Francisco, New York City, Oakland, Buffalo, Chicago, Boston, Kansas City, and Cincinnati, had significant increases in rat populations in the period studied. Warmer temperatures extending breeding seasons and growing populations in cities are just two of the factors contributing to more rodents, and more rodent problems for restaurants and the food service industry.

Outdoor restaurant kitchens have also gained in popularity with new construction spend expected to exceed \$50B. These kitchens require compliance to state health codes which mandate the protection of the work surfaces from rodents, insects and debris (dust/dirt).

Controlling rodent populations at restaurants begins with proper food storage and trash management.



Ken Huening

Controlling rodent populations at restaurants begins with proper food storage and trash management.

Especially in outdoor spaces, trash cans should be emptied several times a day. Tables and chairs should be cleaned of debris and wiped down to remove food residue. The food prep areas and around tables where guests are dining should be swept clean throughout the day and washed and disinfected to deep clean any grease residue or food scraps from the surface on a regular schedule or as large spills occur. These provisions are all outlined in the state Health and Safety Code as it pertains to outdoor kitchen and food preparation and service areas.

Traps are often placed around restaurant parking lots and near dumpsters. While rodents may enter the traps and eat the poison inside, the traps are also counterproductive. They are designed to attract rodents to them, thereby attracting rodents to the area around a restaurant, not ideal. Another drawback of traps and rodent poison is that after the rodent consumes the poison its body becomes contaminated. Scavenger birds and animals that might later eat the rodent could also be impacted by the poison. There are states like California that have now mandated the restriction of

See **RODENTS** page 14



Ford's Garage to debut in Tennessee with new multi-unit deal

Vintage-inspired, full-service restaurant partners with TN Legends to develop up to four locations in Nashville area

Tampa, FL – [Ford's Garage](#) – the full-service, 1920s garage-themed burger and craft beer restaurant inspired by the heritage of The Ford Motor Company – has just announced a significant multi-unit franchise development agreement that will bring up to four new locations to the Middle Tennessee area over the next five years. The deal is led by TN Legends, a Nashville-based development group with decades of experience building, growing and operating successful restaurant brands across the country.

At the helm of the group is Nashville native and longtime industry veteran, Ted Moats, whose dynamic career spans commercial banking, franchising, and leading national restaurant concepts. A Vanderbilt graduate and former U.S. Navy officer, Moats began his career in commercial banking before transitioning into restaurant lending,

an entry point that launched him into franchise operations and multi-brand development. Over the last three decades, Ted has developed more than 100 restaurants across 10 brands in 20 states and held leadership roles that include Chairman, CEO and President of Logan's Roadhouse, where he grew the brand to 65 locations across 13 states under his leadership. Together with his business partner of 25 years, James Blaylock, Scott Estes, former VP – Development Ford's Garage, and the Bozard Ford family, St Augustine, FL lead by CEO, Jeff King, the TN Legends Team is thrilled to lead Ford's Garage's expansion in Tennessee.

"Ford's Garage stood out to me immediately with its timeless appeal," said Moats. "It's hard to stay relevant in the full-service industry, but Ford's Garage has a uniqueness

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Appell Pie

AI in your business

Howard Appell ♦ Today's Restaurant Publisher

It's almost impossible to not see the use of AI on Social Media and on TV across all channels. Videos posted on Facebook, X and Instagram are using AI for comedy and deception, but what will it be used for in our business?

AI is set to radically reshape the restaurant industry over the next five years, driving efficiency, personalization, and profitability across both front-of-house and back-of-house operations. From dynamic pricing to predictive labor scheduling, AI will become a core operational asset rather than a novelty.

The rise off AI in restaurants: 2026-2031 outlook

Artificial intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept for restaurants—it's becoming a strategic necessity. As operators face rising labor costs, shifting consumer expectations, and supply chain volatility, AI offers scalable solutions that touch nearly every aspect of the business.

1. Operational efficiency and automation

AI-powered automation will accelerate across kitchens, scheduling, and inventory. Smart systems will predict demand, optimize prep times, and reduce waste. For example, AI can analyze historical order patterns and real-time traffic to adjust staffing levels and prep schedules dynamically. This reduces labor hours and improves throughput—Walmart has already seen 15-50% labor savings in targeted workflows using similar models.

Robotics and AI-driven kitchen managers will prioritize orders based on complexity and cook time, ensuring synchronized plating and faster service. These systems will also help reduce food waste by forecasting ingredient usage more accurately.

2. Customer experience and personalization

AI will transform how restaurants engage with guests. Voice AI agents are already handling reservations and phone orders; in the coming years, they'll expand into upselling, loyalty management, and real-time feedback collection.

Dynamic menu boards and apps will personalize offerings based on time of day, customer preferences, and

location. AI will push tailored promotions during slow periods, increasing traffic and spend. Expect loyalty programs to become smarter, offering individualized rewards based on behavior rather than blanket discounts.

3. Menu innovation and pricing strategy

AI will play a major role in menu development and pricing. By analyzing sales data, customer feedback, and even social media trends, AI can suggest new dishes or retire underperforming ones. Dynamic pricing—once reserved for airlines and hotels—is coming to quick-service restaurants (QSRs), allowing operators to adjust prices in real time based on demand, weather, or local events.

