

# MAINESENSE

MAKING SENSE OF YOUR FOODSERVICE BUSINESS

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# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

## OPEN UP THE DOORS TO GREATER PROFIT!

By Lindsay Ott

*Our cold, bitter and long Northeast winters make summer's balmy temperatures more appealing than ever. As an independent restaurant owner, you have the opportunity to channel customer cravings to savor the summer into increased revenue. It's time to open up to the idea of outside dining, outdoor (and off-premise) events, food trucks, pop-up restaurants and more. It's time to open your doors, expand your business model and let the profit flow in...*

### Why Expand Outdoors?

Outdoor dining, or dining “al fresco” as it's known to Italians offers several benefits to you and your customers, the first being a sense of sophistication and occasion. Dining outdoors is out of the ordinary – it's an experience that adds a bit of casual luxury – and guests may be more inclined to splurge. It's also a great way to advertise your restaurant, especially if you're in a downtown area. People can walk by and see your customers relaxing and take a sneak peek at what you're serving. Perhaps the most compelling reason to go al fresco is the ability to go beyond the walls of your restaurant, increasing capacity and therefore, profit.

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Your outdoor dining space can become a major marketing tool for your restaurant. On a mild summer day, customers want to savor the sun or enjoy the evening breezes and YOUR restaurant can give them a place to do that instead of their own backyard. Use your social media platforms – such as Facebook and Twitter – to promote your outdoor dining opportunity. Upload photos on a sunny afternoon or post timely invitations such as “The weather calls for blue skies and a high of 80, get your warm weather fix with dinner outdoors on our new patio!” Your outdoor area can also draw more customers through mobile applications such as Yelp! and Open Table because patrons can search for a restaurant based on whether or not they have outdoor dining.

An outdoor area may also create the additional space you need to host a musical act, which is another way to market your restaurant. When bands market their event, they’re also simultaneously promoting your restaurant. You can even utilize the outdoor space to bring in additional revenue during between-meal times. Consider hosting a special Sunday brunch or afternoon “(Iced) Tea Time” in your outdoor dining area.

## Outside Dining in Three Steps!

### 1 Assess Your Space

Don’t be discouraged if you don’t have a scenic vista and the only outdoor space consists of a parking lot: You can still create an inviting outdoor environment (see #2). But first check in with your municipality as you may need a special permit. You don’t need extensive space outside, either, even seating for a dozen is worth it. In fact, if your al fresco dining area is small, it creates a demand and the “little luxury” factor mentioned earlier.

### 2 Set the Scene

The key to a customer-pleasing outdoor dining area is to create an outside “room,” starting with the walls. It could be lattice fencing, thick shrubbery, or a custom-built patio – anything to create a sense of place. Be sure to address proper shading whether it’s with patio umbrellas or a tented ceiling. On hot days, some restaurants will even run fans outdoors which can cut down on traffic noises while keeping patrons cool. A small fountain is a worthwhile investment as the soothing sound can also drown out unwanted noise. Evening al fresco dining requires special lighting considerations as well as a heat source; heat lamps are a must if you want to offer regular nighttime dining.

### 3 Service Considerations

Having a designated server for outdoor diners is something to consider; without one, guests may feel like outdoor seating is an afterthought instead of a special option. Also, constant beverage service on a hot day – whether it’s water refills or special drinks – is essential to guests’ comfort.



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## Take the Show on the Road!

Another way to expand your business model beyond your in-restaurant offerings is through catering. There's no denying that catering is a tremendous business opportunity: In fact, according to the January 2011 Packaged Facts report, *Catering Trends in U.S. Foodservice*, catering sales are expected to increase by 9.1 percent this year – especially for business events and weddings. With an increased demand for catering, how will you stand out from the competition this summer? Offering catering menus and service designed especially for the outdoors, of course!

## Beyond Bricks and Mortar"

g foodservice research and consulting firm, Technomic, cited "bringing restaurants from their traditional street corners" as the number two trend in its 11 for '11 trend list. Whether it's physically moving a mobile version of your kitchen to a park or a corporate picnic or it's opening up an outdoor patio, use the warm summer weather to your advantage and head outside the walls of your restaurant – you're sure to find success waiting.

Catering for the outdoors can be translated into three big events: clam bakes, barbeques, and picnics. In the customer's mind, these are more like events than just straight catering. If your restaurant can offer at least one of the "big three"

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outdoor dining events, you'll be in good shape to capture additional business this season. For example, some restaurants that focus on barbeque have actually invested in a truck with a grill and smoker on board. Others have purchased steamers for seafood. These restaurants are able to literally bring the kitchen to the customer and prepare food fresh for guests. To pull off this type of catering, it's important to work through the logistics including food safety guidelines, serving capacity and the amount of staff required to successfully manage a catered outdoor event.

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## Create a “Living Wall” and Show Your Greener Side!

Ideal for restaurants in a downtown setting, installing a “living wall” can show guests that you’re in tune with the green movement. Living walls are popping up both indoors and outdoors in hip eateries across the country. A living wall is essentially a vertical garden consisting of easy-to-grow plants: ferns, ivies, and flowering vines such as morning glories. There are plenty of do-it-yourself references online or you can consult with a local landscape firm. Once installed, a living wall is low maintenance and has a high “wow” factor (you should be able to get some news exposure!). Plus, living walls filter out environmental pollutants in the air, reduce ambient temperatures, provide thermal insulation and even offer an additional buffer against noise pollution.

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### Food Trucks: Beyond the Big Cities

The food truck trend is already on the horizon, driving straight towards your town. One of every three chefs surveyed in the National Restaurant Association’s 2011 *What’s Hot Chef Survey* cited mobile food trucks and pop-up restaurants as the year’s hottest operational trend. Popularized by reality shows such as the Food Network’s *The Great Food Truck Race*, the food truck concept is all about a mobile kitchen that serves up casual fare in various spots throughout the day.

The summer is a perfect time to launch a food truck as customers – especially those working indoors – will gladly come out to enjoy the warm weather and grab a bite to eat from a food truck! The rising popularity of food trucks coincides with the social media trend. Food trucks often announce their whereabouts using real-time information sources such as Facebook and Twitter.



If you’re not ready to invest in a full food truck, you can test the waters with a pre-packaged weekly lunch delivery to a nearby office complex or downtown area around the lunch hour using your catering van. Be sure to keep a limited menu and pre-package the food right before leaving. Food truck fare is heavily inspired by easy-to-hold, difficult-to-spill types of food, perfect for a summer stroll. Try mini sliders, chicken satay skewers, empanadas, and even gourmet corn dogs.



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