

# How to Increase Your Summer Restaurant Sales





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# We wrote this book for you.

Even before warmer weather is upon us and schools start letting out, your restaurant should start planning for the summer season.

Many restaurants, particularly those located in tourist-driven areas, will want to entice new and returning guests to come out to your place and enjoy themselves, especially while the weather is so nice. Other restaurants may see their traffic naturally dip as students move away or regular customers take extended vacations, so it's important to attract as many new customers as possible to fill in the financial gap.

But no matter what your anticipated traffic, putting together a solid plan for the months of June, July, and August can help maximize a restaurant's profits and keep service moving as smoothly as ever.

Do you have plans to bring on more staff? Need to get that outdoor seating set up, but not sure where to start? Want a few food or drink ideas to give your menu that extra oomph? We wrote this book for you.



## Chapter

# Hiring for Summer Months

Sunny days and warmer weather may still seem so far away, but the reality is summer will be here before you know it. Ramping up your kitchen and serving staff to accommodate traffic (and keep tables turning) must be a priority for any manager or owner — and it's not too soon to start now.

It's important to start the summer hiring process early to compete with other restaurants and businesses who want to get their best team in place, too. Anywhere from January (at the extreme) to April (think Spring Break) should be marked on your calendar to get the process rolling each year.

You don't want to be caught understaffed when a flood of new customers — who expect the same level of service in summer months as during the rest of the year — begin to appear. Nor do you want to face being understaffed if your year-round team all decide they want the last week of August off for a beach vacation. Even if your traffic turns slower in summer months, adding on extra help can ensure you don't end up in a bind.

Plus, if you hit the ground running early enough, you can take advantage of the extra help on Mother's Day, a traditionally very busy weekend for restaurateurs. Follow these three steps and you'll be well on your way to having a team that will impress — not stress — you all summer long.

## Recruit Aggressively

**Start with contacting last year's summer staff.** Going with a known entity can certainly save you time and money. These are employees that have proven themselves to you in the past and with whom you presumably already have a rapport. They understand your expectations upfront, know what kind of benefits and advantages come with the job, and should be well-versed on most of your operations.



Recruiting from your list of recent seasonal employees (assuming, of course, each one is someone who performed well enough that you'd want them back) can make the training process go much smoother.

But be careful not to skip training entirely. Nine or more months away from the daily routine warrants a brush-up, especially if your processes have changed at all in the past year. Just assess their training needs as you go along.

**Use your current employees to recruit new ones.** If your employees enjoy working for you, they'll have no problem telling potential recruits about the job. And rock stars generally want to work alongside other rock stars. Your employees have as much at stake as you do in making sure you hire the right people.

Encourage your staff to tell their friends in the industry and any other contacts they think will be a good fit about the opportunity. Don't forget to include your staff in the hiring and training process, even if it's just to give a tour or answer questions. Self-interest can go a long way: any incentive, cash, or benefits offered for referrals that lead to hires will add a cherry on the top of your hiring effort.

**Keep your expectation of the "ideal worker" broad.** It's natural for restaurant managers to immediately think teenagers when considering summer hires. Kids are out of school, looking to make extra money, and have few commitments set in stone until autumn.

But high school and college students are not the only people suited to take on a temporary position. Besides unemployed adults currently looking for work, you will likely also receive applications or inquiries from seasonal workers looking to accent their full-time positions, like teachers, university professors, other university employees, and construction workers in hotter climates.

Be upfront about hours and work schedules to ensure a clear sense of how flexible an applicant is, no matter what their circumstances. And who knows? If someone sufficiently impresses, it might be great to potentially keep on the "best of the best" come the winter months.

## Onboard Thoughtfully

How do the logistics around temporary hires work differently than permanent hires? On the face of it, there should be few aberrations in your normal on-boarding process. Employees you bring on for the summer will generally be paid hourly, like most restaurant employees, and you are held to the same minimum wage standards applicable to your other employees.

