

NETWEBMEDIA AI SERIES · 14 INDUSTRIES

AI and Restaurants & Cafés

Phone answering, menus, reviews, labor and ordering: a plain-English guide to AI for independent restaurants, bars and cafés.

RESTAURANTS

BARS

CAFÉS

FOOD TRUCKS

First edition · September 2026

Book 4 of 14 · netwebmedia.com

Photo: Louis Hansel / Unsplash

About this series

Fourteen books, one question: what does AI actually change for a business like yours? Each book is written for one industry — its customers, its tools, its rules — so you can act on it this month, not someday. Buy one, or get all fourteen in the bundle.

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Every statistic in this book carries a numbered reference to a named, dated source in the Sources section. Benchmarks are medians or averages from other businesses as published by those sources — not predictions of your results.

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Start here

This book is for the people who actually run food businesses: the owner of a 60-seat neighborhood restaurant who does the schedule on Sunday night, the couple with two cafés and one manager between them, the bar that lives on Friday and Saturday, the food truck whose marketing department is an Instagram account, the taquería that gets forty calls during the dinner rush and answers half of them. If you cook, pour, serve or deliver food for a living and you want to know what AI changes for a business your size, this is written for you.

It is not a book about the future of AI. It is a book about the next thirty days. Every chapter ends in something you can do this week, and every number in it comes from a named, dated source you can check in the Sources section.

Here is what you get. Chapter 1 shows where your peers already are, with the adoption data from the National Restaurant Association, Toast, Popmenu and DoorDash. Chapter 2 explains, in plain English, the five jobs AI can do in a restaurant and the ones it cannot. Chapter 3 is about your guests: how they now ask ChatGPT and Google's AI where to eat, what star rating gets you into the answer, and what they expect once they find you. Chapter 4 ranks the ten use cases that pay back fastest, starting with the phone. Chapter 5 gives you a tool stack with real September 2026 prices in three budgets. Chapter 6 covers the rules: the FTC's review rule, New York's algorithmic-pricing law, texting consent, allergen liability and Chile's new data-protection regime. Chapter 7 is the 30-day plan. Chapter 8 is for readers in Chile and Latin America.

You can read it front to back in about forty minutes. If you are short on time, read Chapter 4 and Chapter 7 and come back for the rest.

● Restaurants and AI in 2026 — four numbers to know

26%

of US restaurant
operators use AI tools
today

83%

of restaurant
locations never
appear in AI
recommendations

40%

of reservation calls go
unanswered

22%

of US consumers
have used AI to
choose a restaurant

Sources: National Restaurant Association via Restaurant Dive, 2026; Uberall, 2026 (vendor study); SevenRooms, 2026; DoorDash, 2026 (vendor survey)

Those four numbers are the whole story of this book. Only one in four operators uses AI, and most of those use it to write posts. Most restaurants do not exist in the answers AI gives diners. Four in ten reservation calls ring out. The operator who fixes the phone and the listing first — before buying

anything clever — picks up the guests everyone else is losing.

1. Why AI matters for restaurants now

A big industry with thin margins

US restaurant and foodservice sales are expected to reach \$1.55 trillion in 2026, with 1.3% real growth and 15.8 million employees across more than one million locations.¹ That is the headline. The lines underneath it are the ones that matter to an independent: 42% of operators were not profitable in the past year, 60% saw softer traffic, and more than nine in ten call food, labor, insurance, energy and card-processing costs a significant challenge.¹

Independents are carrying the weight. Independent units fell 2.3% in 2025 to 412,498, a net loss of more than 9,500 locations, while chains grew 1.4% to about 263,000.² Independents are still roughly six in ten restaurant locations, but the trend runs one way. Behind it: 82% of operators reported higher food costs, which sit more than 35% above pre-pandemic levels.²

Guests feel it too. 68% of consumers plan to reduce restaurant dining in 2026, and average weekly restaurant spend fell from \$115 in June 2025 to \$90 in February 2026.³ On the other side of the pass, 71% of operators plan to raise menu prices, up from 57% a year earlier.³

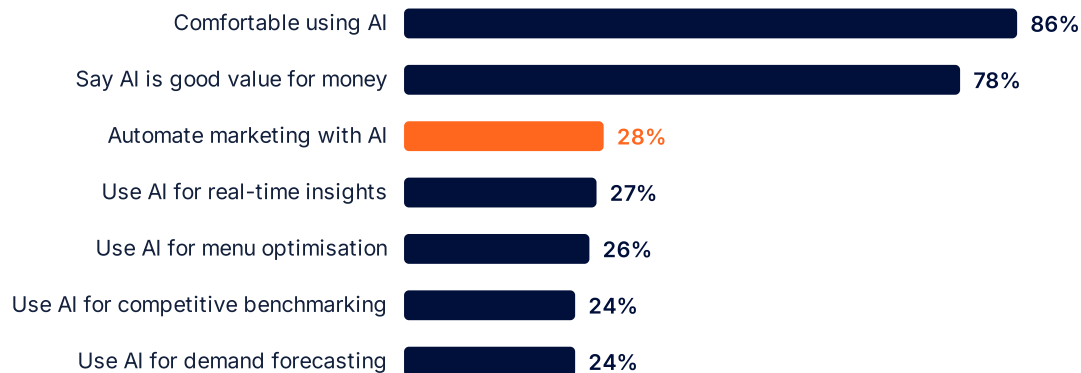
Key number: 40% of reservation calls go unanswered, while 64% of diners still call to book and 74% are open to AI handling the reservation.¹³ In a year when guests are cutting back, the cheapest table you can fill is the one that already tried to call you.

Where your peers are

Just over one in four US operators uses AI today. The National Restaurant Association's 2026 State of the Industry report puts AI use at 26% of operators; the top job is marketing (19% of full-service and 15% of limited-service operators), then administrative tasks (10%) and customer ordering (6%).⁷ Only 12% rate their technology as leading edge and 28% admit it lags.⁷

Vendor surveys report higher numbers, which is worth understanding rather than dismissing. Popmenu's survey of 328 operators found 44% had adopted AI and another 25% planned to this year, with 55% using it for marketing content.³ Toast's 2025 survey of 712 decision-makers found 86% comfortable using AI and 78% calling it good value, but far fewer actually running anything: 28% automate marketing, 27% use AI for real-time insights, 26% for menu optimisation, 24% for competitive benchmarking and 24% for demand forecasting.⁹

Comfortable with AI vs. actually using it (US restaurant decision-makers, 2025)



Source: Toast, 2025 AI in Restaurants Survey, 2025 (vendor survey)

Look at the drop from the second bar to the third. Almost everyone is comfortable; barely one in four has switched anything on. Toast's 2026 follow-up with 676 small operators found the same shape a year later: 87% comfortable, 85% planning to use AI more, 89% "experimenting," mostly through their vendors.⁸ Set against the NRA's 26% actual-use figure, roughly three in five operators who say they are comfortable with AI have not yet put it to work.⁸

The gap between intention and action

The same pattern shows up inside specific use cases: 42% of operators say they are "extremely likely" to adopt AI competitive benchmarking and 41% AI demand forecasting, but only 24% use either one.⁹