This level of agility helps restaurants stay competitive and profitable, especially in saturated markets.

4. Risk management and supply chain resilience

AI will help restaurants anticipate and mitigate risks. Advanced models can analyze supplier health, geopolitical events, and weather patterns to forecast disruptions. This enables proactive ordering and supplier diversification, reducing downtime and spoilage.

Food safety compliance will improve. AI can unify data from sensors, logs, and audits to detect anomalies and trace root causes faster than manual systems.

5. Challenges and adoption gaps

Despite the promise, adoption remains uneven. A Deloitte survey found that while 82% of restaurant executives plan to increase AI investments, only 43% feel strategically ready to deploy it. Barriers include unclear use cases, infrastructure gaps, and talent shortages.

Smaller operators may struggle to keep pace, but cloud-based AI platforms and third-party integrations are making advanced tools more accessible.

Final thought

By 2031, AI will be embedded in the DNA of successful restaurants—driving smarter decisions, leaner operations, and personalized guest experiences. The winners will be those who move early, experiment boldly, and build AI into long-term strategy. For suppliers, tech vendors, and consultants, this shift opens new opportunities to support the industry's transformation.

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What's Going On

Important new products, corporate news and industry events

In 2025, **16 Handles** signed 25 new franchise deals across seven states. The brand now has 32 new stores under development, bringing its total footprint to 67 open or in-development stores.

These deals represent significant new market entries and expansions, including:

◆ **Arizona** Multiple locations within Phoenix metro open beginning February 2026

◆ **Virginia** Virginia Beach and Newport News stores open Spring 2026

◆ **Chicago** Debut of Illinois' first location by Summer 2026 in Naperville

◆ **Texas** The brand continues to expand in Texas, including market debuts in San Antonio and UT Austin, and increased Houston and Dallas presence

Tri-State Area – New stores are slated across the northeast stretching from Hartford, CT to Princeton, NJ, and additional NYC metro area stores in Brooklyn and Staten Island.” **16 Handles** opened its first store in Manhattan’s East Village in 2008, becoming the first self-serve frozen yogurt shop in New York City.



Pokeworks, the leading fast-casual poke brand, is targeting Florida as one of its next major growth markets as it looks to build upon its existing presence in the state. With the goal of opening 10 new locations in Florida over the next three years, the brand is focused on strategic growth in Orlando, Southwest Florida, and several coastal cities. Pokeworks currently serves guests in the Greater Orlando area, and is looking to expand its footprint across Florida. This Florida initiative comes as Pokeworks celebrates strong systemwide momentum across its 72 global locations in the U.S., Canada, and Taiwan. In the first half of the year alone, the brand opened six new locations, strengthening its footprint in key states like California, Texas, Massachusetts, Tennessee, and North Carolina. “Florida has all the hallmarks of a strong market for Pokeworks,” said Peter Yang, Co-Founder and Head of Development at Pokeworks. “The Orlando area and Southwest Florida

continue to see rapid population and tourism growth, making them prime territories for our expansion. We’re excited to partner with passionate franchisees who want to bring Pokeworks to more communities.

◆ Hawaiian Bros Island Grill has announced the continued expansion of its franchise footprint through a multi-unit development agreement with Ohana Restaurant Group. **The agreement will bring Hawaiian Bros to Kentucky, with four locations planned in Lexington and one in Bowling Green**, marking a key milestone in Hawaiian Bros’ growth throughout the Southeast. Ohana Restaurant Group, led by partners Zach Fugate, Nick Blasi and Jessie Nelson leading operations, currently operate five Hawaiian Bros locations across Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, with additional restaurants under construction.

◆ **Wings & Seafood 102’s owner Kevin Tran**, is looking at March or April for



his fast-casual restaurant. The new eatery will be located at **1711 Athens Highway Ste 400 in Grayson GA**. Focusing on mostly takeout, it will also offer some dining. Look for wings alongside a wide seafood lineup—crawfish, snow crab, blue crab,

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A road map for you and your employees

John Tschohl ♦ Today's Restaurant Contributor

As a manager—or an employee—performance reviews are critical to your success. Essentially, they are road maps, letting you know where you are today and what you need to do to move forward. Performance reviews not only help employees by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, they help managers

build winning teams.

There are several steps involved in conducting a performance review that will help you assess and critique employees and develop a plan to move forward. The first is to set aside a specific amount of time for that process. It's important that you let employees know what you

will be discussing and that you give them enough time to prepare in advance of the meeting. That preparation will include asking them to assess their own performances.

Then have those employees deliver their self-assessments to you in advance of the meeting so you have time to learn where they see themselves now—and in the future. Ask them to examine their interactions with customers, coworkers, and other team members and to identify where they think they excel and where they can improve. Also, ask them if there are any roadblocks they are facing and how they would like your help in dealing with—or removing—them.

or continued performance. Provide your assessments to employees before the meeting so they will be familiar with the process and the questions you will be asking them. Follow up with employees in advance of the meeting by reminding them of its specific time and date.