## Don't lose out on quality staff because your pay scale is out of touch.

With the controversy of minimum wage increases sweeping certain jurisdictions, restaurants may feel the pinch even more dramatically when it comes to adding on summer staff. But even if your state or local government hasn't mandated an increase to wages, prospective employees are more cognizant than ever of the debate. Keep your ear to the ground in your community to hear

what expectations are out there among new hires and hiring managers. You'd hate to lose out on quality staff because your pay scale is out of touch with perception when your competitors' wages aren't.



Of course, standards around discrimination, harassment, and workplace health and safety apply uniformly no matter whether your employee is hired on for the summer or ongoing. Tax reporting responsibilities remain the same — for both you as an employer and your summer employees — regarding hourly wages and tips.

However, the kinds of benefits your seasonal employees are eligible to receive may vary, so be sure to consult the Federal and your state department of labor to determine your responsibilities. There may be specific rules applicable to certain benefits, including health care coverage, workers' compensation and unemployment benefits.

Double check the specifics of federal child labor laws as well, even if it's for members of your own family working hours during

the summer months. There are restrictions involving work in freezers or meat coolers, and the operation of certain equipment. These restrictions may affect the type of work minors can do in your restaurant.<sup>1</sup>

## Train Thoroughly

When hiring for the summer months exclusively, you may feel it's important to get people out on the floor faster; the time investment of extensive training just doesn't seem worth it for a temporary hire. But carefully trained staff — no matter how long you intend to keep them on — can save you time and money immediately, not just in the long term.

Servers that know your menu inside and out will be able to make thoughtful suggestions that grow a customer's final ticket size. Kitchen staff that are fully vetted on the chef's vision will require less oversight and be less likely to deliver an incorrect dish to the expeditor. And everyone working together as one team — not the permanent staff and the temporary staff working separately — will keep morale high and expectations level.

Try to manage all training at the same time to avoid wasting resources. Your time is valuable, but the answer to conserving it is not to shortchange training — just consolidate it. This is where smart and early recruiting can help you get every new employee in for the same first day training, and minimize stragglers who you will need to repeat lessons for. Training in a group will also promote camaraderie and teamwork,

particularly if you get long term employees to help out with demonstrations and walk-throughs. Ultimately, you'll get the best work out of every employee if they feel like they can trust each other and if everyone is working toward the same goal.

Carefully trained staff can save you time and money immediately, not just in the long term.

Once you have your staff in place, of course, it's time to decide what you're going to have chefs and cooks prepare — and servers promote and deliver.

Next we look at the centerpiece of your summer planning — **the menu.**



## Chapter

# Planning Your Menu

Every savvy chef with their eye on the bottom line knows that adding seasonal menu items can be a huge benefit to a restaurant. From a customer perspective, those menu items are something really special, a dish that's just for a limited time to celebrate the season — in this case, summer. And for the restaurant owner and chef, it's a great way to build on your overall brand.

There is an endless variety of options for adjusting your menu for the season, but there are a few trends we consistently see pop up in preparation for summer.

### **Farmers Market Ingredients**

It can be a very smart business move to take advantage of farmers markets in your area. You can get great fresh ingredients in season

and then advertise to your customers that you proudly use local ingredients at your restaurant.

The catch is that you'll also have to anticipate what the farmers market is going to have available. This is where building relationships with the vendors comes in handy. If you get to know the local farmers and artisans at the market, you can start getting an idea ahead of time of what produce will be available from month to month.

You can also tell farmers market vendors what you're planning to do for your dishes and — knowing you want to buy from them — they can prepare in advance to have what you need. It all comes down to building those relationships at the beginning of the season and then doing a lot of networking throughout the summer and beyond.

It's not a short term solution – it's a long term investment in building professional relationships.

