

Restaurant

HOSPITALITY



During the coronavirus pandemic, grab and go meals from hotels have seen dramatic rises in sales while dining rooms remained closed.

HOTEL DINING

Hotel restaurants turn to grab and go for service during coronavirus

How three hotels successfully pivoted their menus during COVID-19 restaurant closures.

Michael Costa | Jul 20, 2020

Restaurants in hotels were not immune to coronavirus closures that flattened the foodservice industry this year, so when shutdowns started in March, several hoteliers emphasized, and in some cases, improvised their grab-and-go capabilities to make up for lost business.

Hybrid market concepts—which combine dine-in, packaged food sales and prepared meals to go in one space—have become increasingly popular in hotels because they maximize finite F&B space and attract locals. When restaurant closures hit, properties with a hybrid market, like the Cotton House Hotel in Cleveland, Miss., were well-positioned to pivot and keep sales afloat during the crisis.

“We saw a 90% increase in grab-and-go sales when dining rooms were closed,” says Cole Ellis, executive chef of Delta Meat Market at the Cotton House Hotel, and a 2017 James Beard Award nominee. Delta Meat Market merges dine-in, grocery, butcher shop and prepared meals under one roof, and has two entrances—curbside and through the lobby—for easy access.



While the dining room was closed, the grab-and-go menu expanded by a dozen dishes to include take-and-bake, family-size options of casseroles, sides and desserts, ranging in price from \$5 to \$40, including chicken vindaloo, ratatouille pasta bake with chicken, lobster mac, sesame green bean salad and Oreo crusted Key lime pie, plus rotating daily specials. Through social media, newsletters and signage, the

hotel let the community know Delta Meat Market was open for grab-and-go meals.

“Before coronavirus, our grab-and-go top sellers were actually grocery items like milk, eggs, cheese, grits, bread, meats, rubs and sauces,” Ellis says. “Now, casseroles are selling the most because people can feed their whole family with one.”

The dining room at Delta Meat Market is open again with 50% capacity as well as surrounding restaurants, so the volume of grab-and-go sales has dropped, but Ellis says COVID-19 has ushered in a “new normal that gives customers more choices for how they want to eat. I believe having a hybrid market concept can be a crucial safety net for sales moving forward.”



Meals at Delta Meat Market have become the top grab and go sellers over pantry staples.

Curbside appeal

While much of the restaurant industry swiftly moved to curbside pickup as a way to maintain revenues during shutdowns, it was uncharted territory for many restaurants in hotels that had previously focused only on their dining rooms.

At Central Station Hotel in Memphis, which opened last November, their streetside Bishop restaurant had to add grab and go and curbside pickup when their space was closed by coronavirus.

“We didn’t have a grab-and-go option prior to COVID-19, but it’s something we’ll maintain moving forward,” says Jeremy Sadler, GM of Central Station. “We utilized social media to update our operating hours, curbside service and menu specials, and posted pictures to generate buzz for our to-go menu. We also gave

our internal guests single-use menus in their welcome packets and made the menu accessible via QR codes posted throughout the property.”

Sadler adds the top-selling take-away item has been Bishop’s housemade beef jerky, while the current grab-and-go program requires three to five staff per shift even with Bishop’s dining room open again at 50% capacity.

At W Scottsdale in Scottsdale, the hotel’s Sushi Roku restaurant—one of only four in the country—also shifted focus to curbside and grab-and-go orders while their dining room was closed, taking advantage of streetside access in the city’s entertainment district.



Photo: In addition to take-home hand roll kits, Sushi Roku at W Scottsdale also offered to-go cocktails in mason jars.

The hotel also promoted some of Sushi Roku’s menu as interactive, with make-your-own hand roll kits and instructions, setting it apart from curbside competitors. Hotel guests are offered the same options, plus contactless room service.

David Cronin, W Scottsdale’s GM, says grab and go was popular in March and April, but has tailed off with Sushi Roku and surrounding restaurants reopening their dining rooms at 50% capacity. Cronin says the new options necessitated by COVID-19 are fast becoming guest expectations, and can be a deciding factor for travelers choosing a hotel in the future.

“Hotels that are not being proactive and creative may lose out on room nights,” Cronin explains. “Many customers are looking for specific amenities during the pandemic and are willing to pay for them.”

Perhaps the biggest advantage to a robust grab-and-go program—whether it’s a hybrid concept like Delta Meat Market, the improvised solutions that Bishop and Sushi Roku developed, or a stand-alone kiosk in the lobby—is it keeps F&B dollars in-house, since guests looking for a quick and easy snack or meal don’t have to leave the property to find one.

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