Avoid distractions during the performance review. That includes turning off your cell phone and letting other employees and colleagues know that you are not to be interrupted for the next hour. This is important because it lets employees know that, during that time, they will be your focus and have your full attention

Work with employees to create a plan and to get their buy-ins for implementing it. This step requires that you have an open dialogue by asking employees for their input and on ways they can improve their performance. This includes asking employees to assess your performance and identify what you can do to improve your interaction and communication to help them improve and perform at their best.

Performance reviews are important and should be conducted on a regular basis. They let your employees know that you value them and want to do whatever you can to help them succeed. When your employees succeed, you will, too.

For more information on John Tschohl and the Service Quality Institute, visit the website online at www.customer-service.com. 

About the Author: John Tschohl is the founder and president of the Service Quality Institute—the global leader in customer service with operations in more than 40 countries. He is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on all aspects of customer service and has developed 20 customer service training programs and written eight books on customer service and success—including his best-seller, *Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service*—that are used by companies throughout the world. His monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge at www.customer-service.com. He can also be reached on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

Work with employees to create a plan and to get their buy-ins for implementing it.

You, too, need to prepare by completing a performance assessment that will lead you to grade employees' actions and their levels of improvement in the past. This process involves reviewing employees' files and referring to notes you took during previous performance reviews that document previous performances, expectations met, and specific achievements or incidents—positive and negative. Some of the standards you should address include the employee's reliability, work habits, initiative, skills, job commitment, and attitude toward coworkers and customers.

Use that documentation to gauge the success of past goals while creating a plan for improved

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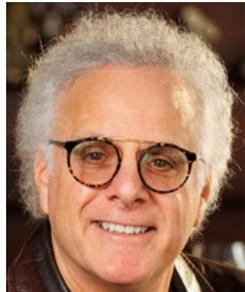


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2026 restaurant marketing trends



Benson Fischer ♦ CEO of ZivZo Marketing Group

In the ever-evolving culinary landscape of 2026, staying ahead of the curve is no longer a luxury—it is a survival requirement. While the bedrock of any successful restaurant remains delicious food and exceptional service, savvy restaurateurs are now embracing sophisticated, tech-driven marketing strategies to cut through the digital noise.

To thrive in this hyper-competitive market, there are 9 dominant trends shaping the industry this year.

1. Partnering with specialized agencies

The pace of marketing innovation is now so rapid that “tried and true” methods from last week can become obsolete by Monday. For many owners, managing a restaurant while simultaneously mastering complex algorithm shifts is overwhelming. Engaging a specialized restaurant marketing agency ensures you have experts to implement and track the latest tools, allowing you to focus on the kitchen while they focus on growth.

2. The rise of hyper-personalization

Generic “blast” emails are a relic of the past. Today’s diners expect experiences tailored specifically to them. By leveraging customer data, restaurants can now offer hyper-personalized

interactions: a birthday voucher for a guest’s favorite dessert or a menu suggestion based on their specific dietary history. This level of detail fosters a deep emotional connection that transforms casual diners into brand advocates.

3. AI-powered marketing automation

Artificial Intelligence has moved from a novelty to a necessity. AI tools are now streamlining operations by:

Predictive Analytics: Analyzing historical data to forecast trends and optimize labor and inventory.

Dynamic Content: Automatically generating social media posts that resonate with specific audience segments.

Chatbot Integration: Handling reservations and FAQs instantly, ensuring no customer inquiry goes unanswered while freeing up front-of-house staff.

4. Short-form video dominance

In 2026, video is the primary language of the internet. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels remain the most effective tools for storytelling. Successful restaurants use short-form video to:

Provide “behind-the-scenes” glimpses of the kitchen’s passion.

Showcase “food porn” style close-ups of signature dishes.

Collaborate with niche micro-influencers to reach local, highly engaged audiences.

5. Social commerce and seamless ordering

The gap between “seeing” and “buying” has disappeared. Through social commerce, customers can now browse your menu on a social feed and complete a delivery or pickup order without ever leaving the app. This friction-less journey significantly reduces bounce rates and capitalizes on impulse cravings.

6. High-impact experiential marketing

In a world saturated with digital content, tangible, real-world experiences have become more valuable. Experiential marketing—such as themed “chef’s table” nights, live music collaborations with local breweries, or high-concept pop-up shops—creates “Instagrammable” moments that traditional advertising simply cannot replicate.

7. Gamified loyalty programs

Modern loyalty programs have moved beyond the simple punch card. By gamifying the experience,

restaurants encourage engagement through challenges, point-based rewards, and “level-up” perks. This not only incentivizes repeat visits but also provides a steady stream of data to further fuel your personalization efforts.

8. The authority of user-generated content (UGC)

Diners trust other diners more than they trust brands. User-Generated Content (UGC)—the photos, videos, and reviews shared by your guests—is your most powerful social proof. By actively encouraging reviews and featuring guest photos on your official channels, you build an authentic community and show prospective diners that your brand is a trusted local favorite.

9. Metaverse and immersive d

While still emerging, the Metaverse and Extended Reality (XR) are providing new ways to connect. Virtual tours allow potential guests to “walk through” your dining room from their living room, while Augmented Reality (AR) menus can project 3D versions of dishes onto a diner’s table, helping them decide what to order and increasing the “wow” factor of the meal.

You can visit Benson Fischer-ZivZo Marketing’s website at ZivZo.com. 