## Summer Specials

The summer season allows you to also explore new specials. After all, bringing appropriately seasonal flavors into your dishes can be especially enticing for guests. If you're going to the farmers market to pick up ingredients for your special, make sure to be flexible with your plan if the produce you need isn't there. If you have a yellow squash recipe but can't find any, consider substituting with fresh green zucchini.

Also think of your specials in terms of "stars and plowhorses." Star items are the ones with high popularity and high profitability. They're ordered often and give you the most profit after food and labor cost. Obviously you want to see as many of these items on your menu as possible — and if a special ends up being one of those stars, consider incorporating it into your menu. Plowhorses are the ones that are high in popularity but lower in profitability. For these items, see

if you can adjust the ingredients so that they are more profitable without lowering overall quality (and lowering the popularity of the dish in the process). While testing out adjusted plowhorse items as specials, you can see if those adjustments can turn it into a star.



## Salads

Salads are very popular in the summer when guests are looking for something fresh and light compared to the warm and heavy staples of the winter months. Look to seasonal produce like endive, butter lettuce, cucumbers, hearts of palm, and sugar snap peas to create summer salads that go beyond the iceberg lettuce standard.

Choosing seasonal vegetables is not only a good way to incorporate summer flavors into your menu, but they're also likely to be the least expensive in summer because they are in season. Plus there's the added benefit of adding the bright colors of those vegetables to your summer menu.



Don't forget about fruit – it's not just for traditional fruit salads. Blackberries, peaches, elderberries, Asian pear, and cherries are all fair game among your leafy greens, but they are far from the only fruit you can incorporate into special summer salad fare. And since it is a fruit, you can never go wrong with the many varieties of summer-picked tomatoes. Talk to your cooks, get creative with your salad choices, and see what happens!

## Grilled Meat and Vegetables

Summer is the prime time of year for grill and char flavors. Steak, kabobs, barbeque chicken, and more can be intriguing additions to a summer menu, especially if you're in a city area where many apartment renters can't keep an outdoor grill at home.

But don't forget about the vegetarians! Grilling vegetables can be a great way to elevate the flavor of meatless dishes and help those with dietary restrictions (or who just prefer to eat vegetarian) still enjoy a great dinner out with their meat-eating friends. Also think about the kinds of fruits you can grill – pineapple, plums, bananas, and peaches put on the grill can all be fair game for desserts or sweet accompaniments to savory dishes.

Thinking outside the box with grilling can be a great selling point for guests wanting to try something new and innovative this summer.

## Seafood

Fish and shellfish is easier to get (and get cheaper) in the summer when so much popular seafood is in season and deliveries are easier to make over long distances. Guests are also thinking of fresh, light dishes now, which definitely can include fish.

Take advantage of the warm weather by creating cold seafood dishes, like ceviche, gravlax with capers, shrimp cocktails, or a whole chilled shellfish platter. Also don't forget your grilling options – you can offer a baked or grilled fish served whole for an appealing presentation. And nothing beats the classic grilled salmon.

Depending on your restaurant's location, ask your fish vendor about local/lake fishes in season during the summer. Like with locally grown produce, local fish can be a great selling point to your guests!

Once you have a plan in place for your food menu, of course, it's time to up the ante on those perfect accompaniments — **the drinks.**



## Chapter

# Preparing Your Drink List

Guests want to be refreshed when they go out to eat during the summer months, so offering seasonal drinks can be a great way to quench that thirst. Your guests are looking for ways to cool off — and at a time when diners are increasingly seeking unique and off-the-wall dining experiences, the traditional options simply won't do.

With 21% of diners reporting that beverages play an important role in their dining decisions, how do you appeal to these adventurous eaters with your summertime offerings?<sup>2</sup>

Anything from margaritas and vodka lemonade, from mojitos to sangria, piña colodas, and mint juleps are free game. If you want to ease your bartending staff into the additions slowly, you can start with a cocktail of the day to test each out. If one in

particular is a hit, include it on the summer-long menu! And if you make the cocktail unique to your restaurant (by adding a special garnish or muddling an herb into the concoction), consider promoting it as your cocktail of the summer.

