

FOOD & WINE[®]

THE RESTAURANT ISSUE

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OCTOBER 2021

SWEET POTATO STICKY
BUNS WITH TOASTED
MARSHMALLOW FROM
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THE NEW RULES

How to become a five-star restaurant guest in the new era of hospitality

PRODUCED BY
HUNTER LEWIS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
FRANZ LANG

OF DINING OUT



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Dining out this spring after my second COVID-19 vaccine jab felt a little like clipping a climbing rope onto a harness and walking out to a rock ledge with a thousand-foot drop. Will this thing really keep me safe?

This spring, as the country began to reopen, I took public health guidance from the CDC and mask-wearing cues from restaurant staff. Restaurant Editor Khushbu Shah came off the road after scouting the 2021 class of *Food & Wine* Best New Chefs (p. 125) about the time when I began to rappel off the rock and dine out in earnest. Even though a few experiences proved frustrating, they ultimately rekindled my love for the people who work in restaurants.

Dining out right now sometimes means that we're left to our own devices, quite literally. This summer in New York City, while entering a new cocktail bar known for its fried chicken sandwich, I filled out a QR code-generated contact-tracing form on my phone. The server told me the kitchen was closing soon and asked me to order quickly via another QR code, a tiny pixelated sticker on a tiny black bottle of hand sanitizer. The venue was so dark that I had to hold the bottle up to a lamp in order to pull up the menu on my phone. Then, I had to shout my order through my mask so the server could hear it over the loud music. Cue the tiny violin.

A few nights later, I joined friends and colleagues for dinner at Francie, a Brooklyn spot known for its signature roast duck and one of the last cheese carts in the city. We sat down in a cushy banquette, ordered from an actual paper menu, and spent a few joyful hours catching up on life and work. After the rocky experience a few nights before, the quality of food, wine, and service reminded me that the root word of *restaurant* is the Latin *restaurare*, to renew. For the first time in weeks, I forgot about those invisible climbing ropes keeping me and other diners safe. As we said our goodbyes and walked out the door, we thanked every staffer in sight.

Then, during the editing of this story, the delta variant reared its head. In late July, the Biden administration and the CDC changed policy and recommended that vaccinated people wear masks inside again. New York City made proof of vaccination mandatory to enter gyms and restaurants. I'm back on the ledge looking over the precipice and wondering what comes next.

When we surveyed *Food & Wine* readers this summer (see "2021 *Food & Wine* Reader Survey," at right), 86% of you were dining out an average of three times per week.

It may take years for restaurants to regain their footing. Meantime, we can all do our part to be better guests.

Chances are we've all had some similar experiences this year. But what about the people cooking and serving our food and pouring our drinks? How are they faring? The answer: not great. We may feel more freedom than last year, but the spaces we're entering have fundamentally changed, and so have the lives of those who operate, manage, and work in them.

COVID-19 hit the restaurant industry with the force of a hurricane. While many of us were cooking at home seven nights a week during lockdown, many bars and restaurants were struggling to stay afloat. Approximately 90,000 closed. Global supply chain issues have created shortages of staples like ketchup, forcing some restaurateurs to shorten menus and raise prices. Foods like grains, meat, and poultry cost more now. So does labor. And the COVID-19 protocols and equipment meant to keep us and workers safe add expenses.

The second wave of that hurricane brought reckonings on the issues of race, gender, and equity in the workplace. Some chef-owners, like Ravi Kapur in San Francisco and Katie Button in Asheville, North Carolina, reacted by retooling their business models in order to pay their employees fairer wages. Other restaurateurs reopened with a Before Times back-to-business mentality and have struggled to find workers. Even though hundreds of thousands of jobs have been added to the restaurant and bar sector since February, the hospitality industry was still down 1.3 million jobs, or 10%, in June compared to pre-pandemic levels, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Food service workers are leaving for other industries. Nearly 6% of them quit their jobs in May, the highest number in decades, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Restaurant Instagram accounts now double as job recruiting sites. Signing bonuses and perks that were unheard of when I was a \$10-an-hour line cook in the early aughts have become the new normal. How tight is the labor market in Birmingham, Alabama, where I live? A restaurateur friend of mine offered his cooks \$1,200 to find a dishwasher; none could.