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What's Going On from page 3

oysters, mussels—plus po' boys, burgers, Philly cheesesteaks, and chicken and fish sandwiches.

◆ **Restaurant Technologies is the leading provider of commercial kitchen solutions for nearly 50,000 customers nationwide.** Since 1999, its Total Oil Management and AutoMist® solutions help “Control the Kitchen Chaos” for quick-service and full-service restaurant chains, independent restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, resorts, casinos, hospitals, and more. By automating the hardest tasks in the kitchen, Restaurant Technologies improves food quality, safety, and efficiency for its customers. Total Oil Management eliminates the manual handling of cooking oil through an automated solution that delivers, stores, filters, monitors, and removes oil. Restaurant Technologies also works with renewable energy partners to recycle used cooking oil into renewable fuels for a more sustainable business. AutoMist automates hood and flue cleaning to reduce fire risk and create a cleaner, safer work environment. Headquartered in Mendota Heights, MN, Restaurant Technologies is privately held and operates 41 depots nationwide with more than 1,200 employees.



Sauce, a leading first-party ordering and delivery platform built for independent restaurants, has announced its new integration with Apple Business Connect, a free tool that allows businesses to customize how their information appears across Apple Maps, Wallet, Siri, Mail, and other apps. Access to Apple Business Connect gives Sauce restaurant partners control over their Apple

Maps place cards so hours, photos, and promotions stay accurate and engaging, creating a simple, direct way for customers to connect with their favorite restaurants. “Stronger visibility across Apple’s tools creates a smoother path from discovery to ordering,” said Li-ran Navon, CEO and Founder of Sauce. “This integration fits perfectly with our mission to help restaurants take control of their brand and customer relationships and online presence. From digital discovery to ordering to delivery, Sauce now helps restaurants own every touchpoint of the customer journey.” Getsauce.com.

◆ **Jersey Mike's Subs** (“Jersey Mike’s” or the “Company”), a leading franchisor of over 3,200 fast-casual sandwich



shops known for its fresh sliced and fresh grilled subs, has announced it has signed a franchise agreement with JM Submarines UK LTD, led by Jersey Mike’s founder and Chairman of the Board, Peter Cancro, to **open 400 stores in the United Kingdom and Ireland.** Cancro founded Jersey Mike’s more than 50 years ago and remains a significant shareholder following the Company’s sale to Blackstone last year. This agreement marks the first European expansion for the Company, with plans to open the first location in 2026. Giving back is also core to Jersey Mike’s mission, and the Company was recognized on Forbes’ Best Brands for Social Impact List in 2025. In March 2025, the Company completed its 15th Annual Month of

Giving, raising a record breaking \$30 million and surpassing more than \$143 million given to over 200 local charities since it began the tradition in 2011, reinforcing its commitment to being a beloved brand in its communities.

◆ **50 Best has announced SevenRooms,** a DoorDash company, as its first-ever global partner – with SevenRooms appointed as Official Booking Platform and DoorDash as Official Delivery Partner – across the Restaurants, Bars, Hotels and Vineyards

brands in the 50 Best portfolio for the next three years. The partnership builds on SevenRooms’ existing relationship with The World’s 50 Best Hotels and marks the first time a partner will support across the full 50 Best portfolio. The agreement spans all global rankings and regional offshoots under the 50 Best umbrella, connecting a global community of venues with guest experience technology and on-demand delivery where available. The partnership underscores the continued expansion and international scale of the 50 Best organization, following the integration of The World’s 50 Best Vineyards into the portfolio and the launch of North America’s 50 Best Restaurants, both



in 2025, and the recent announcement of Europe’s 50 Best Bars to be unveiled in 2026. 50 Best is owned and operated by William Reed, an independent UK-based media group.

◆ **Weird Brothers Coffee is a veteran-owned specialty coffee company founded by brothers Paul and Kenny Olsen.** The brand roasts its coffee in small batches at its Roasting Factory in Herndon, Virginia, blending tradition, innovation, and global inspiration. Known for its authentic story, strong community focus, and uncompromising quality standards, Weird Brothers Coffee is now expanding through

See WGO page 12

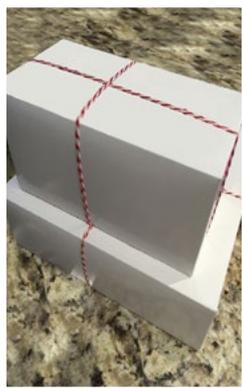


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Why your restaurant profits are inconsistent

David Scott Peters ♦ Today's Restaurant Contributor

Are you tired of seeing your restaurant's potential profits slip through the cracks? Whether it's due to inefficiencies or high costs, it's time to take control and build consistency in profits. Understanding why your restaurant's financial performance fluctuates can be the key to unlocking steady, reliable growth.

A critical aspect often overlooked in building consistent profits is accountability. When accountability is missing in a restaurant's culture, everything from financial targets to basic operational procedures can start to slip through the cracks. Without someone responsible for each part of the process, issues go unnoticed until they become major problems.

Consider a scenario where a restaurant had a great month followed by a sudden drop in profits. Upon review, it was found that inventory management lapsed, causing excessive waste. Schedules were also created based on intuition rather than budget, and customers started noticing the restaurant's decline in cleanliness due to neglected checklists.