But don't stop at alcoholic mixes! Think about your younger guests, the designated drivers, and those who just generally choose not to drink. They should have more options than soda, water, or iced tea.

Create fun juice spritzers, juice mixes, mocktails, or even smoothies for your guests to enjoy during the hottest months of the year — especially if your restaurant has a patio where it gets warm on sunny days. And if some of those juice mixes do well, you can always experiment with making them into alcoholic drinks, too!



Nearly any fruit or herb can be steeped in water to create a new, subtle taste that will not overwhelm food.

We suggest trying out these cool, and easy, alternatives to the traditional imbibes.

### **Fresh Water — with a Little Something Extra**

Agua fresca, meaning “fresh water” in Spanish, is a lightly sweetened, water-based beverage that is just as refreshing as its name implies. And, even better, it’s simple to make in house with produce and herbs already featured in your menu.

Simply take any leftover fruits, herbs, or flowers and blend them in a food processor until smooth. Then carefully strain the resulting pulp into water mixed with simple syrup, sugar, or citrus juice (depending on your taste).

The result is an entirely house-made — and uniquely appealing — combination that seamlessly pairs with your current menu, or that can be changed as often as you like for an innovative and invigorating limited time offer for your guests.

If you’re looking for an even simpler (but still on-trend) option, you can also offer your guests simple water — with a lightly sweetened twist. Although cucumber is widely used for its crisp taste, nearly any fruit or herb can be steeped in water to create a new, subtle taste that will not overwhelm food, but will still carry the impact of a stronger beverage.

Chances are, you already have a number of fruits, herbs, and vegetables on hand that are being used to create other dishes. By using the leftovers from prepping these appetizers and entrees to create water variations, you’re helping to prevent waste. Not to mention, by charging a small percentage more for flavored water, you’re increasing the profit margin on a beverage that most restaurants typically give away — without having to change your inventory.

If you want to really impress your guests and capitalize on yet another industry trend, you can also add the fresh fruit right at the table. Or walk around with a basket full

of various produce and herbs, making sure to stop at each table to offer your guests a fresh slice or sprig to amp up their water.

This small gesture will do wonders to associate your restaurant with extremely fresh food and careful preparation — and given the increasing popularity of natural ingredients and minimally processed options among diners, this association will definitely help your bottom line.

## **When Life Gives You Lemons, Add Herbs**

Ever since a young entrepreneur opened the first lemonade stand, this drink has been undeniably associated with summer. But that doesn't mean you can offer the same old lemon, water, and sugar mixture and expect returns. Instead, spice up your lemonade — literally — to create a sophisticated new take on this age-old classic.

Raspberry lemonade is a common favorite, but there's no end to the herbs, spices, and fruits that can take simple lemon flavors to the next level — and in this case, the more unexpected the flavor pairing, the better. For example, Native Foods, a group of fast-casual vegan restaurants based in Chicago, offers a fragrant lavender lemonade<sup>3</sup>, which has become a staple for their customers.

Lemon is a commonly pairing with everything from tilapia to tiramisu, making it a perfect flavor to experiment with. Take inspiration from the areas of your menu that already feature lemon, or from your own favorite meals that include lemon either as a supporting or star ingredient.

Even if the combination you're considering falls more on the savory or spicy side, go ahead and give it a try. As public interest in healthier foods increases, many customers are beginning to choose savory food and drink — and significantly less saccharine versions of their favorite sweet dishes.



Need more reasons to start making your own lemony offerings? Like agua fresca, lemonade is relatively cheap to make, and offers a unique taste experience at a price point that will make both your customers and your bottom line happy. Not to mention that a splash of gin or vodka might just turn this house-made beverage into a fan-favorite cocktail, as well.