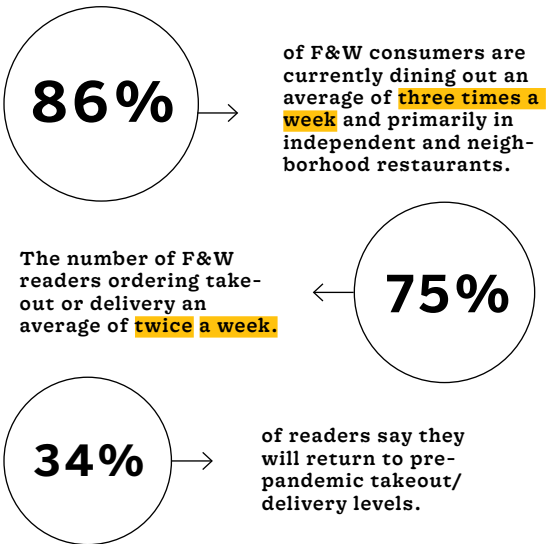
We've heard, from dozens of restaurant workers during our reporting over the past 18 months, that customers became more entitled during the pandemic. Diner behavior continues to rankle.

The truth is that every one of us plays an important role in the hospitality equation. Hospitality shouldn't be purely transactional; kindness shouldn't be a one-way street flowing only from workers toward guests. This guide was designed to help all of us navigate a new and rapidly evolving era of hospitality, offering context and advice on everything from tipping and reservations to dietary restrictions and phone usage. It may take years for restaurants to regain their footing. Meantime, we can all do our part to be better guests.

—HUNTER LEWIS

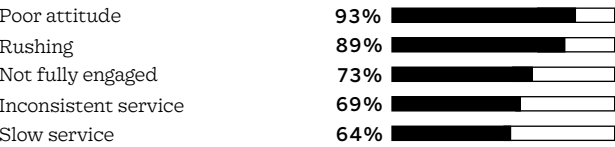
2021 FOOD & WINE READER SURVEY

DINING OUT FREQUENCY



F&W READERS' PET PEEVES

Poor attitude and rushed service are the top pet peeves that F&W readers have with restaurant waitstaff.

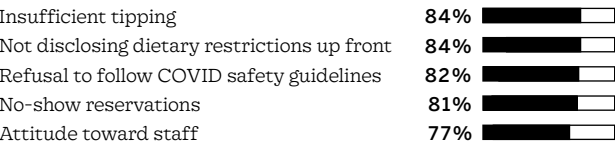


BEHAVIOR

73% of F&W readers would be willing to sign a diner code of conduct.

Only 26% want to use QR codes to view menus in the future.

RESTAURANT WORKERS' PET PEEVES*



*From June 7–13, 2021, 1,500 F&W readers responded to this study. It's important to note that only 81 restaurant industry professionals responded, however. We're including their pet peeves here for reference, but the low sample size does not give an accurate comparison to readers' pet peeves.



Our Apologies, But the Customer Is Not Always Right

CONDENSED FROM REPORTING BY RESTAURANT EDITOR KHUSHBU SHAH

➔ **RESTAURANT WORKERS HAVE ALWAYS SWAPPED STORIES** about customer entitlement: the ridiculous demands, the difficult guests, the bad tippers. But the pandemic and the behavior that came with it—impatience regarding wait times, name-calling, frustration over limited seating and menu choices, disregard for safety protocols—only serves to highlight how pervasive the problem really is. These blunt expressions of entitlement are rooted in the popular adage “The customer is always right,” a notion that started in department stores in the early 1900s and now sits at the center of American hospitality. “We’ve taught the American diner that there are no boundaries, that they can ask for anything and everything, and that it should be given to them,” says Lauren Friel, the owner of Rebel Rebel in Somerville, Massachusetts. Service today is transactional and commodified, says Miguel de Leon, wine director at Pinch Chinese in NYC. “It becomes about what the restaurant can do for the diner,” he explains. In her 2020 book *Be My Guest*, Priya Basil writes: “The hospitality industry ... thrives on the message that you are the only one who counts: you should come first, your every need considered and catered to. You deserve it, after all, as long as you can pay.” But now, that sensibility seems—both to restaurant professionals and, honestly, to most diners—outdated, a servile relic of a former (pre-pandemic) time.