Here's where accountability plays its part. If each shift had a designated person responsible for inventory checks, discrepancies would have



Structured reviews led by specific team members ensure everyone knows their responsibilities.

been caught much earlier. If schedules adhered to the budget, labor cost would have remained in line. And if each shift ensured checklists were followed and completed, customers would have continued to enjoy a clean and welcoming environment, increasing the likelihood of their return.

So, how do we fix this?

Regular restaurant financial reviews

Regular restaurant financial reviews are crucial. Start with having a restaurant budget. This means not just looking at your profit and loss statement at the end of the month but analyzing your numbers weekly using a weekly prime cost budget variance report. Ordering and scheduling should be done on budget, and these reviews should be conducted weekly, if not daily. Structured reviews led by specific team members ensure everyone knows their responsibilities.

Employee training

Proper employee training ensures your team understands their roles and feels empowered to act when things go awry. Continuous training programs help maintain high standards and operational consistency.

Clear sales performance metrics

Set clear performance metrics for your restaurant. Everyone, from your head kitchen pro to your servers, should know what success looks like in their role and how they directly impact the restaurant's profitability.

Take these insights and put them into action. Implement regular financial reviews, enhance your training programs and establish clear metrics for accountability. This isn't just about avoiding losses; it's about creating a pathway to consistent restaurant profitability and success. 

David Scott Peters is a restaurant industry veteran and the original restaurant coach. He's spent decades perfecting the systems that helped thousands of independent restaurants reclaim their profits and freedom. His Restaurant Prosperity Formula™, which includes Peters' proprietary budgeting system, has the power to drive down food and labor costs for independent operators by an average of 23%. Restaurant owners who work with him get one-on-one training and a step-by-step plan tailored to their restaurant, taught by a restaurant owner who's already used Peters' systems to transform their business. His book, "Restaurant Prosperity Formula: What Successful Restaurateurs Do," teaches the systems and traits restaurant owners must develop to run a profitable restaurant. Learn more in his free 30-minute training video <http://www.davidscottpeters.com>.

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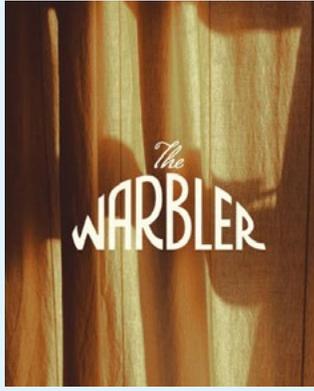
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Featured City New Orleans

Sail 250 will be coming to New Orleans May 28–June 1. New Orleans will be the first stop as America welcomes tall ships from around the world to the Port of New Orleans to celebrate America's 250th Anniversary. There will be a welcome parade, a downtown fireworks show, multiple family activities and the ability to tour several of the tall ships. For more information, visit www.sail250neworleans.com.



The Warbler Hotel is slated to open in 2026 at 1923 St. Charles Ave in New Orleans. The new project will offer a martini bar, restaurant and [roof-top pool](#) and bar from the CureCo. team and Andrew Zimmerman.

The owners of a popular New Orleans sushi restaurant plan to open a second location in Metairie. [Kenji Omakase](#) at 217 Camp St. in New Orleans, is known for its dry-aged sushi, part of its omakase dining experience. Chef Matt

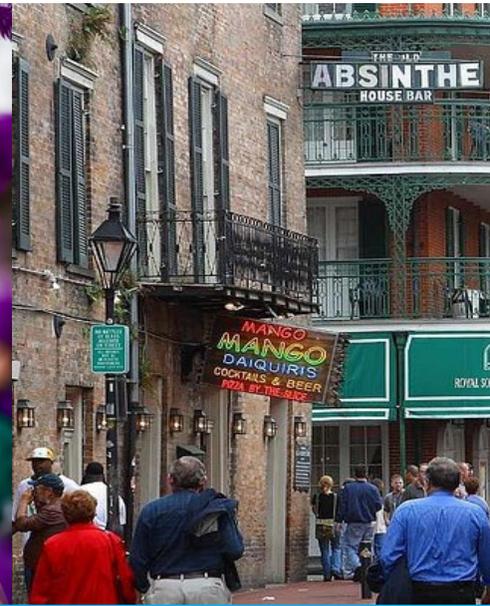


Nguyen is the owner and has partners in the new venture. Kenji Kazoku is expected to open soon. It will be located at 2929 Metairie Road.

Brennan's Restaurant in New Orleans' French Quarter celebrated its 80th anniversary with a special lunch event, donating part of the proceeds to Manning Family Children's Hospital. The event featured an \$80 tasting menu, with owner Ralph Brennan emphasizing the importance of giving back.

Eggs Up Grill has arrived in Louisiana. The new Lake Charles restaurant officially opened the doors to the state's first Eggs Up Grill, located at [4058 Ryan St.](#), bringing a fresh, community-focused dining experience to Southwest Louisiana. The restaurant is owned and operated by Norman Carter and T-Claude Devall, long-time friends and local entrepreneurs who share a deep connection to the area. Both are residents of Lake Charles.

Email your info for **What's Going On** to terri@trnusa.com.