## **Iced, Iced Coffee (and Tea)**

Like lemonade, iced tea is a classic summertime refresher that nearly every restaurant on the block offers. In fact, iced tea enjoys a 78 percent penetration in chain restaurants.<sup>4</sup> However, most offer only one variation: the traditional long-steeped black tea with a side of sweetener and lemon.

Variations on this theme do exist — most often in the form of traditional tea flavored with syrups in raspberry, lemon, cherry, or other flavors — but these offer only the same old sips, with a lot of added sugar. If you want to take full advantage of this summertime trend, and be truly innovative, we suggest stepping outside the black tea box.

There is a near endless selection to choose from — ranging from delicate and subtle white varieties to spicy herbal or bitter green teas — many of which you probably already have in your inventory. Try brewing a few cold variations and adding a little simple syrup, fresh lemon, or herbs to bring their subtle flavors to life. Although some variations may not hold up well to the rigors of cooling, even the most delicate white teas can be used in conjunction with other flavors to create a unique beverage that no other location in town offers.

Just like iced tea, iced coffee is fairly ubiquitous in the restaurant scene, but only in a few variations that are losing favor among diners. Try experimenting with different types of coffee or different flavor combinations that you may not have considered before, such as burnt lemon or avocado.



**Chain  
restaurants serve  
iced tea.**

But it's not just the flavor profile you can change; an emerging trend in iced coffee is serving it on tap. Described as having a texture like Guinness, including the classic foamy head, this caffeinated concoction even has the slight effervescence of an on-tap beer.

This method can also infuse the coffee with flavors of cream and sugar — but a house-made addition of something special, such as the lemon or vegetable flavors mentioned before, can bring even this unique experience to another level.

Ready to bring that entire experience to fruition? Well, nothing says “summertime” like taking your drink outside. In part four, we take you through the steps necessary to get your **patio space** open and ready for business.



## Chapter

# Opening Your Patio

As the days are getting longer and the weather's getting warmer, patios are a key way restaurants can attract more customers and ensure they have a great dining experience. Many diners want to have a nice meal out with family or friends, and don't want to be cooped up inside to eat. When the weather is so nice, offering patio seating brings a different ambiance to the meal that many patrons enjoy.

If you're looking for ways to improve the transition from indoor-only seating to indoor and outdoor seating this year (or even if you've just created a patio area and are opening it up for the first time), we've compiled a few helpful tips for making the process go smoothly for your staff, management, and your guests!

### Check Your Local Laws

Before you open your patio, recheck your local laws – you might have to obtain specific permits or adhere to certain guidelines to use your outdoor space. For instance, some communities require restaurants to obtain a “dog-friendly permit” if said establishment wants to let guests leash their dogs on the patio. Other places will make a restaurant owner get a special permit to serve alcohol on their patio, even if the owner already has a liquor license.

In fact, even if you know your property was up to code last year, it's still a good idea to check up on local laws and ordinances before you open it again. Make sure nothing has changed or been added to those laws in the past year. Do that research sooner rather

than later so you have the time necessary to make those changes before your target date for re-opening a patio for business.

## Patios are a key way restaurants can attract more customers.

### Thoroughly Clean

As you prepare to open your patio for the season, a crucial element is getting it cleaned up. A lot can happen during the fall and winter months, including wild winter storms. Harsh weather during the colder months can damage your patio's wood, wearing away the paint or finish, or produce cracks in concrete that may be hazardous or leave tables feeling wobbly.

Make sure your patio looks great before officially opening it up for the spring and summer, whether that's picking up sticks or trash in the area, replacing any loose boards, or painting/staining wood rails or floorboards. If there are any shrubs or trees near your patio, it's a good idea to have a tree service come out and trim them back. You don't want falling leaves or dripping sap to interfere with your guests' experience (especially from trees with branches that start to hang over your seating area).

