

Dining trends: Self-service=quick service

Innovations to watch: Self-service kiosks, McDonald's and Starbucks on wheels, pizza crayons, and a no-hands handle in bathrooms.

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NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) - New technology innovations could soon force the restaurant industry to rejigger an often-used acronym -- QSR, or quick-service restaurant -- to SSR, or self-service restaurant, instead.

Self-service kiosks and computerized table-top ordering screens are just two of the trends that will be on display at the National Restaurant Association's (NRA) upcoming industry show this May, an annual event that showcases the latest offerings in technology, menu items, uniform fashions and restaurant designs.

"The restaurant industry is the most labor-intensive industry in the country," said Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research with NRA, adding that it currently employs about 12.5 million workers in over 925,000 restaurants and is projected to grow by 2 million workers over the next 10 years.

"When you introduce technology into restaurant operations, whether these are fast-food operators or family dining chains, you are able to get above-normal productivity increases," he said.

For example, industry insiders said franchisees of fast-food leader McDonald's, sandwich chain Subway and restaurant operator Arby's have tested self-service kiosks.

Juan Perez, president of Adusa, Inc., said his company, in partnership with IBM, has developed kiosks that allow consumers to self-order in grocery stores (Kroger is Adusa's biggest customer) and restaurants.



COURTESY: ADUSA INC

Self-service kiosk

Customers at fast-food restaurants can place their food order through the machine themselves and pay with a credit or debit card. At grocery stores, customers can order deli, bakery items through the kiosk as well as look up recipes that use various products sold in the store. (Company: Adusa, Inc.)

Said Perez, "Our kiosks are already in the pilot tests in grocery stores. A customer walks up to the kiosk and places an order to the deli or the bakery. They can pick up the order after they're done with the rest of their shopping." Moreover, customers can also use the kiosk to get information on wines or look up recipes, he said.

Customers in quick-service restaurants will use the kiosks to order food and pay with a credit or debit card, Perez said, avoiding both misorders and long lines at the counter.

"It lets consumers feel more in control because they're getting exactly what they ordered. Businesses can deploy the staff elsewhere and refocus on speeding up order delivery," said the NRA's Riehle.

Likewise, casual dining order systems are undergoing an evolution of their own. Chosen Media will debut a table-top touchscreen order system at the show.

"Customers can place their menu order through the system, they can ask for refills, call the waiter to their table and pay for their meal using a credit or debit card," said company manager Calvin Watkins. The system also acts as a personal jukebox.