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NEW ORLEANS

Bocuse d'Or and Pastry World Cup in New Orleans

The Americas Selection of Bocuse d'Or and Pastry World Cup will be held in July 2026 at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. The best chefs and pastry artists from across North and South America will be in New Orleans competing for a coveted place in the Grand Finale in Lyon, France in 2027, where they will join colleagues from Europe, Africa, Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region. Last hosted by New Orleans in 2024, no other United States city has hosted either event.

New Orleans & Company, Sirha Food, and the Louisiana Restaurant Association are bringing this prestigious event. For the first time, these prestigious international competitions will take place alongside the 2026 LRA



Showcase at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

A new twist is that Bocuse d'Or and Pastry World Cup will be held in conjunction with the Louisiana Restaurant Association (LRA) Showcase, the largest restaurant and hospitality industry trade-show in the U.S. Gulf Region.

Eight teams from across the Americas will compete, each made up of three specialists: a sugar expert, a chocolatier, and an ice cream maker. Over the course of the competition, they'll showcase technical skill, creativity, and precision to impress the jury. By the end of the day, only

The Louisiana Restaurant Association celebrates its 80th Anniversary in 2026.



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Pastry World Cup Returns July 2026



the top four teams will earn a place in the 2027 Pastry World Cup Grand Final.

Stan Harris is President & CEO

Stan Harris was selected as President and CEO of the Louisiana Restaurant Association (LRA) in August 2010. Harris spent over 30 years in leadership roles in the restaurant industry with TJM Restaurant Management (TJM RM), the largest franchisee of Ruth's Chris Steak House, serving for 22 years as President and CEO. TJM RM developed successful restaurant brands including TJ Ribs, Ninfa's Mexican Restaurant, and

Ruffino's Italian Restaurant. He led the company's sale in 2008, after which he took on multiple roles in private equity and consulting.

The Louisiana Restaurant Association (LRA) celebrates its **80th Anniversary in 2026**, marking eight decades of advocacy, education, and leadership on behalf of Louisiana's vibrant hospitality industry. As the Association looks ahead to the next chapter of service, the LRA announced its **2026 Volunteer Leadership**, led by **Octavio Mantilla, Co-Founder and Owner of BRG Hospitality**, who will serve as Chair. 



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Desert De Oro Foods launches full Upside rollout

Washington, DC - **Upside** has deepened its presence in the restaurant industry through a full partnership with **Desert De Oro Foods** (DDO), a major Yum! Brands franchisee operating roughly 350 Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut, and full-service restaurant locations across Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico.

After a six-month pilot, DDO expanded Upside across its 350 locations, spanning key markets including Phoenix and San Antonio, where early results showed strong customer engagement and repeat visits.

"We began with a small test of 71 locations and quickly saw how Upside could reach new local customers and deliver real profit," said **Fred Bendel, VP of Operations at Desert De Oro Foods**. "Once we validated the results internally, expanding the program across our full portfolio was an easy decision."

DDO partnered with Upside to boost customer frequency, repeat visits, and acquisition of new or lapsed guests—and saw measurable gains across all fronts. During the pilot that began in May 2025, the program delivered:

- ◆ 60% ROI
- ◆ 4.4x lift in monthly transactions from new and existing customers
- ◆ 55% reorder rate
- ◆ 76% of participants were new or infrequent customers, demonstrating

Upside's ability to attract new audiences while re-engaging past patrons.

"Desert De Oro's full rollout shows that Upside drives real, sustained growth for multi-brand operators," said **Mike McNamee, Senior Director of Account Management at Upside**. "It's proof that our model delivers measurable results at scale, across different restaurant types and regions."

Upside partners with more than 100,000 restaurants, grocery, fuel, and convenience stores nationwide. Its two-sided marketplace connects consumers earning cash back on everyday purchases with retailers gaining incremental profit. This self-reinforcing cycle has delivered over \$1 billion in cash back to consumers and \$2.2 billion in incremental profit to retailers.

About Upside: Upside is a digital marketplace that connects millions of consumers with brick-and-mortar retailers nationwide. Since 2016, Upside's personalized offers have empowered individuals to gain greater purchasing power for their essential needs while helping businesses achieve measurable profits. Billions of dollars in commerce run through the Upside platform annually, directly benefiting retailers, consumers, and sustainability initiatives.

About Desert De Oro Foods: Desert de Oro Foods, Inc. (DDO Foods) - ddofoods.com - is a multi-concept restaurant company operating full-service and quick-service brands in Arizona, and across the country. The company operates a diverse portfolio of nationally recognized and locally beloved dining concepts, with a strong focus on hospitality, community involvement, and team development.