### Buy Weather Appropriate Furniture and Décor

If you need to update your patio (or if your patio is brand new and you're buying everything for the first time), make sure all tables, seating, and décor are weather appropriate. Furniture that's meant to be used outside will say so in its description.

Of course, you still want to make sure that the furniture you pick is appropriate to your brand and relates well to the furniture in the main part of your restaurant. If you have furniture that you think is perfect, but you're worried about it being weather resistant, you may be able to apply a weatherproofing sealant.

### Maintain Your Patio Heaters

Patio heaters are a fairly inexpensive way to help guests enjoy themselves on those sporadic, cooler summer nights. Perhaps they can experience the sunset during their meal without having to worry about jackets to keep them warm, or enjoy the night sky in later months alongside a great meal and drinks!

Patio heaters are also a good investment simply because they'll give you a chance to push your patio season into the fall — and therefore expanding your seating potential for a longer period of time — while still keeping your guests' comfort in mind.

## Raise Your Patio Umbrellas

These are a must for any outdoor restaurant space. Not only will umbrellas help keep your guests cool on the hotter days of the season, but they'll also protect your guests' eyes from the glare of the sun or reflections off silver and glassware. There's nothing quite as frustrating as trying to enjoy a meal with good company but getting distracted by the sun in your eyes!

If umbrellas don't go well with your décor, consider installing an awning (retractable or otherwise) instead to help create some shade.

## Advertise

Hanging signage by your front door to alert guests to the option of patio seating is important — especially if your patio is in the back or an area which a passerby might not see from the sidewalk. If your business is active on social media, consider taking some sunny photos of your patio on a busy afternoon and posting them on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or anywhere you have a good following. Make sure to mention in your post how popular your patio seating has been during the summer and invite your followers to come dine with you.

## Protect Against Bugs

Planters around the patio can look nice and welcoming, but not just to customers – they can be a welcome haven for bees, bugs and mosquitos.

Beware, some odors that deter mosquitos are also unpleasant to people, but rosemary and basil plants can also do the trick and are a great tie in to a restaurant as well. Lavender and scented geraniums are also an option. Consider planters around your patio with these options (and if bees are an issue use the non-flowering options), and perhaps even one on each table. You can also equip your servers with cans of bug spray to offer willing customers.



Turn the table on pesky intruders with mosquito repelling plants.

Ageratum



Catnip



Citronella



Horsemint



Marigolds





## Conclusion

# Make it worth the effort.

Ultimately, your guests won't know you have an open patio, a summer menu, or drink specials unless you tell them! And the strongest method of promotion is upselling at the table. Talk to your servers at your pre-shift meetings about including new summer menu items as part of their introductions and run through how to describe them.

A simple "Our summer menu includes a delicious angel hair pasta tossed with heirloom tomatoes and goat cheese" can help highlight the dish from the rest of the menu. If you bought those seasonal ingredients locally, make sure your servers mention that, too.

Do spend time correctly pricing these seasonal dishes. You want the profits to reflect the price of ingredients and any special preparation required for the menu item. All extra work (deboning fish, slow pickling techniques, or extensive precision cuts) should be factored into the dish price.

Preparing for success in summer is a lot of hard work — from hiring to providing the best food, drink, and service you can — so be sure to make it worth the effort. Your customers will thank you, and so will your bottom line!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Fact Sheet #2A: Child Labor Rules for Employing Youth in Restaurants and Quick Service Establishments Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) – U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division” – U.S Department of Labor; [dol.gov](https://www.dol.gov)

<sup>2</sup> “Pleasing customers with coffee, tea specialty beverages” – Nation's Restaurant News; [nrn.com](https://www.nrn.com)

<sup>3</sup> “Boosting the variety and appeal of refreshment beverages” – Nation's Restaurant News; [nrn.com](https://www.nrn.com)

<sup>4</sup> “Cool drinks heat up summer sales” – Nation's Restaurant News; [nrn.com](https://www.nrn.com)

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can help your restaurant grow?

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