Tip Big

CONDENSED FROM
REPORTING BY
REGAN STEPHENS

➔ **YOUR TIPS MATTER NOW MORE THAN EVER.** “As restaurants cater to growing demands with the return of normalcy, many places are navigating how to meet this surge in demand with limited staff. So do remember to tip—and a bit more than you might have in the past,” says Paula DaSilva, executive chef at Burlock Coast at The Ritz-Carlton, Fort Lauderdale. If you thought of 20% as the ceiling for your tip in the Before Times, start thinking of that now as the floor. “Before the pandemic, 20% was seen as an appropriate tip for exceptional service,” says Shayn Prapaisilp, owner of Chao Baan in St. Louis. “Right now, 20% should be the minimum.” That goes for when you’re at a sit-down restaurant, but also for staff when you’re getting takeout and drivers (who sometimes earn as little as \$2 an hour) when you’re getting food delivered.

CALCULATING TIPS

Averaged out, F&W readers believe a tip should be

↓
21%

17% believe that a standard tip should be

↓
25%

Average tip for delivery should be **18%**, according to readers.

Takeout tips should be about **15%**, they say.

48%

are interested in paying a **mandatory 18%–20% service fee** built into the bill in lieu of tipping.

79%

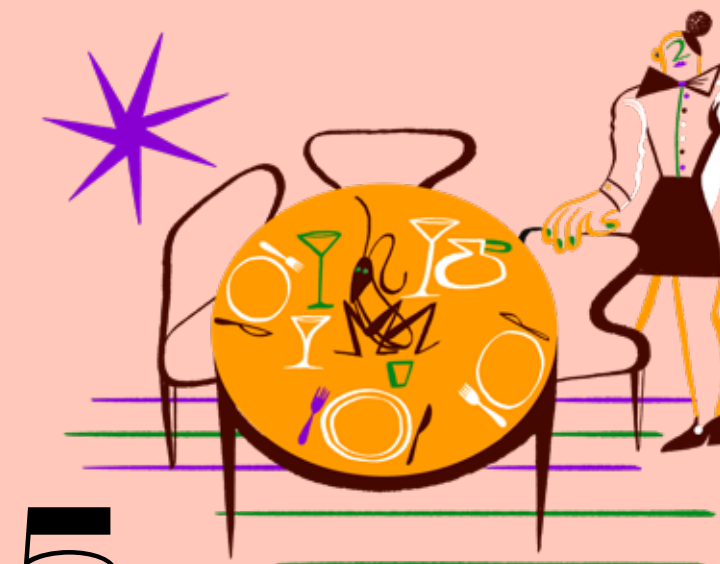
are willing to pay a **COVID-19 surcharge**.

3. Be Clear About Food Allergies

CONDENSED FROM REPORTING BY
SENIOR EDITOR KAT KINSMAN

➔ **ABOUT 32 MILLION** Americans have food allergies, and every three minutes, a food-related allergic reaction sends someone to the ER, according to FARE (foodallergy.org), a nonprofit devoted to education and research regarding food allergies. And, says chef and restaurateur Ming Tsai, responsibility for guests’ well-being falls both on the restaurant staff and on diners. Tsai became a spokesperson for the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network when his son was diagnosed with a severe peanut allergy. Intimately acquainted with the stakes as both a chef and a father, Tsai later decided to write an “allergy bible” that he uses at his own restaurant, Blue Dragon; he also provides templates on his website (ming.com) for others to create their own versions.

So what’s the bottom line for diners? Overcommunicate, Tsai says. Call the restaurant manager ahead of time, and make notes in the reservation app you’re using. When you arrive, remind the staff again. What not to do? Don’t say you have a food allergy if what you actually have is an intolerance, restriction, or simple aversion. If you don’t like green peppers, just tell your server that you prefer not to eat them; don’t claim that they’ll send you to the hospital. As Tsai says, “Nothing pisses a chef off more than when we bend over backwards, change our cutting boards, tongs, and gloves, because they’ve said they have a dairy allergy—and then we see them eating an ice cream dessert.”



People of America, Respect That Reservation!

CONDENSED FROM REPORTING BY
SENIOR EDITOR MARIA YAGODA AND
JOHN WINTERMAN, OWNER OF
FRANCIE IN BROOKLYN

➔ **SHOW UP. FULL STOP.** Restaurants simply cannot sustain the financial losses of no-shows, particularly right now. “Diners who book need to show up for their reservation in a timely fashion or to cancel in a timely fashion. This is a tangible show of support for your restaurant community,” says John Winterman, co-owner of Francie in Brooklyn. In non-pandemic times, a restaurant might have a waiting list, people at the bar, or last-minute requests coming in, all of which could help mitigate the loss of a no-show. But “in the current climate, a lost reservation is just that: lost, irretrievable, irreplaceable,” Winterman says. “The night a party of six no-showed on their three-weeks-ago booking, that represented 20% of what we had planned on for that evening. This lack of manners and—I’ll say it—complete lack of character seriously impacts our staff, not only financially but also in terms of morale.”