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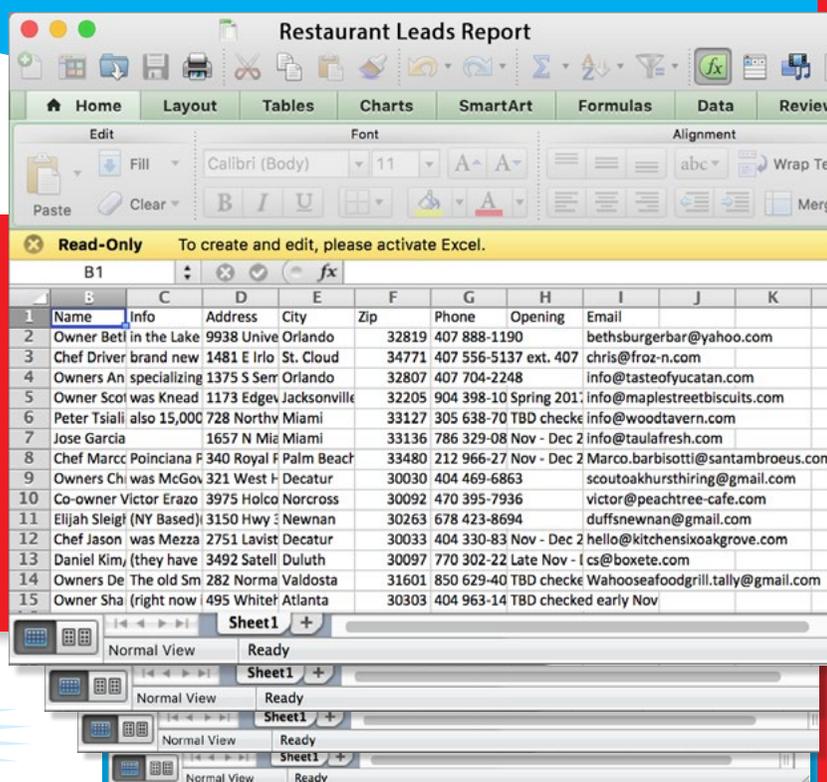
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Vocelli Pizza expands footprint into Georgia, Texas and Maryland

Brand unveils a new vibrant community-focused dining experience in historic Dalton landmark, brings back an experienced operator in Rockville and introduces a regionalized menu with Halal Products to Houston

Pittsburgh, PA - [Vocelli Pizza](#), an Italian-inspired pizza chain known for its handcrafted pizzas and award-winning operations, announced its continued national expansion with three new locations opening in early 2026. The company will debut its fourth dine-in restaurant in Dalton, Georgia, in the historic Crown Cotton Mill building. They have signed a new franchise agreement in Katy, Texas, marking Vocelli's first entry into the Houston market and opening the 17th Maryland Store in Rockville.

"We are thrilled to continue our growth into new communities that share our passion for quality, service, and authentic Italian-inspired food," said Toni Bianco, CEO of Vocelli Pizza. "Our expansion into Dalton and Houston reflects the strong demand for our brand, and we look forward to delivering an exceptional experience to guests in both markets."

In Dalton, Georgia, multi-unit Franchisees of Vocelli Pizza will open within the historic Crown Cotton Mill, originally built in 1884 and now transformed into a vibrant mixed-use destination with shops, restaurants, event spaces, and loft apartments. Opened in January 2026, the new dine-in location will bring a lively, community-focused atmosphere to the landmark setting, including a stage for

live music, pool tables, bingo nights, beer and wine service, and a weekend brunch menu, creating a true gathering place for families, friends, and local residents. The Dalton location will be the 2nd Georgia location built.

The Katy location, scheduled to open in March 2026, will introduce a regionalized menu with Halal products, offering an inclusive dining option for Houston's growing and diverse community. The location will be at 2941 W. Grand Parkway, North Katy, Texas.

The Rockville, Maryland, location is set to return under a franchisee with deep ties to the Vocelli Pizza family business, supported by the expertise of a longtime Vocelli employee turned franchisee. The location is expected to open by February 2026.

"The team is excited to introduce Vocelli Pizza to Houston with a full Halal menu," said Toni Bianco, CEO of Vocelli Pizza. "There is a clear demand for high-quality Halal pizza and delivery options, and we are proud to meet that need while bringing our brand to a new and dynamic market."

These upcoming openings show the continued growth and Vocelli Pizza's momentum as the company aims to launch 11 new locations in 2026 across the United States. **TR**

About Vocelli Pizza: Pizza is headquartered in Pittsburgh, PA and has over 80 locations offering pizza and other Italian foods for carryout and delivery. Since opening its doors in 1988 and selling the first franchise in 1993, The company has realized franchise growth from its award-winning product, low start-up costs and a national marketing program. Vocelli Pizza offers single and multi-unit development packages to qualified franchisees. Online at [Vocellipizza.com](#).

What's Going On from page 6

franchising. "We Proudly Partner with [GOVX](#) to give Discounts to Active Military, Veterans, First Responders and Teachers!" Visit the website online at [WeirdBrothers.com](#).



Jason Sorbet who also has Nashville's [Barrel & Proof](#) and [The Chloe](#) is bringing a new bar to Nashville. **Love's Alibi located at 901 Gleaves St, in Nashville, TN will open by Spring.** They will offer a tavern-style menu for all diners. A little moody, a little mischief, a lot



of love. "Love's Alibi is a cocktail-forward neighborhood bar in Nashville's Gulch. Step into the soft neon glow and vibrant energy where cocktails come quick, conversations linger, and every night feels like it might turn into a story." "We built this place for the ones who know how to have a good time without needing to make a scene. For people who love beautiful things but don't take themselves too seriously. For anyone who's ever said, "I shouldn't have, but... love's alibi."

bringing a taste of locally brewed beer to one of the nation's busiest airports with The Winery and Tasting Room powered by Brewlando. As part of MCO's continued growth and modernization, The Winery and Tasting Room powered by Brewlando will anchor Citrus Market, a new grab-and-go market concept within the airport's expansion.

