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Al Fresco

Patio service requires right employees, finesse



BY PAMELA MILLS-SENN
PHOTO BY JOSH KEOWN

Patio dining. Some restaurant operators say their business wouldn't be the same without it. Barbara Reeve, general manager for the Tivoli Restaurant in New Milford, Connecticut, is one of them. The three-year-old restaurant sits right on the large New Milford Green. Inside, there's seating for 90, and the covered and screened-in patio (the screens can be rolled up in good weather) adds another 50 seats. There's also a wrought-iron gazebo next to the patio that holds 15. Open — and busy — year round, the patio's more popular than the inside, says Reeve.

"Especially in the spring and summer," she says. "People call ahead of time to reserve patio seating. We've actually had people leave because there wasn't outside seating available, even when a table was open inside."

Mattie Cardenaz, general manager for Pizza Solo in San Luis Obispo, California, also describes their patio as having big appeal. Located in front of the restaurant, with seating for about 25, it's the first thing passersby see.

"Patio dining is completely effective in getting random new faces into the restaurant," says Cardenaz. "People may not have been planning to stop in, but they see the outdoor dining and they come in."

But it's not a matter of "build it and they will come." Without the proper amount of thought, offering patio dining can work against you, says Ron Santibanez, CEO of Profit Line Consulting, Inc. in Moreno Valley, California.

"Having outdoor seating is a big advantage; there are a lot of pluses to

patio dining," says Santibanez, whose company works with restaurants across the country. "But for some reason it seems to be an operational issue for many restaurants."

The biggest downfall? Not paying sufficient attention to an area that — unless easily visible from the inside of the restaurant — is too often out of sight, out of mind, says Santibanez. The consequences of this neglect are tables littered with leftover food, overflowing trash receptacles, paper blowing about the patio, and irritated, overlooked customers.

This is less likely to happen during peak times when (hopefully anyway) there's staff assigned specifically to the patio, he says. The biggest danger comes during off-peak times when it's likelier that employees will have to split their attention between inside and outside areas. The remedy for this? Training and establishing specific requirements mandating how often the patio will be checked, says Santibanez.

"You do have to train to keep it at top of mind, especially if it isn't visible from the restaurant," says Becky Black, senior vice president with Shakey's USA, Inc., headquartered in Alhambra, California. The chain has 65 sites; five offer patio seating.

"You need to integrate the patio into staffing and deployment; someone has to be accountable for it," Black continues. "It's important for managers to demonstrate this front-of-mind by moving inside and outside, speaking to the guests and reminding staff."

Black says they decided to give patios a try, looking for a way to increase capacity without increasing rent and common-area maintenance fees, since the patio is usually not part of the rented square-footage of a space (their patio capacity is typically 50 to 60 people).

There's another benefit, she adds. "Shakey's is a gathering place," Black explains. "We wanted to be able to accommodate groups and to be able to segregate them from the general population. When dealing with large parties, the patio is a definite draw."

"For small groups, outside seating isn't as much fun," she continues. "They can feel a little disconnected from what's going on inside, because it's such a group experience inside."

Disconnect isn't an issue for Pizza Solo; its year-round patio is easily viewed from the inside and sits out in the open. In fact, part of it isn't even sectioned off from the sidewalk, says Cardenaz, adding that it isn't uncommon for non-customers to grab a chair for a bit of people watching. That aside, there are other challenges that come with this kind of seating arrangement.

For example, she has to train employees on city and fire regulations, and to monitor the outside with these in mind, since customers will often move the tables around, potentially running afoul of these restrictions.

"We also serve beer and wine and the alcohol can't go beyond a certain point," she explains. "I have to constantly remind the staff to tell the customers and to watch to make sure this doesn't happen."

Patios and alcohol can prove a troublesome combination, Black says. "As a restaurant you're accountable for what happens. With alcohol, you need safeguards in place to ensure nothing is happening with alcohol that shouldn't, such as being handed over a fence or underage drinking."

To combat this, Shakey's has installed live camera monitors they watch to make certain that guests behave.

It's important to pay attention to the details, says Black. Make sure the furniture's comfortable. Plumb for heating rather than using butane tanks; if these run out of fuel mid-meal, the guest experience can be ruined. "You need to make sure guests feel it was worth it because the prices are the same inside and out," she says. "There's no patio discount."

PATIO PLOYS

Guests can linger longer on patios than you'd like, reducing turns and impacting wait times. You don't

want to rush customers, but you do want to maintain a good pace. Barbara Reeve says during peak times she assigns only experienced waitstaff to the patio. They can handle a fast pace, expertly tend to customers, and keep things moving along.

Other speedy strategies? Pay attention to the patio's layout and ease of access, says business

consultant Ron Santibanez. Consider:

Are the doors wide enough for servers to easily get through?

How heavy are they?

What kind of obstacles might the furniture present? For example, if you use umbrellas, do servers have to duck under them to interact with customers or to avoid eye-level

(and hazardous) prongs?

What about bussing stations and trash receptacles? Their location makes a difference in terms of quick clean up and keeping the area inviting and guest-ready.

Pamela Mills-Senn is a freelancer specializing in writing on topics of interest to all manner of businesses. She is based in Long Beach, California.