If you use reservation apps like OpenTable or Resy, don’t abuse them. Mark Strausman of Mark’s Off Madison in New York City says that even though these apps have made life smoother for guests, some people use them to double-book tables or repeatedly no-show. “It’s just one more example of digital convenience making it easier to forget that there are actual humans behind the business,” he says. If you can’t show up for your reservation (life does happen), always call the restaurant and let them know with as much notice as possible.

RESERVATION REALITIES

45%

of F&W readers most frequently use dining reservation apps to secure a table when dining out.

↓
31% call the restaurant directly.

20% show up and wait for a table.

ONLY 5% of those polled said they had not shown up for a reservation.



Patience, Patience, Patience

BY REGAN STEPHENS

➔ **REMEMBER LAST FALL**, when kitchen burnout snuck up on us? Without unfettered access, we learned just how much we appreciated restaurants. But as that sense of gratitude has waned, even while the pandemic hasn’t, chefs are urging diners to be patient. Labor shortages “put pressure on current employees to carry longer hours and to do tasks they have not received proper training for,” says Gabriella Valls of Ponyboy in Brooklyn. As a result, service might look different than it did in the past. Also contributing to this new reality are the ever-changing COVID-19 safety guidelines that make Andre Fowles of Miss Lily’s in New York City feel like “you’re opening a new restaurant every week.” Shifting outdoor and indoor layouts also makes replenishing silverware from a waiter station or delivering food to your table take longer. “When we designed the restaurant, we didn’t think about having another 30 seats outdoors,” says Cédric Vongerichten, owner of NYC’s Wayan. All of these hurdles make it harder to offer diners the experience they expect. It doesn’t mean restaurants aren’t trying, though.



4.

Use Your Phone for Memories, Not Calls

BY
KORSHA WILSON

➔ **DIVISIVE AT FIRST**, cell phones in restaurants are now an inevitable part of dining out, and the reality is that tech can help diners engage with a restaurant more deeply. For Christine Sahadi Whelan, managing partner of Sahadi’s in Brooklyn’s Industry City, it’s about meeting each guest at their “comfort level with tech,” she says. “I was worried people wouldn’t engage with one another, but they’re actually doing it in a really organic way.” Whether they’re using QR codes to pull up the menu, creating Instagram stories about their meals, or just snapping a picture of a favorite dish, diners are creating memories over dinner in a restaurant via tech. That’s a good thing, Whelan says. But there is one cardinal rule she doesn’t bend on: “I do want you to turn off your ringer, though.”

7.

Smaller Menus Are the Order of the Day

BY REGAN STEPHENS



➔ **YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED PARED-DOWN MENUS.** For starters, blame staffing shortages. “Even just one less cook at night eliminates an entire station,” says Cheetie Kumar, co-owner and chef of Garland in Raleigh, North Carolina. Tighter menus help short-staffed kitchens. Add to this supply chain problems. At Maydan in Washington, D.C., owner Rose Previte says that procuring ingredients like spices and oils poses problems, in part because global distributors are facing their own labor shortages. In turn, everything is more expensive. According to Nicholas Elmi of Philadelphia’s Laurel and The Landing Kitchen, “Fish went up about 10% [in June] alone.” Maryland blue crab meat has more than tripled, clocking in now at nearly \$55 per pound. “They don’t have people to pick crab,” he says. For Laurel, this means offering one tasting menu instead of two. Some chefs say scaled-down menus are not necessarily a bad thing. “Smaller menus mean more focus,” chef Marcus Samuelsson says. “*Thriller* was only nine songs. This is a time when we will see American food through a different lens.”

8.

Don’t Weaponize Your Online Review

BY DEPUTY EDITOR MELANIE HANSCHKE



➔ **A BAD DINING EXPERIENCE TRULY SUCKS.** I know this as both a customer and as the deputy editor of *Food & Wine*, but also as the owner of a café with my husband in Pennsylvania. You, the diner, have invested time and money to go eat delicious things that you didn’t have to cook yourself, in a convivial atmosphere. When your expectations aren’t met, it can be tempting to go nuclear online. And while that might make you feel vindicated in the short term, it’s really not doing my restaurant—or you, honestly—any favors. What’s the result, after all? You walk away feeling you’ve been cheated of a good night out; my business suffers in the long term from a negative online review.