The space will offer travelers a convenient, locally inspired experience, with the Winery and Tasting Room serving as a dedicated bar where guests can relax and enjoy a curated tasting experience from a locally owned Orlando

brand. "Being part of MCO's expansion is a huge milestone for us," said Shara Pathak, founder of Brewlando. "Orlando International Airport is often the first and last impression visitors have of our city, and we're honored to represent Orlando's craft beer scene on such a global stage."



Today's Restaurant invites you to submit info for the What's Going On column at any time. Please e-mail your company, product or event information to terri@trnusa.com and try to keep the word count at 50-75 words or so. Get free publicity for your company, product or service! **TR**



Brewlando, Orlando's homegrown craft brewery, has announced its involvement in the ongoing expansion of Orlando International Airport (MCO),

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Rodents from page 1

certain poisons to reduce the collateral harm to other species, but it also makes the poisons less effective.

One of the main concerns with the presence of rodents in a restaurant is the bacteria and viruses they can spread. Hantavirus, leptospirosis, rat bite fever, and even the plague can be spread through bites, droppings, and urine. Beyond protecting food and beverage products from rodent exposure, restaurants also need to be vigilant about the cleanliness of dishes, utensils, cooking

what some vendors claim. Rodents can chew through bulletproof fabrics like Kevlar. A certain type of fabric is not going to keep out a rodent, but providing a barrier of entry helps. Rodents do not like sitting in the open for long. Creating a blocking barrier like a cover sealing the entrances to the work areas is an effective solution for keeping them out. It also stays on during windstorms

The reality is, rodents will always be a challenge for the food service industry. Making a restaurant completely rodent proof is basically impossible. Rodents can smell food through plastic and cardboard packaging. Rodents can also chew through nearly any material including wood, wallboard, plastic bins and metal fiber.

Putting barriers between rodents and their food, proper food storage, and regular cleaning can help control rodent populations and limit their activity around restaurants. Consistent and thorough rodent management protocols can help restaurants reduce current rodent activity and help mitigate it in the future. **TR**

About the Author: Ken Huening is the inventor and CEO of CoverSeal. An avid collector of exotic and classic vehicles, Ken has experienced rodent damage on more than one occasion. To his dismay, most solutions on the market to deter rodents were either impractical or ineffective. He created CoverSeal as an easy and complete protection solution. For more information, visit www.getcoverseal.com.

The reality is, rodents will always be a challenge for the food service industry.

equipment, and food preparation surfaces. In California, the restraint health code requires restaurants to install rodent resistant covers on outdoor cooking and food preparation surfaces. When selecting a cover to comply with local code requirements, restaurants should keep in mind that there is no such thing as a rodent proof fabric regardless of

Ford's Garage from page 1

and staying power that immediately resonated with me. The atmosphere, the commitment to quality, and the guest experience are what set the restaurant apart from the rest, each location is meticulously crafted with care, and I think Nashville and surrounding areas will instantly fall in love with the concept."

Ford's Garage offers a unique blend of comfort food, craft beer, and vintage automotive nostalgia. Known for its signature burgers, over-the-top desserts, and themed décor featuring classic cars, gas pumps, and a true 1920s garage vibe, Ford's Garage creates a destination for families, foodies, and car enthusiasts alike.

The group is targeting locations in high-growth suburban communities such as Murfreesboro and other key markets surrounding Nashville. In addition to the four units under the multi-unit development agreement, the group has plans to open even more locations in the future.

"There's tremendous opportunity in the Nashville region," he continued. "Full-service restaurant concepts perform exceptionally well here, but success requires understanding the community and the real estate. Ford's Garage delivers a fun, immersive dining experience that I know Middle Tennessee guests will embrace."

Beyond site development, TN Legends with the help of partner, Bozard Ford and Jeff King, will also be

engaging in conversations with multiple Ford dealers in the region and is actively evaluating land acquisitions for standalone buildouts. Bozard Ford is the first Ford dealer in the country to develop a Ford's Garage restaurant located on dealership property.

"Expanding into Tennessee has been a long-term goal for Ford's Garage and partnering with a group as experienced and deeply rooted in the Nashville community as TN Legends makes this opportunity especially exciting," said Billy Downs, President of Ford's Garage. "Nashville is a vibrant, high-growth market that values great food, great experiences, and authentic brands, all things Ford's Garage is built on. We're thrilled to bring our unique blend of quality, hospitality, and automotive-inspired nostalgia to Tennessee for the first time and look forward to building meaningful connections in the communities we'll serve." **TR**

About Ford's Garage: Founded in 2012 and franchising since 2015, Ford's Garage - fordsgarageusa.com - opened its first location in Ft Myers, FL, less than a mile from Henry Ford's winter home. Today, as the only official licensee of The Ford Motor Company, operators are able to use the company's iconic logo and other brand imagery, to resonate with customers looking to have a true experience with their meal at the 1920's garage-themed burger and craft beer restaurant franchise. The brand has expanded to include a total of 33 locations across eight states and is eager to find qualified franchisees to help bring the brand to more communities east of the Mississippi.

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