Here’s a better idea: If you give constructive feedback in the moment, my restaurant management can turn your subpar experience into a spectacular one because you’re allowing us to practice exactly what we specialize in: hospitality. Talking to a manager and letting them know what you’re not satisfied with allows us to course-correct right away. In the end, it’s a win-win. You end up having a better experience (don’t forget that our aim is to make you happy), and we can actually improve your day, rather than get punished in perpetuity online for a single accident or occurrence.

66% of readers say they are likely to speak to a restaurant manager if they have a bad experience.



Prove Your Status

CONDENSED FROM REPORTING BY KRISTEN HAWLEY

➔ **WE’VE ALL MADE CONCESSIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC.** San Francisco chef Seth Stowaway figured he’d have to break up the single long table at the center of his new restaurant to space guests apart. But instead of compromising his vision for an intimate and communal dinner party, Stowaway found a simple way to safely seat strangers next to each other. When Osito opens in October, it’ll join restaurants across the country in asking for proof of vaccination. Generally, restaurants are within their right to require diners to prove their vaccination status, and objecting to the vaccine—for whatever reason—isn’t enough to skirt the rule. Most ask to see your vaccination card, a photo of the card, or a digital health pass. Some allow a negative COVID-19 test. Check social media accounts, read your reservation confirmation email, or just call and ask if there’s a policy. Why bother? Amid surging cases, new capacity restrictions could cripple or close restaurants that have only just started to recover. Experts agree that vaccinations are among the only ways to put the pandemic behind us.



Be Kind

BY VINNY ENG

➔ **I WAS NEW TO WAITING TABLES 15 YEARS AGO.** A guest waved me over: “Can I tell you something?” I held my breath and waited. “This is exactly as you described, but it is just not for me.” I first felt immediate relief, then apologized and responded in jest, “I’m always glad to set you up for gentle disappointment.” We both laughed, and then we worked together to find a more suitable dish.

I thought about this experience a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic. These past 18 months demanded so much from all of us, individually and collectively. With humility and relief, and still a bit worn down, many of us have made it to the other side of the shut-down. Timeliness, candor, directness, and kindness in communication (my take on “the four gates of communication”) became important tools, not only to level-set in the face of a pandemic but also to ensure that we could preserve our energies to deliver help not just to ourselves but also to the people we were riding out COVID-19 with.

I learned those communication skills working in restaurants. During the pandemic, embattled but not broken, food workers were deemed essential. They labored: at grocery stores, in dining rooms, on delivery bikes, packing takeout orders, cooking meals, and waiting tables in outdoor shared spaces—all while sustaining heightened exposure to a potentially life-ending disease.

Food workers bring dexterity, consistency, emotional intelligence, and persistence to our roles. This is skillful work, and millions of these workers ensured that other people had access to meals while still earning pre-COVID-19 wages. And because of the past 18 months, many others in the restaurant and food

As you reenter the dining world, tread softly.

10.

industry have lost careers, emptied savings accounts, strained friendships, and ended relationships; the pandemic impoverished families and tragically caused the deaths of colleagues and loved ones. So as you reenter the dining world, with relief that your favorite spot is open again, tread softly. Pass through the four gates and recognize the humanity of every worker. Greet each employee with an acknowledgment of their presence: You are sharing space with them.

COVID-19 also revealed long-standing structural barriers to the equitable treatment of workers. Women owners, gender-fluid operators, and entrepreneurs of color all faced clear impediments that kept them from gaining access to the money they needed to stave off cash-flow crises or crushing debt. Your individual choices won’t solve those burdens, but the grace you afford restaurant owners and workers may help renew their motivation to see those challenges through.

When I traveled for the first time after shelter-in-place orders were lifted, I accompanied a friend to New Orleans. We were attending a memorial that was postponed because of the pandemic. At Herbsaint, we sat at the bar and succumbed to the temptation to order one of everything. And as we settled into piping hot fried oysters and perfectly dressed coleslaw, I asked our bartender what it was like to be back in service. Unlike in San Francisco, where I live, indoor dining only paused in New Orleans for two months. But public health guidance was still hard to navigate. The bartender said he was more than pleased to be working indoors without a mask, despite the boorish behavior of some diners when mask mandates were initially lifted. The staff and rhythm of the restaurant, he said, were finally returning to pre-COVID-19 levels. He then added his plea to future diners: “Don’t be an asshole.”